

# Cruise to the animals

In New Zealand's pristine Fiordland, playful dolphins entertain intrepid voyagers

LEE MYLNE

DOLPHINS are bounding towards us, their sleek grey bodies leaping in unison. It's a welcoming committee of a score or more, a cavalcade of joy that elicits laughter from those of us lucky enough to receive this unexpected escort into Bligh Sound in New Zealand's Fiordland.

Minutes earlier, on the bridge of the luxury three-deck catamaran Island Passage, I'd just jokingly ticked off four of the "big five" wildlife we're likely to see in New Zealand's southern fiords — penguins, albatrosses, fur seals and deer.

Then first officer Georgina Micet points ahead to the sudden flurry of white water on the starboard side: "Here they come." Passengers scramble down to the lower deck for a close look.

It's our third day in the fiords. Not all have dawned so bright and clear, but I learn that the weather is the biggest consideration as our journey takes shape at the hands of captain Vince Maurice. Where each day will take us depends, to a great extent, on the weather.

"Below 40 degrees there is no weather, below 50 degrees there is no law, below 60 degrees there is no God," jokes Captain Vince in a paraphrase of an old mariner's adage.

"But seriously, everything depends on the weather."

George Sound, where we join the sleek Island Passage, is at about 44 degrees. And it's the changing weather, the moods, the mists and the rain, interspersed with bright blue-sky days that make this an unforgettable place. And the isolation — this is a place visited only by a few fisher-



men and the hardest of hikers. Island Escape Cruises' owner Peter Bissett has spent years negotiating permission to bring his ship into these waters.

Fiordland National Park, on the southwest coast of the South Island, is New Zealand's largest national park, extending more than 200km from Milford Sound in the north to Preservation Inlet in the south and covering 1.25 million hectares. It has been a World Heritage Area since 1986, home to 700 plants found nowhere else and wildlife including the endangered takahe bird and rare Fiordland crested penguin.

**The three-deck catamaran Island Passage navigates through New Zealand's Fiordland; fur seals, below, basking in the sun**

PICTURES: LEE MYLNE

Our journey has started in Queenstown, with a light plane flight to Te Anau and a helicopter transfer to the ship. It's a dramatic, James Bond kind of way to arrive, dropping over the mountains, through mist and rain, to land on the ship's helipad.

Fiordland is one of the wettest places in the world but we are blessed with two fine sunny days on our five-day cruise.

When it's wet, the landscape is transformed. Rain washes the beech forest and waterfalls tumble down the steep mountain faces to the fiords; on sunny days, it is as if they had never existed.

George Sound is our shelter for two nights. The first morning dawns grey and drizzly, but we are keen to board the landing craft to explore the head of the sound, which sits 21km from the coast, where a Department of Conservation hikers' hut peeks from the thick forest.

The track is muddy and slippery but we spend a pleasant half-hour or so pottering around, sheltered by towering silver beeches and dripping ferns.

The next day, our excursion is to a crescent of beach adorned with flowering flax bushes, daisies, blossoming rata trees — set to provide a blazing red summer showing for the next cruise — and wandering oyster-catchers, gulls and cormorants. There's not a single piece of flotsam to be seen.

Later, we're captivated by the lazy antics of a colony of New Zealand fur seals, idling on the rocks.

From George Sound, we venture into the Tasman Sea. I head to the stern and try to keep my mind off the pitching deck by watching the albatrosses and gulls ride the thermals and waves.

The ocean passages are mercifully short and *mal de mer* is avoided by most. With a maximum of 24 passengers and a crew of eight, service levels are high and it's easy to find a quiet spot. Meal times, at two large dining tables, are introduced by head chef Yano Gideon and an almost too-steady supply of cakes and slices are provided by sous chef Donald Seil. Both chefs are from Vanuatu (where Island Passage cruises for part of the year).

In Bligh Sound, kayaks are launched and some guests paddle the shoreline, dwarfed by the steep sides of the fiord. The less intrepid take the landing craft to discover more waterfalls, mosses and lichens, and look in vain for signs of a reputed hot spring.

Heading north, we bypass the entrances to Sutherland Sound and Poison Bay. We enter Milford Sound, a tiny outpost of civilisation with day-tripping cruise boats and fishermen coming close to take a look at the ship.

As we fly out, I look down on a landscape unchanged for 350 million years. Island Passage sits reflected in the clear water, waiting to reveal more secrets of Fiordland to the new day's arriving guests.

Lee Mylne was a guest of Island Escape Cruises.  
• islandescapcruises.com



## Extravagant days meet unprecedented value.

Your elegant ship is your passport to discovery, with fascinating ports of call that span the globe.



BOOK BY 3 MARCH,  
2013 AND SAVE!

### 14-Day Pacific Treasures

Roundtrip Sydney

ms Osterdam: 2 Mar, 30 Mar 2014

Includes: Noumea, Lifou, Port-Vila, Anelghowhat, Ile des Pins, and more.

Ocean-view from \$1,699, Verandah from \$1,799

Interior Stateroom from **\$1,399\***

Fares based on 30/3/2014 sailing.

### 43-Day Pacific Treasures & South Pacific Crossing Collectors' Voyage

Sydney to Vancouver

ms Osterdam: 30 Mar 2014

Includes: Sydney, Ile Des Pins, Mystery Island, Pago Pago, Kauai, and more.

Ocean-view from \$4,499, Verandah from \$4,899

Interior Stateroom from **\$3,799\***

• Cruise from less than \$100 per day!\*

• Ask about reduced rates for 3rd/4th guests!\*

• Cruise roundtrip Sydney from \$1,399!\*

### 29-Day South Pacific Crossing

Sydney to Vancouver

ms Osterdam: 13 Apr 2014

Includes: Port Vila, Luganville, Lautoka, Pago Pago, Honolulu, Lahaina, Kauai, Seattle, and more.

Ocean-view from \$2,999, Verandah from \$3,599

Interior Stateroom from **\$2,599\***

### 34-Day Australia Circumnavigation

Roundtrip Sydney

ms Volendam: 19 Oct 2014

Includes: Brisbane, Great Barrier Reef, Darwin, Komodo Island, Perth, Kangaroo Island, Melbourne, and more.

Ocean-view from \$5,999, Suites from \$10,499

Interior Stateroom from **\$5,499\***

Contact your Travel Professional, call us on  
**1 300 987 322, or visit hollandamerica.com**



**Holland America Line**  
A Signature of Excellence

\*Terms & Conditions: ALL PRICES STATED ARE PER PERSON, DOUBLE OCCUPANCY AND INCLUDE TAXES and discounts. CRUISE OR CRUISETOUR ONLY. Fares listed are in Australian Dollars. All fares are based on Promo RH/FL. Third/fourth offer based on sharing a stateroom with 1st and 2nd guests, are valid on select sailings, and are based on Promo Z3. Third/fourth child offer applicable to ages 17 and under. Government Fees & Taxes are included in all 3rd/4th offers. For more information about our stateroom categories and suite descriptions, to view deck plans and for full terms and conditions applicable to your cruise, please refer to hollandamerica.com.au or the appropriate Holland America brochure. Offers are capacity controlled and may be modified or withdrawn or sailing/departure dates may be substituted without prior notice. Subject to availability. Other restrictions may apply. Carnival plc as Agent 2TA 5580. Ships' Registry: The Netherlands.