

*Hei Matau: Safe Passage Across Water*

# THE ZEN OF CRUISING NEW ZEALAND

text and photos by Amanda Castleman

*Mount Cargill's trails overlook Dunedin and the Otago peninsula, home to the only colony of royal northern albatrosses on a human-inhabited mainland.*

An albatross lazes along beside the boat. Our engines push against the wind and on-rushing tide off New Zealand's Otago Peninsula. But this bird just cruises — look ma, no hands! — on its 10-foot wingspan.

That same power carries non-breeding toroa (royal northern albatrosses) on circumpolar flights, skating along the Antarctic fringes and nesting on far-flung, salt-chapped islands. Just one colony, here at Taiaroa Head, deigns to live on a human-inhabited mainland.

Otago is an exception-worthy place with its freehold farms, sun-soaked coves and volcanic sea cliffs. Sand dunes rear up 325 feet in one area. The nation's only castle rides the peninsula's spine: a monument to William Larnach, a gold miner turned banker and 19th-century politician. Nearby lives the world's rarest penguin, the native *Hoiho* ("noise shouter" in Maori), which slouches on the \$5 bill beside some giant daisies.



Like much of New Zealand, Otago's natural beauty is epic. Wide-screen. Almost over-bright, as if *Hobbit* Director Peter Jackson filmed the whole Colorado-sized country in 48 frames per second. And though I've been warned — begged even — not to mention "bloody Middle Earth again," I can't help myself. I imagine Dwarves frisking here and Orcs rampaging there. Jackson may be a trilogy-milking uber-geek, but he's also a wizard at capturing the spirit of a landscape. And what terrain he had to work with: *Aotearoa*, the "Land of The Long White Cloud." Glaciated peaks taper down to fern forests, world-famous vineyards and an indigo ocean where southern right whales idle.

All this streams past my porthole on the *Volendam*, an elegant, garden-themed Holland America ship. At first I'm restive, always crowding off the gangplank in the initial surge. "Tourists, not travelers," I sniff, charting an independent course through the harbor towns. "I'll find my own possum-merino-blend sweater, ta!"

Then one afternoon I sit across from a woman knitting in a starboard lounge. "They call us grey nomads in Australia," she volunteers. "We are spending our children's inheritance."

"But do it — travel — while you're young and have the energy," continues Frances Young of Naples, Florida. "Because when you can finally afford it, you can't walk when you get there. Trust me. I'm 92."

## I FLOAT DOWN A BLACK-WATER RIVER AS TURQUOISE CONSTELLATIONS OF GLOWWORMS IGNITE THE WAITOMO CAVES.

*Opposite page: A spelunker descends into the vast Waitomo Caves system, famed for its black-water rafting and glowworm boat rides. Right: Fur seals and dusky dolphins pass cruise ships in the Fiordlands, New Zealand's largest national park, on the southwestern corner of the South Island.*

Young grew up in a small Southern town, jitterbugged her way through college to a wedding and listened to Louis Armstrong on old river steamboats that groaned past the mile limit so they could open the bars. Now she wants to see New Zealand before she dies.

Shame descends. Here I've been kvetching about slow espresso pulls and mocking the elevators' day-of-the-week carpets. Meanwhile, Young has been drinking up the views like mint juleps, and reminiscing about Satchmo, who considered his Mississippi River tours as essential as lessons in literacy.

Schooled, I look closer at what a wonderful world passes by the *Volendam*. Our voyage edges along New Zealand's wild southern stretches, ice-sculpted and shrouded in rainforests. Then we hook around the Fiordland National Park and trace the eastern coast, exploring cities, remote villages and moss-green pasturelands. Flocks of sheep crop up as often as Hobbit-shtick, with seven grass-burners for every citizen (down from 22 in the early eighties).

With Young's advice searing my mind like the letters on the One Ring, I throw myself at Kiwiland. I make a wish in the capital city of Wellington, when the blue bucket empties in the famous, splashy Cuba Mall fountain. I wander palm-fringed, Easter-candy-colored Napier, which blossomed into the world's Art Deco Capital when townsfolk rebuilt in just two years, after the 1931 earthquake. I float down a black-water river as turquoise constellations of glowworms ignite the Waitomo Caves. They twinkle, as air currents sway the translucent fishing lines of the insect-hungry gnat larvae.

We drift in the dark with the tour's leader hauling on guide ropes now and then. Our dory grows silent, then still. The blue-green lights reflect on the surface. We are falling through space.



PHOTO: AMANDA CASTLEMAN  
PHOTO OPPOSITE PAGE: CHRIS MCLENNAN / TOURISM NEW ZEALAND



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Opposite page from top left: Pohutukawa (New Zealand Christmas Tree) blossoms in Napier; A kiwi-crossing sign on Stewart Island; Milford Sound, near Queenstown. A café in funky Cuba Street, Wellington; The Gilray Fountain represents Napier rising from the ashes of the 1931 earthquake; A yellow-eyed penguin (Hoiho) on the Otago peninsula;

An unfolding fern (koru) represents life and growth in Maori culture; A red rowboat off Stewart Island; Volendam, a 1,432-passenger Holland American cruise ship, docked in Port Chalmers, near Dunedin, New Zealand. This page: A sunburst dazzles the Fjords, just one stop along Holland America's 14-day New Zealand Discovery cruise.



Limestone scrapes the hull, grounding my daydreams. Except I can't get boats off my brain. They are, I realize, the key that has always unlocked New Zealand. Humans first settled here by sailing double-hulled canoes from East Polynesia just 730 years ago. They could read the stars like a Rand McNally atlas, and created charts of sticks and shells to remember where currents sliced and precisely how swells backwashed off certain islands. It takes a certain chutzpah to venture thousands of miles in a boat lashed together with coconut fiber, while navigating with other bits of compost. Their reward: this long, lovely strip of land and its mild, maritime climate, where off-track polar penguins wash up and eat sand, expecting snow.

White men first hove into view in 1642, when Dutch Explorer Abel Tasman lost four crewmen to hostile Maoris. Other sailors followed, seeking what café-au-lait-colored maps called *terra australis incognita* (the unknown southern land), including James Cook, who forged the area's later links to Britain. Soon these green and pleasant shores evolved into a rest stop amid the risky, ship-swallowing waters of the world's largest ocean.

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The Pacific was “so far away, so difficult to get to, and, when [Europeans] finally reached it, so unexpectedly immense,” writes Christina Thompson in her modern memoir *Come on Shore and We Will Kill and Eat You All*. “The early explorers suffered terribly from scurvy, hunger, thirst, not to mention disorientation in the course of voyages that often lasted for years.”

My journey takes just two weeks, as Holland America squires the *Volendam* along the coastal highlights. I shoot craps in the casino. High in the Crow's Nest nightclub, I sip champagne as new friends bat their eyelashes at uniformed officers. I outmaneuver grey nomads for the highly coveted chairs in the wood-paneled library. In those quiet moments, slipping past cliffs brightened by the scarlet pom-poms of pohutukawa blossoms, I find an unexpected ease on the ten-deck, 1,432-passenger *Volendam*. Not every journey needs hardship to have meaning. In fact, seafarers have more often sought out good luck and still harbors. I anchor myself, touching my greenstone fishhook pendant, a gift from a Kiwi friend. *Hei matau*, the Maoris call it. A symbol of safe passage across water.

So I sip meritage and spoon down crème brulee — the very blend of crunch and custard made famous by New York City's Le Cirque, since it partners with 15 of the line's ships. It's a far cry from taro or hard tack. Still, I sense a connection with those first waves of explorers as our captain logs nautical miles beside the Land of The Long White Cloud.

Albatrosses, natives to this isolated country, may kite effortlessly along its shores. But we humans have always approached this wellspring of beauty, hearts in hand, as grateful voyagers from the sea.

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## NEW ZEALAND CRUISING

### Holland America

The 14-Day New Zealand Discovery cruise departs from Sydney and edges the coastline from Milford Sound to Waitangi and The Bay of Islands. Rates start at \$1,499 per person ([www.hollandamerica.com](http://www.hollandamerica.com)). Add on to the luxury with fine dining at Canaletto or The Pinnacle Grill, which hosts a Le Cirque night each trip.

### New Zealand Cruise Highlights

Animal fans can watch glowworms flash at Waitomo Caves ([www.waitomo.com](http://www.waitomo.com)) and observe the country's symbol — an endearing long-billed bird shaped like an egg — at Otorohanga Kiwi House ([kiwihouse.org.nz](http://kiwihouse.org.nz)).

Catch up on culture in Art Deco Napier ([www.napier.govt.nz](http://www.napier.govt.nz)) or Wellington's boho Cuba Street, thick with cafes, galleries and boutiques. The national museum, Te Papa Tongarewa, ranges from specimens collected by Captain Cook's expedition to a costume worn in *Xena: Warrior Princess*. ([www.tepapa.govt.nz](http://www.tepapa.govt.nz)).

Adventurous travelers can hike to the Organ Pipes on Mount Cargill, Dunedin's most prominent peak, or mountain-bike the nearby Otago Peninsula. Other hands-on excursions include a cooking class in Akaroa, a Tatapouri reef walk and sailing on an America's Cup yacht in Auckland, as well as kayaking at Waitangi's Bay of Islands.

*Opposite page: Kids play on the beach in the small fishing village of Oban on Stewart Island. Rakiura National Park covers about 85% of the landmass: its name means "Land of Glowing Skies," referring to the southern lights.*