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off the grid

Tony Woods wanted to be a fireman. But the Kiwi entrepreneur ended up establishing a Kabul-based enterprise bringing renewable energy to Afghani villages. He talks to **Keri Welham**.



Tony Woods delicately cuts a pistachio, blackberry and cream cheese muffin in a suburban Wellington café, glances around, and claims this could be Kabul.

And it's true there are a few similarities between ex-pat life in Afghanistan's capital and the urban Kiwi lifestyle. "You can sit down in a café in Kabul that looks exactly like this," Woods says, surveying the blackboard menu, lunching suburbanites and black-clad wait-staff. In both cities, Woods can get good coffee, play a round of golf and take weekly salsa lessons. But that might be where the similarities end.

Kabul is 1800 metres above sea level with average January temperatures between 5°C and -7°C. It has a strong trade in replica antiques, a handful of glitzy shopping malls, a devastating legacy of war after war and a thriving development sector dedicated to improving life for its estimated 2.8 million residents and the roughly 25 million Afghans living in the valleys and mountain ranges beyond the city limits.

If this were a café in Kabul, Woods says, there would be a mass of cars passing the window (predominantly the Toyota Corollas of which Afghans and Kiwis are both particularly fond), the sidewalks would be dusty, and there would be two security guards sitting out the front with guns.

Woods, 44 and originally from Wellington, is the director of renewable energy company Sustainable Energy Services Afghanistan. He and a team of 23 staff based in Kabul take solar-powered energy to villages across Afghanistan, and have begun the process of expanding into other developing countries such as Pakistan, Yemen and Sudan. Many of the contracts are negotiated in the West, as it's often a foreign government or department that's paying the bill through an aid, development

or counter-insurgency programme. It's clear motivations vary. A foreign government might want to offer robust alternatives to the poppy harvest for landowners by introducing cold storage and water pumps to boost the success of other crops, or a non-governmental organisation may want to fulfil donor dreams of providing lighting in homes.

The resources available in each community range from wind, solar and running water to biofuel, and these resources dictate what kind of renewable energy plant will be installed. Woods and his team put in place the renewable energy plants, and teach locals how to do everything from basic repairs to reading the prepaid meters. The company's work in Afghanistan has produced some of the largest renewable, off-grid energy services in the world. The work can be dangerous for Woods' staff, as the heavily armed rebel forces are keen for rural villages to remain isolated, inaccessible and without electricity. Increasingly, local staff go out into the field and Western staff – who are much more highly prized targets for the insurgents – are among those employed in the office jobs at base. The local staff are trained to an international standard. Many are sent to the United States, Germany or New Zealand for 'on-the-job' engineering training. Woods say this is ultimately less expensive and more sustainable than sending armed guards into rural areas with Western staff. "More to the point, armed guards simply annoy the locals and won't save your neck most of the time."

Woods is a manufacturing engineer by training but the one-time Rongotai College head prefect always planned to have his own business. »»

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“Once I stopped wanting to be a fireman, when I was about 10, I wanted to run a business I guess.”

While working in a war zone didn't surface in any childhood dreams, Woods does credit family holidays to exotic locales such as Papua New Guinea with his view that New Zealand's geographical isolation was no limitation. After school, he joined the New Zealand Army territorial force as an infantry pioneer.

“I think joining the territorials was one of the best things I did for myself. The army let you find your own limits. I loved it,” he says.

Woods has studied through Massey University to complement each phase of his career. He started with a Bachelor of Technology in 1986, did a Diploma of Business Administration in the mid-90s, and has almost completed a Master's in development studies, which he started in 2005.

Woods began thinking about renewable energy in New Zealand 15 years ago, but quickly realised the infrastructure in this country was too robust. There was no drive to innovate. So he set up Empower Consultants, brought some colleagues on board, and spent about 10 years advising organisations such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's New Zealand Aid division and the

Asian Development Bank. They worked through South-east Asia and the Pacific, improving electricity supply to isolated communities.

One contract took Woods to Afghanistan in 1999, during the years of Taleban rule.

“It was very feral, but there were other Kiwis up there then.”

When the Taleban were overthrown, Woods realised there

was a huge opportunity in Afghanistan, where it is estimated up to 90 percent of the population has no electricity. He kept working with Empower Consultants until 2006, then set up Sustainable Energy Services Afghanistan.

It is plain that renewable energy engineering is a growth business. There are vast valleys, deserts, plains and mountain ranges across Afghanistan, and other developing countries, where electricity is not yet commonplace.

Meanwhile, a move to self-sufficiency in the field among some of the world's biggest armed forces is opening new avenues for renewable energy operators. Sustainable Energy Services Afghanistan is currently working with the US Marines in Helmand to improve energy efficiency

at combat outposts, while also providing solar and hydro-electric solutions for locals.

Woods is overseas eight or nine months of the year, much of it spent bidding for projects in Washington DC or running the business in Kabul, where his weeks involve meetings with army engineers, customs officials and government ministries. As the boss, he's also responsible for ironing out all the small frustrations for a business in a developing country, such as unreliable internet access.

He says his career is tough on family. Woods has three teenage children in Timaru, and he's working on getting trusted lieutenants to run the business so he can spend more time at home. In recent months he has taken on an Afghani business partner, and hired a Kiwi right-hand man with the necessary renewable energy engineering background – and some very handy military and mountaineering experience – who will be transferring to Kabul.

Woods is in the process of employing another new staff member whose mother is worried about the threat of roadside bombs.

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In November, would-be thieves rained machine-gun fire on Woods' Afghani business partner, Akmal Wardak, as he drove home from a meeting in a rural area. Wardak didn't stop when the bandits waved him down, and was shot in both legs as he drove away. Woods says: “Akmal and his three friends in the car went from joking and listening to the stereo one second to being raked with tracer bullets at 800 rounds per minute the next.”

While Woods and his staff have to be aware of the inherent danger of operating in an environment where such ambushes are possible and Western workers are sometimes targeted, the greater concern for prospective employees is that a job in a combat zone renders everyday life somewhat mundane.

“It's hard to have a boring day in Kabul. You can do pretty much anything with a degree of caution.” On weekends off, Woods sometimes pops to Dubai, a two-hour flight away. Or he pays \$5 to swim in the pool of one of the big hotels. Or he plays a “hilarious” round of golf at the nine-hole Kabul Golf Course.

He has warned the new recruit that his expectations of what a job should offer in terms of excitement and satisfaction will be forever changed, and the life of an engineer in a hotspot like Afghanistan is often a difficult fit with the quiet rhythm of family life. ■