

HUMBLLED BY FIORDLAND

Colin Moore joins a select group of adventurers on a voyage of discovery into the Fiordland wilderness

The flywheel on the *Milford Wanderer* generator takes a couple of minutes to slow to a stop.

We are at the head of Hall Arm in Doubtful Sound where the forest clad mountains drop straight into an oil-like sea that fills the deep chasms carved around the fringe of Fiordland by ancient glaciers.

There is a thick dusting of snow on the trees and on the still, dark waters too, the morning water temperature still too cold to melt it.

The ship is motionless, the engine cut, the generator motor silenced. The flywheel finally stops and, as the skipper, Chris Hishon, has requested, the 34 passengers are silent too, with neither movement, nor whisper, nor a camera shutter to break the spell.

There is the faint noise of a seabird somewhere in the distance and the soft thump of snow falling from an over-laden branch. But mostly there is a profound and overwhelming silence that invokes a deep sense of humility and wonder in equal measure.

We are deep in Fiordland, one of the most remote places on earth, and the sheer magnificence of our surroundings readily stuns us into an obedient silence.

Such all-persuasive quiet is usually a time for reflection. In seven days we have journeyed into the heart of a land that the World Heritage Area judges declared to be of 'exceptional natural beauty' and with 'outstanding examples of the earth's evolutionary history'.

And from the time a helicopter ferried us from the West

Arm of Lake Manapouri, across the snow-clad mountains of Fiordland, into the head of Long Sound on Preservation Inlet, until we disembarked at Deep Cove in Doubtful Sound a week later, we have been in a world that no superlatives can really do justice.

Real Journeys' 'discovery' voyage between Preservation Inlet and Doubtful Sound is a journey to a world without the distractions of cell phone, terrestrial radio or television coverage. We adopt the rhythms of shipboard life and those of the land and sea around us.

The land is young by some standards, just 500 million years since Gondwanaland sediment settled in an ocean trench to be compressed into a fledgling Fiordland, there to be folded, cracked and heaved about by an ongoing tussle between two tectonic plates.

And each day we watch the ongoing process, as waterfalls, tree avalanches, rain and snow slides bring down what the tectonic plates continue to build up.

From the water's edge to the sky, the land is clothed in a carpet of green of every imaginable shade – from the light green wisp of mountain herb fields to the near black of narrow-leaved conifers in the shade of a ravine. With the passage of the sun, the shades constantly change and the hard edges of the lacerated landscape soften.

It is a land only briefly touched by man but devastatingly so in some places with stoats and rats wrecking havoc on birdlife, and seals, penguins and whales still to recover from 19th century slaughter.

Most of all, perhaps, it is a raw land that leaves your emotions raw – and I have experienced only a handful of others that do that – a place where you stare and absorb and say nothing. There is rarely need to; idle comments would debase it.

Only a handful of the hardest trampers and hunters usually get to experience this immense ethereal country. It is steep up and down, mostly untracked, a bewildering maze of ravine, valley, knife-sharp ridge, truncated spurs and high peaks. And a devastating climate with up to seven metres of rain a year.

So we are a select and fortunate few, carried in rela-

tive luxury on the 30m *Milford Wanderer*, a ship launched in 1992 with a design based on the old trading scows of Northland; beamy, roomy and shallow draught, comfortable without compromising its sea-going abilities.

The *Wanderer* was built for overnight cruises in Milford Sound and sleeps 60, mostly in four-bunk cabins.

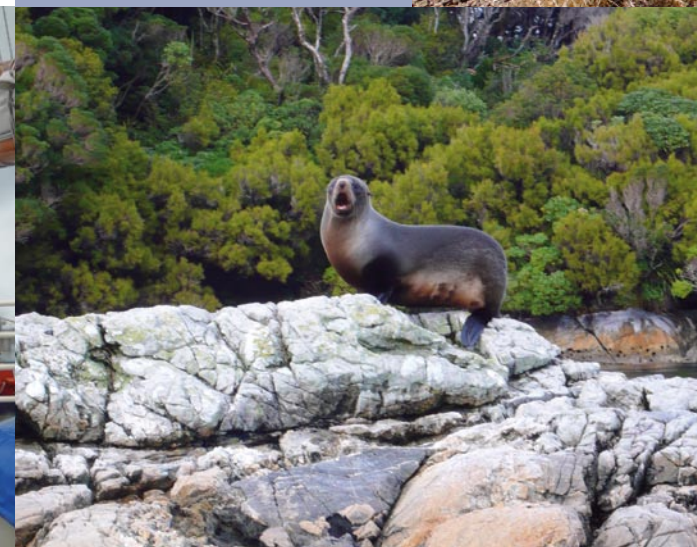
But each year when the Milford cruising season closes, the *Wanderer* leaves its Milford Sound base for a series of southern voyages in the relatively settled weather of mid to late winter. The ship is down-sized to sleep 34 with two people in each cabin.

There are six cruises between Preservation Inlet and Doubtful Sound with the passengers ferried to, or from, the *Wanderer* by helicopter, quite possibly, as in my case, by the legendary southern pilot Richard 'Hannibal' Hayes.

The bunks are comfy, the food is plentiful and sumptuous; every night we dine on imaginative meals worthy of the finest restaurant. If you want, you can be content to sit back in the warmth of the main salon, read, play cards or board games, watch and photograph the magnificent scenery from the deck, and listen to the informative talks and slide shows presented each evening by the nature guides. Ngarita Johnson, 79, did mostly that. She was on her 10th Real Journeys cruise – and has already booked another.

COLIN MOORE/REDACTOR SERVICES

Clockwise from above: *Milford Wanderer* waits for its next passengers at the head of Preservation Inlet; Passengers ferried from chopper to *Milford Wanderer* in Preservation Inlet; Hulk of a former lighthouse schooner, last used a helicopter pad and refrigeration unit; Fur seal in Dusky Sound; A brief passage in the open sea between Dusky and Doubtful Sounds





Above: Puysegur lighthouse, one of the bleakest spots in New Zealand; Below: Unusual reclining chimney used on an unsuccessful 19th century gold mining venture in Preservation Inlet; Left corner: The crew

But for most of us, it is full on from the time we climb onboard with our two nature guides keeping us busy on numerous landings and many walks, ranging from a few minutes to a couple of hours. Ron Tindall, the former conservator on Stewart Island, and Ken Tustin, a retired wildlife biologist, add knowledge and background that gives an intellectual depth to the visceral wonders we experience. Their knowledge and understanding of Fiordland, its history and its flora and fauna, is bewildering.

We trek to Puysegur Point lighthouse, surely one of the bleakest spots in the country, but once home to the grandparents of one of the passengers.

Cromarty in Kisbee Bay in Preservation Inlet was once home to 500 souls, drawn by the gold mines at Te Oneroa and a shore-based whaling station at Cuttle Cove.

There is little evidence of it now except a privately owned lodge whose owners are rarely in residence. The caretaker, Don Goodhue, is one of a group working on a private conservation project to clear nearby Coal Island of predators.

In the earliest days of whaling, the whalers would sit in comfort onshore until they spied a whale with new calf resting in the inlet. Then they would row out and kill the calf and tow it further into the inlet until the mother, following along, became easy prey and did not have to be towed so far to shore and the blubber rendering pot.

The whales soon learned of the awful ploy and shore-based whaling was over by 1840, but 150 years later the whales are beginning to return. Goodhue recently counted 17 southern right whales in the inlet.



Buller's mollymawks follow along behind as we steam around Five Fingers Pt, so aptly named by Captain James Cook, into Dusky Sound, the fiord forever associated with the British navigator.

Cook named the point and Dusky Bay on his first voyage in the *Endeavour* in March 1770, but he never ventured into the fiord until his second voyage in 1773 when after 123 days at sea he sailed the *Resolution* into Dusky Sound for five weeks of re-victualing and R and R.

We visit Anchor Island and Facile Harbour where the *Resolution* first dropped anchor, and go ashore at the snug berth in Pickersgill Harbour to where it was towed a day later. While the sailors worked on the ship, brewed beer from rimu and manuka, and recovered from scurvy, the scientists set up their measuring instruments on Astronomers Pt. The trees they cut have been replaced by re-growth, but we stand on the very spot where those from a much earlier voyage of discovery stood.

A rata stump projects from the bank, uncannily identical to one pictured in a painting by Hodges, the expedition artist.

Some 120 years after Cook, another pioneer came to Dusky Sound in a desperate bid to undo some of the damage that came in the wake of European discovery. Richard Henry, New Zealand's first Wildlife Ranger, spent nearly 20 years trying to establish a safe haven on Resolution Island for kakapo and kiwi, his work eventually undone by the stoat's ability to swim long distances, but his methods were successfully followed on island sanctuaries such as on nearby Breaksea Island.

Henry lived, mostly alone, on Pigeon Island, where we visit the site of his house and boatshed and the enclosure he built to house kakapo before transferring them.

When Henry first saw stoats, a ruthlessly efficient hunter, in Fiordland in 1890, he knew the future for the region's birds was dim.

Ironically, one of the highlights of our voyage is to visit the site where another foreign species was introduced. In 1910, 10 Canadian moose were released at Herrick Creek in Wet Jacket Arm of Dusky Sound.

"It is my favourite place in the world," says Ken Tustin, one of our nature

guides and the 'moose man', who with his wife Margie has spent several decades chasing elusive remnants of the herd.

The couple show us the damp spot where they have camped, for up to six weeks at a time, with nothing but a flysheet and a wood fire to sustain them as they collect considerable evidence that some moose survive. But a photograph to dispel all the doubters remains elusive.

We walk around a relatively small area, but when I stop to change a memory card on my camera I lose all sight of the group, even though they are in brightly coloured clothing, and have to navigate my way back to shore by following the creek.

In a way, the Tustin's camp is Fiordland writ small. Dense and wet bush dropping into clear water where fish are numerous, remote and somnolent, a creek fed by snowmelt and a narrow valley that goes up and up, introduced wildlife and native species, pioneers and conservationists – and worldly, educated people humbled by nature that is truly raw. 📍

WILD FILE

Who Real Journeys

What Discovery cruises to Stewart Island and Fiordland

When Stewart Island, three sailings July 2009; Dusky Sound, three sailings August and September; Preservation Inlet, six sailings May to August.

How long Stewart Island, six days, five nights; Dusky Sound, five days, four nights; Preservation Inlet, seven days, six nights.

Cost Stewart Island, Bluff to Bluff, \$1700, twin share; Fiordland, Te Anau to Te Anau, \$2300, including helicopter transfer to Preservation Inlet; Dusky Sound, Te Anau to Te Anau, \$1700.

What's included Everything except alcohol, which is available for purchase onboard

Further information www.realjourneys.co.nz



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