

Tour Around New Zealand in 47 Days

By Paul Stock



Paul and Marion

New Zealand's far south is renowned for gales, rain, and large, long period Southern Ocean swells. But differences between the El Niño and La Niña weather phases (collectively known as El Niño-Southern Oscillation or ENSO) and climate change provide opportunities to explore the lower South Island in more settled weather than usual. La Niña summers are typically drier and less windy in the south of the South Island. While the North Island NE has wetter weather and more low-pressure systems. My wife Marion and I circumnavigated New Zealand over Christmas during the 2022/23 La Nina weather phase on *Spitfire* our 13m 1987 Davidson 42 yacht.



Arriving back in Auckland on Jan 26 2023



Our route around New Zealand

We left Westhaven Marina in Auckland on December 12th 2022, stopping briefly at Tryphena on Gt Barrier Island, ahead of the planned passage across the Bay of Plenty around East Cape to Gisborne in Poverty Bay. The next day, after passing Cape Colville, the forecast easterly shifted southeast sooner and fresher with heavy rain so we cracked sheets and blasted off to Tauranga.

After a couple of wet days in Tauranga the weather cleared, clearing the tidal port entrance and motor sailing towards East Cape. Volcanic drizzle stung my eyes as I peered upwind from behind the spray dodger at Whakaari/White Island. We rounded East Cape with a building breeze, gybing not long after dawn inside Ranfurly Bank. Then ran past Tokumaru and Tolaga bay closing on the coast with poled out genoa. This area was where Captain Cook approached, stopping to repair the Endeavour and take on supplies at Tolaga Bay in 1769. Sadly, it was also pummelled with devastating Jan-Feb 2023 weather events and severe flooding soon after we completed our trip.

The Gisborne entry channel approach was like a massive hot air gun with a small marina lying at its head surrounded by cafes and a bustling sports club. Once a strong commercial fishing port, only a few fishing and charter fishing boats remain, log carriers and logging are now the main port industry. A completely new wharf was under construction with a couple of ships loading and two new tugs sat proudly moored in the entrance channel. Gisborne is one of my favourite places to visit and was a great stop with good shelter and deep water at the marina and berths (and showers) available for rent via the sports club or alternatively via the port representative.

Keen not to miss a fair wind – a theme of this trip – we departed on the 19th Dec for Akaroa on Banks Peninsula 400 miles south, aiming to push into the better South Island weather pattern before south-westerly headwinds returned. Stunning Mahia Peninsula – where Rocket Lab launches their rockets – and Portland Island shrunk behind us at dusk as we motor sailed into Hawke Bay with main, genoa and staysail, heading east of course to maintain our apparent wind speed in the fading wind. The seaward position would also set us up for the forecast south-easterly wind 150 miles south.

The change came mid-afternoon on the 20th December preceded by an increase in long period southwest swell. We reefed the main, rolled the genoa and raised the staysail ahead of the change and settled down to an approx. 9kn average speed on a beam reach course for Banks Peninsula. Even though we passed Cook Strait. about 70 miles off Cape Palliser (cape 3), the weather was rough with a gale warning in force. This marked the beginning of a different, more detailed type of forecast in the South Island often including more than one swell direction, in this case, long period from the southwest about 2m and 1.5m northeast. Spitfire and Pierre (NKE French autopilot) did a nice job of it, but quite rock n roll (beam sea) as we pressed into the night, sometimes surfing and sliding a little

sideways as we heeled on the wave faces with the occasional jolt waking the sleeper. Night watches of three hours on (usually sitting dry on the bridge deck under the spray dodger) then three hours off worked pretty well.

South Island

The next day's sea breezy wind backed to the east as the day wore on and eased but the now easterly sea state stayed, unbroken from the Southern Ocean as it wrapped round Banks Peninsula, an occasional albatross, dolphins and many other birds welcoming us in the endless sunset. Akaroa Head marks the entrance to the eight-mile-long harbour and we anchored on dusk at 2130hrs just north of Akaroa's main wharf.

Founded in 1840 by French settlers, Akaroa, about 1.5 hours from Christchurch isn't dissimilar in its feel to historic Russell in Northland (1840 is old by New Zealand standards). Now it is a tourist town with many restaurants and boutique accommodation. Commercial boat operations take tourists to see the unique, rare Hector's dolphins with their Mikey Mouse style fin and other birds and wildlife.

Our youngest son James, a keen free diver joined us from the wharf at Wainui, two miles across the bay from Akaroa township on the morning of December 23. Wainui is the base for a commercial salmon farm. I tried the salmon in an Akaroa restaurant the previous night and can recommend it. James had hitched two rides, slept on the side of the road in a ditch before arranging his dive gear sufficiently well on the roadside at daybreak to secure a ride.

Sailing away from Banks Peninsula was fast on the roughly 290-mile leg to Stewart Island. But the fast didn't last. The summer solstice daylight persisted till about 2200hrs and only a few hours later the glow of the new day bled over the horizon before sunrise from about 4.30am.

A 15knot headwind broke the flat calm up the following morning and the sea built, then faded away before an easterly settled in about midday, following us round Nugget point, freshening as we continued the 70 miles into the fading breeze and early hours of Christmas Day. Approaching Stewart Island. We weaved our way in the darkness into Half Moon Bay, inside Big Rock and through the fairway outside the many moorings and moored fishing boats to pick up a mooring just off the main wharf at Oban at 0345. Marion magicked up a Christmas tree and decorations as only she can, followed by a quick drink, photo of the rising sun and some rest a thousand miles from home.

Stewart Island is an increasingly popular tourist destination known for charter cruises, commercial fishing, hunting, aquaculture, tramping with kiwi sighting on the west of the island and multi day tramps. There's an excellent, friendly campsite/backpackers at Oban (we were able to do washing and use facilities there for a reasonable price), friendly garage with fuel, repairs and more, museum, the South Sea Hotel for a beer, a couple of cafes, general store, information centre, none of it exorbitantly priced – a restful and friendly place at a moody latitude.

It is possible to swing at anchor at most places in Stewart Island with moderate depths. We stayed in Little Glory Bay in Paterson inlet on boxing day night and checked out Big Glory Bay next door the next day. There is a large serious aquaculture operation occupying most of Big Glory and pictures of a seal decapitated by a Great White shark were being shared around when we were there. Sharks are known to be common around Stewart Island, including Great Whites. There's even a shark cage diving company operating from nearby Bluff on the South Island mainland.

In Paterson inlet we visited Prices Inlet with its historical remains of a Norwegian whaling ship maintenance base; the amazingly sheltered Kaipipi bay; stayed in Golden Bay for a few nights – a short walk from Oban – and visited Ulva Island, a bird sanctuary readily accessible by tourist boat. Kaka's stitch birds, Stewart Island wekas and an overwhelming number of different bird species fluttered and soared through the bush. Marion noticed a leopard seal in a ditch about a kilometre inland. It was alive, seemed well but wasn't keen to chat.



Ulva Island, Stewart Island

Port Adventure lies approx. 10miles south of Port Patterson. We anchored in Abrahams Bosom. James encountered seven gill sharks when free diving there which didn't trouble him, and seals that wanted to play.

After a couple of days, we back tracked north to Golden Bay and picked up my brother Jason on Jan 2nd. With our compliment of four we motored on a windlass sea south again to Lord's River, just south of Port Adventure and the following day to Port Pegasus at the bottom of Stewart Island.

Port Pegasus is approx. seven miles long with a north and south part. At 47 degrees South there was no vegetation above the snow line on the mountain tops. We only saw two other boats there, but several schools of bluefin tuna, and seals. James, despite a top effort to spear a Tuna, was unsuccessful. But he did manage to catch one on a rod the next day, after being invited onto the 11m outboard powered high-speed launch "Cleaning Windows" that anchored near us in Evening Cove.



Port Pegasus drone shot of us entering Pegasus Passage

While James went tuna fishing Marion, Jason and I anchored in Shipbuilders Cove just south of Evening Cove and set off in the dinghy to climb “Bald Cone” a mountain on the southwest of the cove. A leopard seal didn’t like the idea of us exploring its creek, diving under and around the dinghy before leaping out of the water to threateningly bare his teeth. Marion brandished the oar with conviction, and we retreated. Returning a while later, the coast was clear and we found the bald cone track with expansive views in all directions, well worth the climb.



James with Tuna on Cleaning Windows

To say that weather at 47 degrees south doesn't stay calm forever is an understatement and I was conscious that we needed to keep moving to be back in Auckland by February. VHF reception for coastal weather forecasts and to check in with Meri Leask at Bluff Fisherman's Radio was patchy although we could still send and receive messages via our satellite messenger.

We'd picked up James from Cleaning Windows at Sheath knife Bay, the closest bay to the most southern exit from Port Pegasus ready for the 90-mile passage to Preservation Inlet in Fiordland which we planned to reach in daylight. The detailed forecast provided by Maritime Radio was for variable 10kn overnight then becoming Northerly 25kn North of Puysegur point (the most South-

westerly point of the South Island) and Easterly 20kn South of Puysegur Point with rough sea. Then 30kn and large swells in following days was forecast – not a particularly rough forecast for the Puysegur maritime area. The night was clear, fuel tank full, so rather than wait for morning we left just after dark at 2300 hrs on Jan 4th.

An accelerated easterly wrapped around the bottom of Stewart Island pushing us past South Cape the most southern point of New Zealand and Southwest Cape soon after. We motor sailed through the calm night to be next to isolated and rugged Hautere/Solander Island by morning. Sealing and whaling gangs operated around Solander Isl. in the 1800s and the wildlife there is abundant. We sailed all day. The confused sea and wind increased considerably at around 1330hrs as we approached Puysegur point the sea compounded by the Solander and Puysegur trenches that extend from the bottom of NZ southward and north to the bottom of the southwest corner of West Cape – the windiest place in New Zealand.

We'd kept east on our track north from Solander Isl. in case the forecast northerly came through. But the easterly prevailed, accelerating to about 25knots. We sailed parallel to the shoreline a couple of miles off Long Reef which broke continuously as the seas got rougher. Rounding Puysegur point, Coal island, just north of Puysegur Point, and all the coasts seethed with white water from the multidirectional swell and as we approached Coal Island the entrance to Otago Retreat in Preservation Inlet unfolded. We motor sailed into the calm haven.

The west coast including Fiordland is the wettest area in New Zealand. Milford Sound, the northern most fiord is the wettest inhabited place in New Zealand and one of the wettest in the world. The sounds in Fiordland are actually fiords, named because there was no English word for a flooded glacial valley. The 14 vast fiords range from about five to 20 miles long and their expanse, isolation, majesty and sea life are overwhelming.

In Fiordland the steepness of the mountains and depth of the water generally increases with distance north. Depth is a major obstacle to anchoring with steep drop offs a short distance from shore are common.

To anchor, it was often necessary to drop the anchor at the bottom of a bank in more than 20 metres of water then let out 80m or so rope while reversing towards the shore, then tie back to the shore. We used a 100m reel of floating polypropylene braid for a shoreline, stowing it on its plastic drum. By passing our mid cockpit lifeline through the drum and re securing it taught, the line was easily run out and retrieved using the dinghy or paddleboard. And the drum was easy to remove and stow. We saw

very few local fisherman or anybody during the early January holiday period, but there are many moorings and stern line arrangements which are used by locals.

Setting out on our next leg from Preservation Inlet around West Cape we hoped to beat the forecast 30 knot plus southerly. Motoring from Preservation Inlet's northern entrance we passed Gulches Head in a flat calm then torrential rain before Cape Providence gave way to the forecast southerly. We sailed seaward on port tack to get free from the 40m depth contour and to give West Cape a wide berth. It is recommended to get out from the 40m line when travelling between Fiords because of the undersea trenches and resultant very rough water. As it happened a seaward leg and gybe after Cape Providence worked perfectly for the wind direction and we rocked and rolled our way downwind with the birds, past lonely and treacherous West Cape to Dusky Sound.

In Pickersgill Harbour, Dusky Sound, where captain Cook moored the Resolution in 1773, we anchored overnight and walked around the wooden boardwalk made by the Department of Conservation (DOC) to Astronomer Point. DOC information notes that "Astronomer's Point is the site of a temporary observatory set up by William Wales, of the Board of Longitude, during Captain Cook's second voyage in 1773. The observatory was established to fix the position of New Zealand."

We left Dusky Sound far too soon after spending a couple of nights at Cooper Island near the head of the sound. Rounding Cooper Island clockwise, we passed through the Nine Fathoms Passage, Paget Passage and entered the eight mile long Acheron Passage, a gorge-like inland joining link between Dusky and Breaksea Sounds. Waterfalls cascaded and meandered from the steep banks like snakes and ladders. I made the regretful decision not to visit Wet Jacket Arm, a marine reserve in Acheron Passage; something to dream about and come back to.

In Sunday Cove, just around the corner in Breaksea Sound the cove was littered with fishing buoys, a fishing hub complete with large supply barge, separate water barge with an accommodation hut. It was, when we anchored there, abandoned, sheltered, with virtually no wind despite the freshening breeze on the coast.

A fairly significant downside to no wind in Fiordland: sandflies. Marion deployed the sandfly kit of citronella candles, mesh curtain material fitted over all hatches (double layer), head gear, mosquito straps and Deet insect repellent. Midges swarmed outside the netting constantly. Gladly we left Sunday Cove the following day with a nice breeze of about 20kn blowing down the sound, and the midges away.



Marion modelling the mosquito combat equipment

With single reefed mainsail, we bore away, reaching below Entry and Breaksea islands into the open sea. Again, we sailed off the coast on port gybe to get into deep water with the wind parallel to the coast. Gybing about five miles off Dagg Sound with a building breeze we reached to the Hares Ears at the entrance to Doubtful Sound/Patea averaging about eight knots.

Doubtful Sound was teeming with commercial and trailer boats compared to where we'd been. We hadn't seen more than one boat in the past couple of days. In fact, we only saw four or five either yachts or tourist boats during the motor to Deep Cove at the head of Doubtful Sound 18 miles from the entrance. Despite the 25kn breeze outside the fiord, there was, unusually, no day-breeze when we arrived. All was calm in Doubtful Sound.

Deep Cove is one of two landward access points to the Fiords that can be reached from the head of the sounds without lengthy tramps. The other is Milford Sound. A tail race from the hydroelectric power station above debouches into Deep Cove from Lake Manapouri, and a road from Deep Cove to Lake Manapouri remains from the construction of the hydro scheme in the early 1970s. The Manapouri power station is the largest hydro station in New Zealand. According to its owner, Meridian Energy, it can power 619,000 average homes in a year.

To get to Deep Cove you must book with tourism company Real NZ to catch a ferry across Lake Manapouri to the power station where a bus will take you down to Deep Cove.

We were able to rent a mooring northeast of the tail race that we shared with two other yachts, a two buoy mooring with a thick hawser between them. The hub of Deep Cove, a choppy five-minute dinghy trip across the tail race from our mooring is located to the SW. Remote and basic, there's an outdoor hostel, launching ramp, fuel, the ability to arrange to get stores delivered, and paid wifi access. A small number of large tourism boats operate from there. The day (sea) breeze typically blows at 20kn plus down the fiord against the outgoing tail race. We were able to get Jason and James out from Deep Cove as we had hoped via Real NZ bus and ferry.

Marion and I were two handed again for the next leg up the West Coast to Nelson. We made it to the mouth of Thompson Sound and the open sea by 1030hrs on Jan 14th. Nelson was approx. 450 miles distant. We wanted to keep some time in the bank to spend closer to home if we needed it. The light northerly and smooth sea forced us to tack upwind and petered out later. Soon we were motoring, reducing speed in the early hours to conserve fuel in case the wind didn't fill in.



Leaving Fiordland to open sea via Thomson Sound

In the morning we were near enough to Haast to get cell phone reception for the first time in almost two weeks but that was about to go again until we reached Nelson a few hundred miles north. Haast is the last place on the west coast before the road crosses through Haast Pass to the east side of the Southern Alps. A sniff of sea breeze got us going about 1100hrs and we set the MPS. That kept us trucking at over 8kn forcing us out to sea slightly as the sea breeze backed over the day.

After dropping the MPS in the evening we gybed to head towards Cape Foulwind off the fishing port of Westport. Westport and its Southern cousin Greymouth are both bar harbours – difficult bar entrances, unfortunately too dangerous for keel boats like us. The new day dawned clear, another sea breeze day shoving us along with a poled out headsail. Several fishing boats trolled for Tuna off Westport as we passed and I was glad it was daylight.

Dead downwind on port tack past Kahurangi Point we sailed, the last turning point before the northern tip of the South Island. At midnight we gybed for Cape Farewell. Threading our way north of Stewart Rock and Kahurangi Shoals we were still dead downwind as the wind followed us round the point. At least the swell had reduced, replaced by a short steep and deep chop with tide under us. We rolled in the headsail to slow the boat as the breeze freshened to over 20 knots. Marion went down for a sleep about 0230. At least one of us needed to rest. I headed up a bit to reduce the chance of accidental gybe. But still full main. We were dead square. To reef the mainsail, we'd need to be at least beam-on to the wind – heading directly for the coast which was closing fast. I didn't know exactly how far away we were as I was hand steering. I didn't trust Pierre to not crash gybe in the steep short seas though it could probably have done as well as me. The wind still followed us around the cape as the swell gave way to steeper and shorter waves. This was a big cape after all. Whanganui Inlet was not far to starboard where I didn't want to go. 10knots boat speed now, surfing down the short vertical waves, 25 knots wind. Then 12 knots boat speed and 29 knots wind. Hey wind, it's 0400, I'm exhausted! Only an hour away from Cape Farewell. But I can't come down away from land unless we gybe in 30 knots of wind with a full main – no thanks. We could tack – no thanks, I want to cut the corner of Cape Farewell to save distance.

“Marion, I need a hand.” We started the routine: Engine start, harness clipped on to jack line, no lines trailing, into wind, pilot engaged, go forward to the mast, Marion on the main halyard. The bow was heaving, but not too bad. “OK let's drop”. Good, main's down. Course altered again for Cape Farewell motoring at 8kn with the engine just in gear and no more.

At Cape Farewell the wind switched off as expected and we motored along the flat calm length of Farewell Spit turning again in the early morning with a near windless day, arriving in Nelson the marina mid-afternoon of 17th Jan.

Nelson is a popular and pleasant place with warm climate and major repair port and the largest city in the North of the South Island. The Marlborough Sounds (sounds not fiords) offer great cruising just east of Nelson.

The next rounding Capes: Maria Van Diemen, and Reinga the northernmost tip of New Zealand lie around 400 miles north of Nelson. We left on the morning of the 19th. There was enough westerly to sail when we were north of Separation Point as we ghosted past Golden Bay and Farewell Spit averaging around 7kns with main, genoa and staysail. The course north took us up to 100 miles off the West Coast. We were able to do a daily update to Maritime Radio via email using our satellite messenger when we were out of VHF range.

More shipping and obstacles were around in this leg as we approached Mt Taranaki past the gas platforms. We didn't have a radar, but the AIS served us well and I strung up a radar reflector for the leg. Twice, big fishing boats were able to call us – one a 120m trawler advising of their movements and where they were planning to shoot their nets. Things can get quite busy when several fishing ships are in the same area chasing fish, in front of your course at 0200.

The south-westerly persisted till the morning of the 21st as forecast and then faded away. We motor sailed alongside 90-mile beach in calm weather. Rounding Capes Maria Van Diemen and Reinga was uneventful on the tail end of the tidal current going our way. Our tidal atlas and charting tidal information were invaluable over the trip. The overfalls were still significant as they always are and there was Columbia Bank's awesomeness breaking below Cape Reinga. We stopped at Tom Bowling Bay along with a couple of fishing boats and a launch probably on its way to the Three Kings. It was unique to have company after the deserted south. There's almost always a swell in Tom Bowling and Spirits Bay and an easterly roll was building from an approaching tropical depression that was to become the end Jan/early Feb atmospheric river that devastated many parts of the north island with slips a few days later.

Rounding North Cape felt like coming home. We settled down for a long motor to Mangonui 35 miles down the coast on another windless day. We'd based ourselves out of Mangonui the previous year as part of visiting the remote Three Kings Islands NW of New Zealand. The plan was to spend a few days making our way home to Auckland. But the forecast wasn't the best. Easterlies for days and

days and big sea due to the remnants of a tropical depression. And building to gale force towards the end of the week. As we were directly west of the next major cape, Cape Brett, the south entry to the Bay of Islands, I decided to make our way east to Cape Brett. If we could get around before the fresh easterly a beam reach would carry us home down the coast.

Leaving Mangonui in the afternoon of the 23rd Jan with a gentle sea breeze we anchored at the Cavalli Islands on dusk. The building swell was noticeable. Up early the next day we motored directly upwind into the light south easterly which faded and changed to east as we approached Cape Brett and started sailing soon rolling the genoa in favour of the staysail and single reefed mainsail for a fast reach down to Whangaruru where we anchored for two nights.



Saying goodbye to Cape Brett and Piercy Island

With staysail and single reefed main we left Whangaruru on the 26th Jan into a forecast to increase to easterly 30-35kns. A short beat towards stunning Mimiwhangata Bay and out around the jagged Rimariki Islands laying through down the coast. So much for the lazy cruise. Another reef in just after 1000 off Whananaki as the breeze built to mid 20knots, making good progress. It was very rough on the coast until we got into the shelter of Little Barrier Island. Good progress across Bream Bay was made under cracked sheets and we were able to ease a bit more after Kawau Island heading towards Tiritiri Matangi Island, with the tide starting to flood through the Whangaparoa passage. We didn't see any other sailing boats all day. After Tiritiri we recorded the days high of 39kns wind as we averaged 9-10kns into the Waitamata Harbour and home.

We tied up in our Westhaven berth just after 2100 hours on the 26th Jan 2023. The next day the atmospheric river of moisture from the tropics flooding Auckland into a state of emergency weather system we'd sailed in on occurred. Thankfully we'd arrived home safe just in time and with no breakages 2,500 nautical miles and 47 days after leaving. An unforgettable extended Christmas holiday.