

7-DAY FIORDLAND / TE WAHIPOUNAMU EXPEDITIONS

SCENIC & NATURE

The massive glaciers that tore the landscape apart 15,000 years ago left 14 fascinating fiords, the northernmost being the famous Milford Sound, with its narrow valley and steep cliffs, and the southernmost being Dusky Sound, and Chalky and Preservation Inlets.

Strictly speaking, a "sound" is formed by a river, while a "fiord" is a glacier-formed valley. Fiordland's southern fiords are much larger than its northern fiords, with mountains and hills complementing their islands and coves. The remote islands in particular have been a real opportunity to establish bird sanctuaries, such as Anchor Island, which is now home to the likes of the kakapo and saddleback.

Fiordland receives about 6500mm of rainfall each year, the perfect catalyst for beautiful waterfalls and lush podocarp forest, both abundant in Dusky Sound. This rainfall also creates a freshwater layer on top of the fiords, resulting in a unique marine environment.

Wildlife

Dusky Sound and its surrounding fiords are havens for marine and bird life. From the comfort of our vessel you can enjoy seals and a variety of birds in their natural habitat.

Birds

Fiordland has many pest-free islands, the best known being Anchor Island, where you may see the endangered kakapo, South Island saddleback, South Island robin and yellowhead.

The most intriguing of birds is the rare Fiordland crested penguin. It is the only penguin to breed exclusively in New Zealand, mainly in Fiordland and Stewart Island. We may also see falcons, white-faced herons, white herons, cattle egrets, petrels, a variety of shags and the common black-backed gull.

Out in the Tasman Sea we frequently see Albatross including the Royal Albatross which has the longest wing span in the world.

Seals

Fiordland is home to the New Zealand fur seal (kekeno). Although almost hunted to extinction in the 1800s, New Zealand now boasts approximately 80,000 fur seals, with a large population found in Dusky Sound.

Dolphins are frequently seen in the sounds and, on rare occasions, pilot, humpback and Southern Right whales. Orca have been spotted along the coast and it is always a special privilege to see these incredible animals.

Underwater

Fiordland is home to ten marine reserves. Depending on the weather, we may use the ROV to view the Five Fingers Peninsula and Wet Jacket Arm reserves in Dusky Sound and the Long Sound Reserve at the head of the Preservation Inlet.

The extreme amount of rainfall in the fiords results in a freshwater surface layer that can be as deep as seven metres. The run-off from the surrounding mountains collects vegetable particles, which are responsible for the tannin-like colour of the water. This creates a light barrier and encourages deep-water plants and animals to thrive at shallower depths.

The marine reserves have an impressive variety of habitats and species from sponges, lampshells (brachiopods), starfish lobsters, rock crabs and fish, to some of the world's biggest populations of black coral trees. This black coral - said to be more expensive than diamonds - can be more than 300 years old.

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HISTORY

Maori

Fiordland/Te Wahipounamu was well known to the Maori, and many legends recount its formation and naming. Demigod Tuterakiwhanoa is said to have carved the rugged landscap from formless rock. Takiwai, a translucent greenstone, was sought from Anita Bay and elsewhere near the mouth of Milford Sound/Piopiotaahi.

Early Maoris began to explore Fiordland from about 800 years ago. They were inventive, adventurous and resilient, as all who venture off the well-trod way must be. Remnants of the major southern Maori tribe Ngatimamoe, fled into remote parts of the Fiordland in the late 18th century. They were pursued by Ngaitahu tribesmen from the north, and about 1780 two battles are said to have been fought in the far southwest at Preservation Inlet which the Maoris called Rakituma, 'the threatening sky'. About 5 years later legend has it that Pukutahi led another group of fleeing Ngatimamoe intending to take refuge and settle in the Murchison Mountains ('the land of the moho' - takahe) between the south and middle fiords of Lake Te Anau. Te Hau, a Ngaitahu warrior, led a party which caught and slew some of the escapers in a fracas thought to have taken place across the lake from the hotel at Te Anau.

The survivors disappeared and entered lore as the poignant holders of the names 'lost tribe' or 'wild natives' of Fiordland. In 1851 Captain Stokes of the survey ship Acheron recorded that he and his crew 'came on the fresh foot-marks of some natives' in Bligh Sound, most likely members of the 'lost tribe' that Paddy Gilroy, skipper of the Amazon, had seen there in 1842. And Captain Cook had earlier made contact with Maoris when he put the Resolution in to Dusky Sound for repairs and to rest his crew from March to May of 1773.

Dusky Sound and its surrounding fiords are steeped in rich New Zealand history and stories of the early beginnings of this remarkable region are fascinating.

In 1770, Captain Cook, sailing the Endeavour, saw Five Fingers Point "standing up like four fingers and thumb of a man's hand". It was nearing dusk so Cook, arguably the greatest mariner the world has ever seen, decided it would be unwise to sail into the fiord. He named it "Dusky Bay" and kept sailing,

In 1773, he returned in Resolution and, having spent 117 days at sea, he sailed straight into Dusky Sound and anchored off the eastern tip of Anchor Island. The next day he found a safe anchorage and used his boats to tow the Resolution to Pickersgill Harbour, where the ship moored alongside Astronomers Point for five weeks. It had been an arduous voyage through the Antarctic waters - the ship needed repairs and the crew needed a rest.

An acre of forest was cleared where tents were erected, a brewery constructed and a forge was set up. The stumps can still be seen and there is now a boardwalk around the Point.

It was named "Astronomers Point" because it was an observation for William Wales of the Board of Longitude to establish the position of New Zealand. This was important so they could test the accuracy of John Harrison's watch, the "H4" (finding an accurate marine watch was the challenge of the 1700s and Harrison was the leading contender). The Royal New Zealand Navy has marked the site of the observatory and mounted a plaque to commemorate this important historic location.

Cook made a very accurate chart of Dusky Sound, scientific data was collected, and he left weeks later via Acheron Passage and Breaksea Sound.

New Zealand's first house and ship

In 1792, Captain Raven of the Britannia left a gang of sealers at Luncheon Cove on Anchor Island. Here they built the first European house and ship in New Zealand. A mound of boulders near the stream is believed to be a tidal platform on which the sealers built their boat "Providence".

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Whalers also established a whaling station in 1829. By the 1840s, sealers had almost hunted fur seals to extinction and Dusky Sound once again became deserted.

The first shipwreck

In 1795, the 800-tonne East Indiaman Endeavour, carrying 244 people, sunk in Facile Harbour after being caught in a storm. In 1910, the cruise ship SS Waikare sank after hitting an uncharted rock in the Sound. Modern-day electronic sonar is a useful thing to have!

New Zealand's first conservator and sanctuary

After the ecologically disastrous introduction of possums, ferrets, stoats and rabbits, by the late 1800s, it had become obvious that native bird populations were heading towards extinction. In 1891, Resolution Island was chosen as New Zealand's first sanctuary and Richard Henry was appointed caretaker and curator. He became an international pioneer of the live transfer of birds to island refuges, even though his methods proved to be a disheartening failure.

In 1894, he arrived on Pigeon Island and built a three-story house with his assistant - the piles of which you can still see today. He then proceeded to catch and transfer over 700 kakapo and kiwi from the mainland to surrounding islands.

On 4th August 1900, to his utter despair, he discovered a weasel on Resolution Island. He trapped and poisoned for another eight years but left in 1908. His capture techniques, however, were pioneering and his observations were a foundation for later successful bird recovery programs. He went on to be the Kapiti Island ranger before he retired in 1912 and died in 1929.

Mystic moose

Some believe moose may still live in Wet Jacket Arm after they were released in 1910 and although most New Zealanders are convinced that they died out long ago, there are still people prepared to spend time and money trying to prove their continued existence.

Preservation Inlet

The Gold Rush

In 1887, the Puysegur Point lighthouse keeper found gold on Coal Island and triggered the gold rush. The Cromarty township was created to service the Golden Site and Alpha mines, and the Te Oneroa township sprang up to serve the Morning Star mine.

On the hills on the west of Isthmus Sound, halfway down Preservation Inlet, gold, silver, copper and lead were found. A company was formed and, in 1897, a shaft was driven 50 metres inland and 30 metres underwater. Blasting fractured its roof and it filled with sea water and the mine never recovered.

In 1908, a second attempt was made, but this time a smelter was built and 35 tonnes of ore was smelted only to produce no returns and the whole site was abandoned once more. The smelter remains with its long brick chimney running up the hill behind it.

The Lighthouse

Puysegur Point Lighthouse is the most isolated lighthouse in New Zealand. There are superb views looking along the south coast and, on a fine day, the Solander Islands can be seen to the east and the tip of Cape Providence to the west.

It was first built in 1879 on the most south-westerly point of the South Island, but burnt down in 1942 by an eccentric gold miner who was annoyed by the light keeping him awake. In 1989 it was automated, but remains an iconic and fascinating part of Fiordland's history.

World Heritage Area

Fiordland National Park was officially constituted in 1952. Today it covers over 1.2 million hectares and was declared a World Heritage Area in 1986.