

Zest in the Friendly 40s

Revisiting Stewart Island

Tom and Vicky Jackson



Nautical reminiscence in the form of revisiting favourite cruising grounds is the prerogative of elderly sailors. One of our many favourites is Port Pegasus at the southwest corner of Stewart Island in the far south of New Zealand. Though small in area Port Pegasus has numerous anchorages. Fortunately

several of these are all-weather, giving shelter from the volatile conditions of the southern 40s; Southwest Cape, one of the five ‘great capes’ is only a few miles away. Cruising the south of New Zealand is best done in *La Niña* years when the highs follow the cooler waters, letting the lows do their worst on the North Island. Fortunately 2022 was such a year.

Stewart Island is New Zealand’s third largest. Despite being a World Heritage area it has only a tiny population in the one village, Oban. However, in the early 19th century there were more Europeans on the Island than in the better known areas of the North Island, as sealing and whaling brought large transient populations. Fishing and tourism are now the essentials of the Island’s fragile economy.

It is about 600nm from our home port, Nelson, to Stewart Island, whether by the west or east coast route. The latter is more appealing to those like us who now prefer to break their



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passages into digestible chunks, as there are convenient ports for pleasant stops at the Marlborough Sounds, Lyttelton, Akaroa and Dunedin. Having departed Nelson just before Christmas, a combination of motoring and pleasant reaching saw us entering Tairoa Heads on 9 January for the long, winding motor up Otago Harbour to Dunedin.

Though the Otago Yacht Club is rarely a hive of activity, it makes visitors welcome – or at least those with shallow enough draft to get in the shoal entrance of its tiny but well protected harbour.

The hills of Lyttelton and Akaroa had encouraged hiking rather than biking, but Dunedin's landscape is more gently rolling and our bikes emerged from their cramped quarters in the cockpit locker for an airing, first to Port Chalmers in the rain and then to the south coast beaches in beautiful, bright sunshine. Sophisticated food stocks are in short supply at the store in Oban on Stewart Island, so we replenished, refuelled and watered.

A window of fair winds opened as if by arrangement and we headed away, though not without incident. Almost immediately the autopilot threw a temporary tantrum, through no fault of its own, as its wiring had been disturbed by the ructions of re-stowing the bikes. We then found as we sailed down Otago Harbour that we could not turn off the engine with its stop solenoid. We have to confess that despite its generally reliable and powerful performance, we have not made friends with

Half Moon Bay, Oban



Zest's Vetis engine. In any case, given our likely arrival in a small harbour with no guarantee of a convenient mooring we decided to keep the engine idling until we reached Oban, when we could give it still more of the attention which it so often demands.

A delightful, full moon lit night sail took us within striking distance of Oban. Though fog descended during our approach, the sun broke through as we entered the harbour at Half Moon Bay, where we picked up a convenient mooring and shut down the engine. A day spent

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studying wiring diagrams and investigating their possible correspondence to reality produced only tentative conclusions, but eventually the disconnection of an apparently redundant wire seemed to restore order to the system.

This was our fifth visit to Oban. It is impossible to visit such a small, tightly knit community (population 400) without making friends with whom we then caught up. Oban is also a crossroads for cruisers, headed not only to Port Pegasus, but also further on to Fiordland on the west coast of the South Island. Their numbers are few, but the quality is high and we enjoyed chatting to several old friends and some new ones. Though we missed the famed and raucous quiz night at the South Seas Hotel, we celebrated there with two friends from Nelson on their completion of the demanding 32km Rakiura Track on Stewart Island.

During the spell of blustery weather that followed we headed across Paterson Inlet to Little Glory Cove for a few nights in that quiet and well protected anchorage. A spell of clement weather allowed us to head out for the sail round the south coast to Port Pegasus in gentle reaching conditions, though the big swell from the south reminded us that there were only a few isolated islands between us and Antarctica.

Port Pegasus has three navigable entrances and is divided into two arms connected by a narrow passage. We passed through the southern entrance and continued on to tree lined Evening Cove. Like Patagonia and Alaska the most protected anchorages in Port Pegasus require lines ashore to tuck well in. The time spent is well repaid in peace of mind and sound sleep. Fortunately in many anchorages local fishermen have set up permanent lines, which speed the process.

Along the skyline to the west of the Cove are the high granite outcrops of Scotch Cap, Gog and Magog. Reaching Magog and returning is an all day tramp even for the young and fit along a mostly unmarked route. We had previously managed to



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reach Scotch Cap and tried again, but after struggling through extensive, head high tangles of bush we lost touch with the best route and surrendered to nature and fatigue, returning to *Zest* to lick our wounds, actual and figurative.



Three days later a spell of calm weather allowed us to anchor just off the small creek which leads to the start of the route up to another granite outcrop, Bald Cone. After our failure to reach Scotch Cap, we were determined to reach the top this time. In fact the open moorland leading to the Cone makes for easy walking. However, the Cone itself is more challenging. A smooth, slippery granite funnel, the Chute, is the only easy route to the summit. Fortunately there are some set

Bald Cone (above) and Vicky enjoying the summit



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Tom's semi-rappelling descent of the slippery Chute

ropes along the sides of the chute, up which we climbed, pulling ourselves hand-over-hand. The 360° views from the top in cloudless sunshine were well worth the effort of the climb up and the subsequent nervous, semi-rappelling descent.

In the 40s, calm sunny days are often followed closely by howling gales, so we motored the same afternoon to the shelter of Disappointment Cove - justifiably renamed by Gary, our local fisherman friend, as 'Peacehaven', after a retirement home in Invercargill. The anchorage is approached through a very narrow channel, followed by a sharp turn to starboard where one faces a large hawser stretched right across between the shore and a small island. With an anchor toward the entrance and lines to both the hawser and the small island we were snug from the strong southerlies of the following couple of days.

A short walk from the cove through dripping, temperate rainforest took us to a long, sandy, south facing beach to watch the swells rolling in. This beach is also a favourite with the local sea lions, which do not always take kindly to visitors as Vicky found on a previous visit. Though they look



Pesky female sea lion



Bell Topper Falls, Port Pegasus

ungainly, sea lions can move surprisingly quickly and have unpleasantly spiky teeth. We walked the beach unmolested on this occasion, but found on our return that the dinghy was guarded by a young female. After a period of mutual contemplation

Zest, Evening Cove, Port Pegasus



she came ashore and waddled a short distance into the bush, allowing us to make a dart for the dinghy.

We particularly wanted to see Bell Topper Falls at the northern end of Port Pegasus. We passed through the narrow Pegasus Passage and anchored in Water Lily Cove. From there it was a long dinghy ride up the North Arm to the Falls. The unusually dry weather of the summer had limited the flow this year, but the Falls were still beautiful, if not quite as striking as when we first viewed them in 2000.

With the forecast of easterlies setting in for a few days, we made a late afternoon passage in fast reaching conditions along the south coast to Abraham's Bosom near the southeast

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Mollymawks



Royal Albatross

corner of Stewart Island. The anchorage is a favourite with local fishermen – and the name a favourite with us. The following day saw us back in Oban and preparing for our passages back up the east coast of the South Island.

The generally light wind conditions of most of our sailing thus far had also meant that we had seen less bird life than usual. Just before our departure from Oban and during our quick, windier passage to Akaroa this changed. We were regularly surrounded by flocks of albatross and mollymawks, much to our delight, which was increased still further by the usual escort of Hector's dolphins into the entrance of Akaroa Harbour.



Akaroa can boast a connection to one famed sailing captain. It is the birthplace, in 1872, of Frank Worsley, Shackleton's captain on board the *Endurance*, for the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition 1914-16. He lived with his family in one of the steep valleys high above the town helping, from an early age, with clearing land for sheep pasture. Perhaps some of the hard physical labour here did something to prepare him for the enormous deprivations suffered after the *Endurance* was lost to the ice. Worsley's navigational skills were renowned even by the standards of the early years of the 20th century in the Royal and Merchant

Frank Worsley statue, Akaroa

Zest in the Friendly 40s

Navies. These skills were tested in the most extreme conditions on board the tiny *James Caird*, the 6.9m lifeboat, that Worsley with Shackleton and four others sailed from Elephant Island to South Georgia. We paid homage to this remarkable New Zealander, in front of his statue in Akaroa.

Having reached the Banks Peninsula, we had only 200 more miles to the shelter of the Marlborough Sounds. However, the conditions were unsettled and the remnant of cyclone Dovi was on its way south from the tropics. More by luck than judgement we managed to pick a short window of reasonable weather to get us up the coast in moderate reaching and running conditions. Until, as we approached the narrow, tide swept entrance to Tory Channel, the fog closed in. We do not have radar on *Zest* and so pilotage was entirely reliant on GPS accuracy, the sound of waves breaking on rocks and finally on the sight of the shore, uncomfortably close to port. Fortunately the fog lifted somewhat once into The Sounds as we made our way to Waikawa Marina near Picton to sit out what promised to be a very windy and very wet few days. The promise was fulfilled, with 50+ knots even in the shelter of the marina. Fortunately the wind direction held us off the dock and our doubled, and even quadrupled lines held firm.

We are firm believers in the Puritan ethic of weather – and it applies to most everything else; you have to suffer the bad to earn the good. Having suffered the storm we were blessed with several days of idyllic summer weather during which we made our way successively, by gentle stages to an anchorage in Annie Bay, a mooring in Catherine Cove, to await an early morning slack tide in narrow French Pass, and then home to our berth in Nelson Marina.

We achieved our not overly challenging target of revisiting Port Pegasus and cruised 1,340 miles during eight delightful weeks. We only hope that the Puritan ethic of weather does not catch up with us when we compete in the Round North Island Two-Handed Race starting in February 2023.

Hector's dolphin

