

Southern New Zealand Sail *by Peter Tait*

Over the years I have helped hundreds of FireBug builders with their build and have made many good friends on the way. This has led to several sailing adventures with these new friends. In Dunedin Gordon Caley was Commodore of the Otago Yacht Club for many years. The club put together a fleet of 'Bugs and Gordon owned a 30 foot steel keelboat which was well set up for cruising in the cold southern waters, read on..



2 'Wings' tied up to a tree in the South West Arm of Patterson Inlet, Stewart Island.

Here I was on the ferry to Stewart Island! “Where the heck is that?” I hear from non-New Zealanders. Well, it’s the small island, a few miles south of New Zealand’s South Island and I was reminded of its proximity to the South Pole as I got closer. It was mid-February and for us and that’s the warmest part of the year so I had packed mostly shorts and tee shirts. I had flown to Invercargill, the southern-most airport, stepped off the plane and headed directly to the nearest mountaineering shop for long woollie underwear. That wind was coming directly from the South Pole!

A good FireBug friend, Gordon Caley from Dunedin had phoned me in Auckland, “Peter would you like a look around Stewart Island and then help me sail up the coast to Dunedin?” And a few days later I was nearly there. The weather wasn’t so good, not only cold but blowing a gale! Would the ferry crossing be cancelled? “Nope, we never cancel, well only once we did, back in about 1954...” The Foveaux Strait runs east-west and the big southerly swell came around both sides of the island

resulting in a big untidy chop. The ferry was a very beamy cat and handled it quite well. Not so the passengers, most were sick but I'd chosen a seat amidships and was OK.

The crossing didn't take long and there was Gordon's blue thirty footer anchored near the wharf and he rowed over. I shooed away the seals as I climbed down the rickety old steel ladder with my gear and jumped into the dinghy. 'Wings' was 30 feet long, steel, and well appointed. The fire was going in the potbelly stove and the resulting cosiness was very pleasant.

Looking in at the town of Oban in Halfmoon Bay it looked small but attractive and well serviced, New Zealand's southern outpost.



3 The small port of Oban in Halfmoon Bay, Stewart Island..

We had a catch up over a cup of tea and headed ashore to have a look around. The town had the essentials but was only small, population 400 or so. The Department of Conservation had a big presence and the DoC signage was everywhere. The shop was well stocked for provisioning. We didn't bother with the yellow café where the menu included jewellery and fishing lines but the pub looked to be worth a visit later, especially as there was an Auckland v Southland rugby match on. As an Aucklander it was me versus them and we all had a good laugh as the city boys won!

The town had a pleasant aspect with sandy beach and most houses had a sea view. DoC, tourism and commercial fishing provided the jobs.



4 All the gear for adventures on land and sea.



5 We didn't make it to the JustCafe.

A two handed keelboat race around New Zealand have since done a stopover in Oban and the race boats did a fundraiser for the local school to build a FireBug. But it didn't appear to ever get off the ground and there was never any response to my emails. What did the funds get spent on I wonder? Warm clothing for the children perhaps, or more coaching for the rugby team?

In the morning we left for a look around the northern bays and anchorages. The island of Renga Renga is famous as the home of the popular renga renga lily, scrap of info there for the gardening fraternity. The Patterson Inlet just beyond is the favoured boating region. We explored and chose to spend the first night in a pleasant and very snug bay well into the South West Arm. It was all very remote and beautiful. I had expected pristine native forest down to the water's edge but like the rest of New Zealand the island had been milled for timber in the colonial days. The forest was regenerating well but it takes a while that far south. There were birds everywhere and a lot of marine life but good eating fish were scarce that day. We dropped anchor close in at the head of the little bay. The tide rise and fall was only a metre and a bit so we rowed a stern line in and tied up to a tree!



7 Not many cruising boats around the bays.



8 We met these guys having a real life adventure!



6a All types of sea life

It was another comfortable night with the stove providing the warmth. Gordon had the boat well set up for living aboard. Rising early in the morning, he ground flour and baked bread which is a real treat on a boat. Another friend of mine does that too - it's not difficult, well put it this way, the ingredients are simple but there are baker's tricks to learn. Just flour, yeast, water, a pinch of salt and bake in a collapsible metal box 'oven' which sits on the two burner cooker. Delicious!

By profession Gordon is a science, engineering and maths teacher and also a consultant in alternative energy and out-of-the-ordinary gadgetry. He can make you a water-driven Pelton wheel to generate enough electricity for a house from a fast flowing stream or design you a house which will be self-sufficient for heating year round, even in the far south.

The plan was to cruise the island until the weather looked suitable for the sail up the coast to Otago Harbour and the 'Wings' home port of Dunedin. It was 200 odd miles north with no shelter on the way. To the east it was next stop South America so it had the potential to get pretty mean. We spent the day looking around and fishing then the forecast was OK so the following morning we pointed the bow northwards. For two days and a night the wind was light and a lot of ground was covered under power. We stayed in sight of the coast all the way. There was not much to look at but I had always been keen to see an albatross and we had several gliding along astern hoping for scraps. I was disappointed, they flew and soared well with an enormous wingspan but otherwise didn't have the class of my favourite seabird, the beautiful gliding and diving Gannet of the northern regions. I had caught a Gannet on a fishing lure a few years back. It had been towed along and was spluttering

for breath but then sat happily on my knee while I tucked feathers back into shape and marvelled at the beauty of nature. It eventually got enough breath back and flew off.



6 Dolphins playing around the boat

There were a lot of fish about. I have always fished but this was different to my home waters. The experienced skipper had the answer - on board the boat he had a forward looking depth sounder and fish finder. Just short of Otago Harbour we headed for a sunken reef which he knew was good for cod fishing. The technique was to locate the reef with the sounder, then find some fish action. He held the boat there while I operated the 'fish catcher' which consisted of a not very sporting 300lb line with a very large weight attached to the end and about twenty baited hooks 'cantilevered' off the taut line with stainless steel wire brackets. We didn't anchor, the boat was held over the hotspot for ten or fifteen minutes during which time the biting activity was all on. When the line came in we had hooked several big fat cod and a couple of other southern oddities. This was more like it!



11 A cod fish - should we wait until he grows up?



12 Sunrise at sea, always special.

Another few hours and we were at the spectacular Otago Heads with storm bashed cliffs and an early lighthouse nestled on top. The headland is famous as home to a large number of birds including Petrels, Spoonbills, breeding colonies of the Yellow Eyed Penguin and Royal Albatross and five types of Shag. The region is a major tourist attraction out of Dunedin.



13 Otago Heads on a nice day. Lighthouse well fastened down.

We spent the night tucked into a small bay near the heads we were on another mission, catch some salmon on the way up the harbour. Rumour had it that the fish had been breeding up a river which fed into the harbour and at this time of year there should be some amazingly big fish on the move. Gordon had recently been visiting a son living on the Canadian west coast and had studied local salmon fishing techniques and purchased some gear which we had on board.

The idea was to tow a heavily weighed down salmon lure at the depth the fish were expected to be at. It all looked hopeful but after several hours of cruising up and down the winding channel we had only brought aboard some barracouta which were well summed up in the fishing book as *'Just a pest when you are fishing for more desirable species!'*



14 'Wings' sort of tied up, and back home at the Otago Yacht Club jetty.

I enjoyed the sail up the beautiful Otago Harbour and we ended the cruise tied up to the jetty at the Otago Yacht Club where Gordon had been Commodore for many years.

Wonderful time Gordon, many thanks!

Queries are welcome: Peter Tait - pete@firebug.co.nz