

Sidebar to: "The Many Faces of Aotearoa"
THE ABCs OF CRUISING NEW ZEALAND

by

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With no place in New Zealand more than sixty miles from the ocean, modern Kiwis – just like the Maoris before them – are seafarers of the first order. New Zealand's two islands straddle the Roaring Forties, extending from 34°S to 47°S – the equivalent of from Cape Fear in North Carolina to St. John's in Newfoundland. While the top of the North Island experiences settled easterly conditions for several weeks at a time in the summer, for most of the year the parade of low and high pressure systems marching across the Southern Ocean brings frequent gale-force winds from just about every direction. To sail these waters to a schedule, as the Kiwis do, means taking what comes and making the most of it. While the foreign yachts all hunker down in secure harbors as the gales approach, the Kiwis cheerfully set off into the worst of conditions, intent on enjoying their sailing holiday no matter what. The foreign crews massing in Opuia for the annual migration back to the tropics would spend weeks listening to the weather gurus, reading weather maps, and debating with fellow cruisers the best weather window before their departure. The Kiwis set a date a year ahead and leave, not in the least worried by the "spot of bad weather" they know they will encounter along the way. In a country where, it is said, one in three people owns a boat (which averages out to one boat per family), it seems as if everyone is building, has built, or is about to start building a boat. Here, sailing is headline news and sailing heroes are national icons.

New Zealand's two large islands offer these intrepid sailors four extraordinary cruising grounds set amidst an amazing diversity of climate and topography. The Bay of Islands is the furthest north and most compact of these. Extending south to Opuia, west to Cape Brett and north to Cavalli Islands and the large inlet of Whangaroa, it includes dozens of harbors ranging from a few bulletproof storm anchorages to a number of open roadsteads only suitable for settled weather. But settled weather is the norm in a good summer, when the low pressure systems move south and high pressure systems bring light northeast winds to much of the North Island. At that time of year, cruising attire consists of shorts and tee-shirts, the water gets warm enough for a brisk swim, and the sandy anchorages with their teal and emerald water begin to feel distinctly tropical.

Auckland lies a bit over a hundred miles south of the Bay of Islands, about a third of the way down the North Island on a narrow neck of land where bays thrusting in from the west and east almost bisect the land entirely. To the east of Auckland lies the Hauraki Gulf, New Zealand's second major cruising ground. This 60-mile long, 30-mile wide U-shaped sound is bounded to the west by the main body of the North Island, to the east by the Coromandel peninsula, and to the north by Kawau and Great Barrier Islands. Though noticeably less tropical and a good deal rainier, this area covers more territory and offers more variety than the Bay of Islands. Among other things, cruisers can choose between dining in a gourmet restaurant before going clubbing in Auckland, hiking some of the dozens of miles of remote trails through native forest on Great Barrier Island, and diving in the rich temperate waters around the Mercury Islands just to the east of the Coromandel peninsula. The Hauraki Gulf experiences plenty of warm, settled summer weather, and the dozens of good anchorages within a daysail of Auckland provide plenty of shelter from the occasional gales.

New Zealand's two other major cruising grounds lie on the South Island, in the heart of the Roaring Forties. These are significantly more challenging areas to cruise, but they provide a unique opportunity for intrepid tropical cruisers to experience the high latitudes without having to detour several thousand miles from the "coconut milk run." However, to cruise these areas on a yacht takes an investment of several months. Most of those we met cruising the South Island spent an entire year in New Zealand.

New Zealand's largest cruising ground lies at the top of the South Island, stretching from Cape Farewell in the west to Wellington in the east and straddling Cook Strait. It includes the golden beaches of Abel Tasman National Park, the town of Nelson which serves as the staging post for adventure tourists heading further south, the convoluted channels and odd-shaped islands in the Marlborough Sounds and New Zealand's capital city of Wellington. Gales are common here year round, and the Cook Straits are notorious for funneling and accelerating the wind, as well as for strong currents that create nasty waves when opposed by strong winds. Good anchorages are harder to come by than in the cruising grounds further north, and rough weather often arrives with little warning. However, the friendly, well-protected marina at Nelson lies in the middle of this cruising ground and makes an excellent base from which to explore the area when large high pressure systems bring settled weather. Nelson is touted as the "sunniest town in New Zealand" and is gaining a reputation for high quality, reasonably-priced boat work. Friends that wintered there had a drier, sunnier but slightly cooler winter than we did in Auckland.

Fiordland and Stewart Island, New Zealand's most dramatic – and most challenging – cruising ground, lies at the bottom of the South Island. Glaciers spilling down through the mountain valleys from the ice cap covering the Southern Alps during the last ice age carved out thirteen fiords along New Zealand's southwest coast. Here cruisers will find dramatic vistas of rock, water and cloud, haunting silver and gold light, and an awesome, glacier scoured landscape. Sixty miles south of the last sound, Stewart Island straddles 47°S. Two large inlets project into the 45-mile long island's eastern coast, each with a dozen anchorages to explore. Here Yellow-eyed penguins – the rarest in the world – and New Zealand fur seals – just returning to New Zealand after being all but wiped out by sealers in the last century – play in every anchorage and Kiwis – the flightless bird for which New Zealanders have been nicknamed – roam the beaches. To reach this area, cruisers must brave the Southern Ocean's often treacherous weather and the 3-4 meter swells common along New Zealand's west coast.

In the ten years since we were last here, New Zealand has leapfrogged into the 21st century. After a painful readjustment, it has enjoyed a long period of economic prosperity. The Kiwis have won – and then lost – the America's Cup, the New Zealand dollar has strengthened from 38 to 75 cents to the US dollar, and the population has expanded by almost 25 percent. A huge wave of immigration has brought in large populations of Pacific Islanders, Chinese, and other Asians creating a cosmopolitan and sophisticated culture in Auckland that is gradually influencing the rest of the country. New Zealand has gained status on the world stage for its anti-nuclear stance and environmental advocacy, and gained notoriety as an "adventure travel" destination – and home of the Hobbits. Though the population is still less than four million – with forty million sheep (down from 70 million when we were here last) – New Zealand has become less rural, more outward looking and more sophisticated. Cruising New Zealand is often easier and more convenient than cruising the United States, but a few pointers follow.

Aids to navigation. New Zealand uses the International Association of Lighthouse Authorities (IALA) System A which puts red buoys to port when returning to harbor – the opposite of the

American system. Most hazards tend to be marked, if not with an official buoy then with a long pole visible at high tide. GPS accuracy relative to the charts is generally excellent.

Boat equipment. For those considering cruising Fiordland, a cabin heater will increase your comfort and greatly reduce the dampness from the rain. Screens, mosquito coils, and bug spray are essential for dealing with the sandflies that thrive in the near freshwater of the sounds. These are generally not a problem on Stewart Island unless anchored off of freshwater rivers.

Boat work. Crews brave the notoriously stormy passage to and from New Zealand to escape the cyclone season in the tropics and, like us on our first voyage, to put the boat back together after anywhere from 8,000 to 20,000 offshore miles. New Zealand gained a stellar reputation for boat work in the 1990s when the Kiwi dollar was selling for as little as 38 US cents and the quality of the marine industry was unequaled throughout the world. This reputation became tarnished over the last few years as many of the professionals went after the big money available from the America's Cup syndicates and the American dollar lost almost half its value, bringing labor rates and material prices closer to those in the US. There's still good boat work to be had, but it's much more of a "buyer beware" market than it used to be, and most of the work on mid-sized cruising boats has migrated away from Auckland, to Whangarei and, just recently, to Nelson.

Chartering. A plethora of chartering options exist; a search on the Internet will turn up most of them. Bareboats can be chartered in the Bay of Islands and Auckland. Skippered charters are available for Stewart Island and Fiordland departing from Bluff or Nelson and for Marlborough Sounds departing from Picton or Nelson.

Culture. Though there is still a long way to go, the indigenous Polynesian population, the Maoris, have made huge inroads into achieving economic and political equality with the descendants of Europeans. Maori have successfully litigated claims in court to regain title to ancestral lands as well as to gain a share of New Zealand's economic prosperity, most notably a substantial percentage of the profits from New Zealand's lucrative fisheries. In the process, the Maori have gained a new pride in their heritage and their language, and Maori words had become interwoven into colloquial speech. A dozen words like pakeha (the Maori term for white Europeans), iwi (tribe), hikoi (protest march), hui (tribal meeting), and marae (extended family group) crop up regularly in casual conversation, on the radio, and in the newspapers. In the Bay of Islands, where European place names had been bestowed more liberally than elsewhere, the Maori names have largely been reinstated.

Guides. The *Hauraki Gulf Boaties Atlas* and *Northland Boaties Atlas* are the most comprehensive guides to the Hauraki Gulf and the Bay of Islands respectively. The Southern Island is not nearly so well covered. *The New Zealand Cruising Guide: Central Area* covers the top of the South Island from Farewell Spit to Wellington. The Mana Cruising Club publishes *A Boaties Guide to Fiordland* and *Stewart Island Cruising Guide*. These are dated, but the basic information is still adequate.

Quarantine. If arriving in New Zealand aboard your own yacht, be prepared for the strict quarantine laws. The Customs officers will confiscate a huge variety of food including eggs and egg cartons, mayonnaise, fresh or canned meat from almost all countries, honey, and sprouting seeds including popcorn. If you want to minimize the amount of food that gets destroyed, go to the website for New Zealand Customs to get a complete list.

Marinas. Marinas can be found throughout the top half of the North Island and at a few places in the top of the South Island. Long term rates tend to average around NZ\$1 per meter; short term

rates can be triple that. For more information, go to www.nzmarinas.com or order the booklet titled *A guide to New Zealand Marinas* from the New Zealand Marina Operators Association, PO Box 111, Picton, NZ.

Travel. After the long run across the Pacific, most crews arrive with a long list of boat projects and a strong desire to take a break from sailing. For those who would rather explore New Zealand by land, the cheapest way to do so is to buy a car. Even with the decline in the US dollar, cars in New Zealand are amazingly cheap because the Japanese dump many of their used cars here. Most cruisers enjoy some land cruising after they've mastered driving on the "wrong" side of the road. After selling the car, most of them end up spending only US\$400-500 for the use of a car for six months.

Weather. Weather forecasts are broadcast several times per day on VHF throughout New Zealand coastal waters. At broadcast time, the weather forecast is announced on Channel 16 along with the frequencies to tune to. Repeaters allow these broadcasts to be picked up in almost all of New Zealand's coastal waters including most of the fiords. "Good as Gold" Meri broadcasts a long range forecast for the South Island through Bluff Fishermen's Radio at 8:30 PM local time on 4417 mHz.