



# Hiding from the **Roaring Forties**

A camping trip around remote Stewart Island in New Zealand's south gave **Katie Thomsen** the urge to explore deeper into its isolated wilderness.





Straddling 47°S, Stewart Island lies in the heart of the Roaring Forties.

Westerly winds often blow at gale or storm force and blast its rocky western coast. The eastern coast is more protected and has two large, safe harbours: Paterson Inlet and Port Pegasus.

Ferries from Bluff and small planes from Invercargill bring visitors to Oban, the island's only town. Several well maintained tracks lead around and across the northern part of the island but the southern part is accessible only by boat or float plane. No roads or tracks lead to Port Pegasus. Most of the 400 residents of Oban have never been down there.

Many foreign yachts arriving in New Zealand to wait out the cyclone season, most venture no further south than Auckland. Travelling this beautiful country by land is a welcome break from months crossing the South Pacific in a rolling boat. Indeed my husband Jim and I drove around South Island last year by campervan and took the ferry over to Stewart Island.

We often found ourselves wondering what it would be like to sail to this special place, so we came back to New Zealand to do just that.

After nearly two months of exploring and enjoying Abel Tasman and Fiordland National parks on South Island on our yacht *Tenaya* it was time to move on. We began to watch for a weather window to cross the notorious Foveaux Strait. Two weeks later we got it. A high was building over the area so the strong winds and rough seas would ease long enough for us to make the 130 nautical mile overnight passage from Dusky Sound to Port Pegasus.

Our route would take us southeast past the Solander Islands and the western side of Stewart Island, around South West Cape and up to Port Pegasus. South West Cape is one of the five great southern capes, only Cape Horn is further south. This knowledge was somewhat angst provoking!

## CAPE CONFUSION

In paragraph four I describe rounding South West Cape, one of the five great capes. I believe the name should be changed to South Cape. But please, read on and decide for yourself.

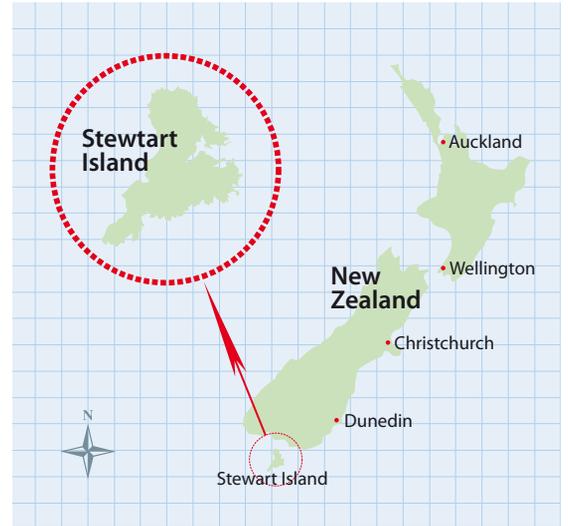
The southernmost tip of land on Stewart Island has two different names depending on the reference. Google Earth, Wikipedia and our older Navionics electronic chart label it 'South West Cape'. C-Maps and the most recent version of Navionics (for iPad) call it 'South Cape'. Same location: 47° 17.438S 167° 32.28E.

The most recent Navionics and C-Maps label two capes: 'South Cape

'as above and 'South West Cape' at 47° 16.999S 167° 27.844E. I don't know how the land was identified on our paper charts; we've sold them.

Evans Starzinger, an American sailing guru, also refers to it as 'South West Cape' in his informative PDF file about sailing around the five great capes. He explains the early discrepancy as it was first named 'South Cape' by Capt. Cook and later 'South West Cape' by William Stewart who performed a more detailed survey.

But now there is another discrepancy with two capes labeled, each with one of those names. Very confusing!



Up at dawn, we freed ourselves from the mooring outside Luncheon Cove in Dusky Sound and headed out to sea. We were sad to be leaving the magnificent and pristine wilderness of Fiordland, but were excited to explore the completely different and even more remote, Stewart Island.

The sun was warm, winds were in the single digits and the seas were slight.

The birdlife was plentiful. Sooty Shearwaters gathered in numbers while prions and terns darted about. Mollymawks, small members of the albatross family, joined the larger Royal Albatross soaring effortlessly for miles.

The night was magical with a full moon and glassy sea. Clouds rolled by while the Southern Cross sparkled directly overhead. At one point during his watch Jim saw odd columns of light shooting skyward. He pondered for a moment before realising they were the Southern Lights.

We were certainly surprised when the weather report that evening said there was a storm warning for the area. Not a gale warning, a storm warning. That's 55+ knots! Where did that come from?

All we could do was ensure the boat was ready and wait nervously. We rounded South West Cape on March 10, the same day that Captain Cook did 242 years earlier on his first voyage in the *Endeavour*.

A swathe of pink on the horizon intensified and turned the eastern sky a deep magenta and the western sky a brilliant deep blue before the sun rose. It is easy to understand why the Maori name for Stewart Island is Rakiura, 'Land of glowing lights'.

As we entered the south arm of Port Pegasus we passed a rare yellow-eyed penguin lazily fishing while a sea lion bull noisily followed us. Was he welcoming us or chasing us? We weren't sure.

There are several all-weather anchorages in Port Pegasus and we headed for Evening

Cove as the storm warning was still in effect. The guide book says to drop the anchor in the middle of the cove and tie two sternlines to shore. It was low water when I paddled the windward line out in our inflatable kayak to a strong tree with several lines tied around it. Instead of looping around the trunk, which was overhead and hard to reach, I ran our line through a loop in the beefiest line. Then I paddled the other stern line out and secured it around a tree. Once settled, we crawled into bed for a nap.

Strong winds blowing from the SW woke us up and we found *Harmony*, a 26' New Zealand yacht, anchored nearby.

We awoke several times during the night to check that all was okay. We hadn't heard wind in the rigging for quite some time and it was a little disconcerting to have so much on the beam. In the morning *Harmony* moved further into the cove and we worried we might be stretching too close to the rocks but feared taking in any scope.

As we sat in the cockpit pondering the situation, I noticed the line taking all the force go slack. Jim jumped up, started the engine and steered us into the middle of the cove. When I pulled the line in, the loop and bowline were still in place, the existing line had broken. Good thing it didn't happen during the night!

Needless to say, both sternlines were then tied around the thickest trees I could find. We added a third line off port midships for good measure as that was directly into the wind. *Tenaya* looked like she was caught in a spider's web, but she was secure.

#### Literal rock fishing

Stewart Island is very different from any place we've ever seen.

At first glance it seems open and mellow but on closer inspection the vegetation is often

PREVIOUS SPREAD:  
Boat Harbour Cove in  
Port Pegasus

CLOCKWISE FROM  
BOTTOM LEFT: One  
of many rocky islets in  
Port Pegasus; Inside  
Smugglers Cove; View  
of the entrance into  
Port Pegasus



FROM TOP: Boat Harbour Cove in Port Pegasus, Stewart Island; Stewart Island is pristine and remote.

impenetrable. Rolling hills are dense with scrubby brush, grasses, flax and tall rimu trees. Here and there are piles of granite outcroppings. The whole island is rugged, windswept and isolated.

During the 18th to 20th centuries adventurous pioneers of various nationalities arrived: sealers, whalers, prospectors, shipbuilders, timbermen and flax harvesters settled here and married Maori women.

Eventually these industries disappeared and the bush reclaimed most traces of their existence. What remains is an interesting mix of hearty people who have continued to survive in this harsh environment without many of the comforts of the mainland. Tourism, conservation work and fishing for cod, paua (abalone) and spiny lobster are the main interests today.

When the weather cleared we went exploring. A track leads from the anchorage up to several granite domes. We hiked to the top of the closest highpoint.

The track disappeared for a while and we made our way through the bush from boulder to boulder until we found it again, leading us to the top with a fabulous view of Port Pegasus.

There is a trail marked on our chart from a little cove at the southern end across to Boat Harbour in Broad Bay. We were told it is very pretty and there was once a settlement nearby. Hoping to hike over and see it, we motored a short distance, anchored and tied two lines to shore.

It was low water and the rocks were a beautiful colour in the brilliant sunshine. Swaying kelp alternately hid and revealed them. Suddenly I glimpsed a big paua in six inches of water. Excitedly, I reached down to pry it off the rock. No luck.

I went back to the boat to get my proper paua prier and pulled on my wetsuit and gear. I had another incentive to get in the water as well. It was the last day of scallop season and we had yet to collect any ourselves.

“Katie, you have to actually put your wetsuit on and dive for your scallops,” were the instructions from Billy in Deep Cove, Doubtful Sound via email. When I responded that it had been cold and windy and I was hesitant to get in the water he wrote, “Hi Katie, don’t be a bloody wussy. Get in the water and paddle around looking down and you will see them.” Well okay then. I am not a “wussy”.

As we paddled along the shore looking for more paua a blue cod sprang out of the water and flopped wildly on a nearby rock. As Jim brought us alongside, I scooped the suicidal delicacy into the kayak. That’s the first time we’ve ever caught a fish without a line! Without a doubt, blue cod are our favorite tasting fish. They are only found in this region, nowhere else in the world.

In the middle of the bay I peered over the side of the kayak but could not see any scallops. Billy’s words rang in my head so over the side I went. They were everywhere! I collected our limit of 20 in no time.

As Jim paddled our dinner back to the boat I swam back for another try at the first paua but it held firm. I found several more but they were so big I was unable to dislodge them and only succeeded in getting a smaller one.

Twice we went in search of the settlement in Broad Bay, twice we were turned back. Whatever track had been there 20 years ago when the guidebook was written had vanished.

Without any signs of habitation, we were keenly aware of our isolation and relished the solitude. The only other boats we saw in Port Pegasus were *Harmony*, who left before we did, two fishing boats and *Southern Winds* the Department of Conservation boat with sea lion researchers on board.

As a gale warning was in effect the day we moved to North Arm, we secured *Tenaya* in another all-weather anchorage with stern lines tied to shore. The wind howled through the treetops but very little stirred the water in protected Ben's Bay.

There is a tiny cove not far away that, if you were not searching for it, would surely miss. A narrow opening between two rock walls is just wide enough for a dinghy to squeeze through. The tapered entrance widens into a secluded cove of emerald water with a sandy shore and bottom. Dark rocks are scattered about while ferns and other foliage dripping with moisture cling to the steep walls and form a canopy of green.

It's an enchanting little wonderland. Further up the arm ruins can be found from an old fishing and freezing station as well as those from a tin mining operation.

**Returning Stewart to isolation**

We awoke at dawn for the fifty mile trip from Port Pegasus north to Paterson Inlet. Our timing was right for the current that runs along the coast and it gave us a nice boost all the way. Wind speeds were four to seven knots and the seas were moderate with the swell from two directions bouncing us around a bit.

We anchored in Golden Bay, a pretty and quiet setting. It is close to Oban and has a wharf to leave the kayak. How easy it was to just drop the hook, attach the snubber, back down and be done with it!

We met several local folks who invited us to their homes. One man offered us the use of his mooring at Ulva Island, a bird sanctuary.

Before we were ready to leave this amazing island, a weather window opened up to sail to Dunedin on South Island's eastern side. Off we went. This time we had a fabulous overnight sail with winds 20 to 30 knots from behind and following seas.

But that is another story.



Collecting scallops in Port Pegasus

ch

**cruisinghelmsman** Katie Thomsen



Having returned home to Antwerp, Belgium from a kayaking trip in British Columbia, Kate announced, "I could live on a boat." Six years and 35,000 miles later, she enjoys venturing into higher latitudes while delving deeply into the lands and cultures she encounters aboard their 2006 40-foot Hallberg-Rassy sloop.

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