



# Southern Spirit

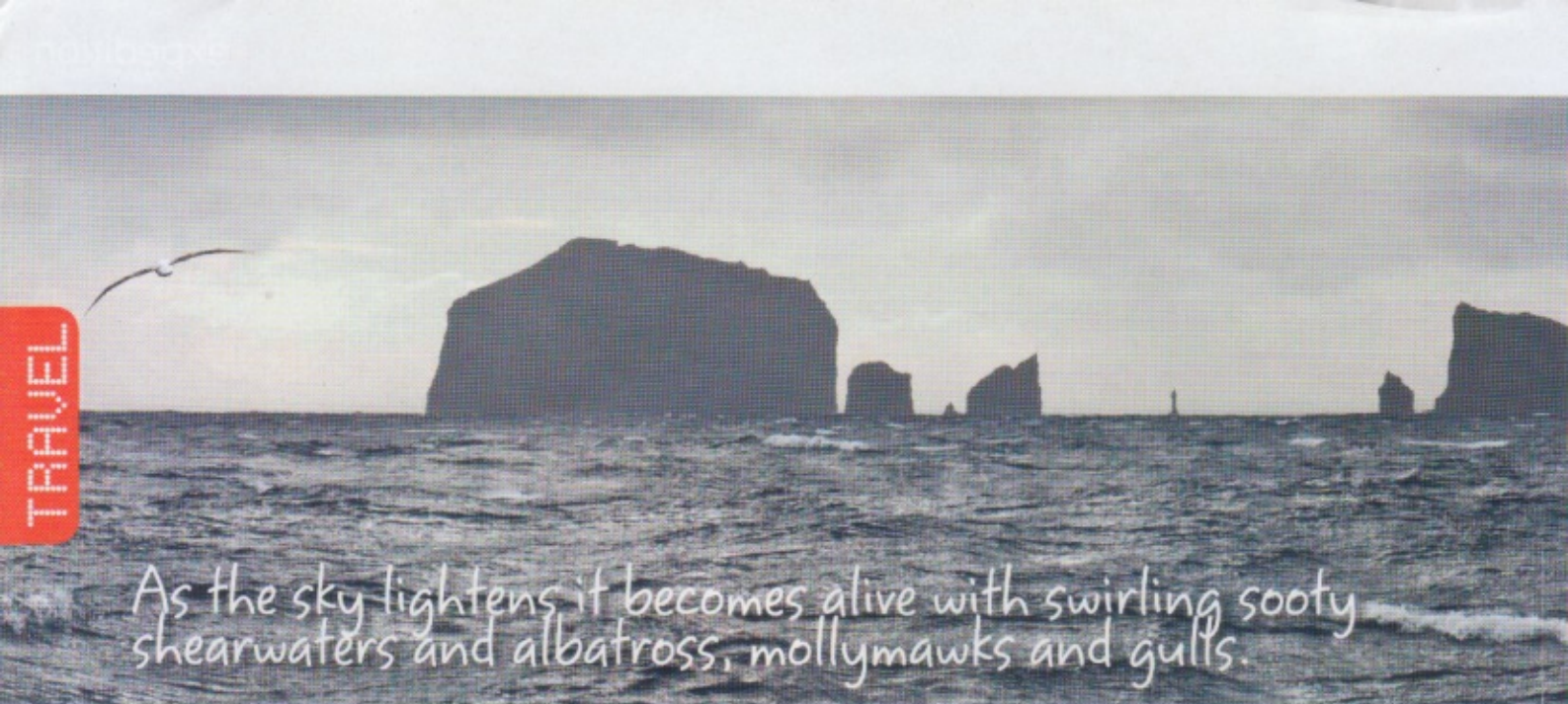
Few visit New Zealand's subantarctic islands – they're inhospitable, untamed, inaccessible. Which makes the wildlife that much better.



**SET IN THE** Southern Ocean 200km south of Bluff, The Snares were so named for their reputation for wrecking sailing ships racing through the Roaring Forties to Cape Horn. About a tenth of the size of Rangitoto, the main island of The Snares is a dot on the chart. But after our stormy first night at sea, it would provide a few hours' welcome haven.

As we closed in on the island's towering rock faces in the pink, watery light of dawn, we heard a dull roar above the frenzy of reefing sails. The noise strengthened to a howl, like a jet engine, and we realised we were witnessing one of the world's strangest ornithological phenomena. The Snares





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are home to more than three million birds. Yes: on this rock in the middle of the ocean live more seabirds than on all of Great Britain. As the sun rises each day, all three million of them squabble and jostle from their labyrinth of burrows to find a rocky ledge where they can take flight and feed for the day in the Southern Ocean – the air alive with swirling sooty shearwaters (or titi, the New Zealand muttonbird) and albatross, mollymawks and gulls.

It was a fitting introduction to our sailing adventure around New Zealand's subantarctic islands, home to some of the most remarkable birdlife in the world. We were making the 13-day trip on board *Tiama*, a purpose-built 15m yacht owned by Henk Haazen, a lifetime sailor who has run charters around the subantarctic for a decade.

New Zealand's Department of Conservation (DOC) manages the islands as National Nature Reserves – our highest conservation status. They were designated a World Natural Heritage Area by the United Nations in 1998, in recognition of their "superlative natural phenomena". Landings by people, with their risks of pest and weed invasion, are limited and biosecurity precautions are strictly followed.

Our course took us via The Snares to Enderby Island – a 30-hour sail if the Roaring Forties are friendly – and the plan then was to skirt the eastern coastline of Auckland Island, before heading to southern-most Campbell Island and returning to Bluff. In all, a 1500km round trip.

Built by Haazen over 10 years in a New Lynn warehouse, *Tiama* is heavily rigged for extreme conditions. Even in a severe gale – and we had a couple – she felt as solid as a battleship. Not only is she sturdy, but the placing of every block and winch on deck, every handrail in the galley, is the product of hours of careful reflection.

Haazen was accompanied by our guide, Jeremy Carol, who shared catering duties: *Tiama* is meat free, which caused some apprehension among the five carnivorous charterers. But a parade of wondrous meals from cherry pancakes to Thai vegetable curry, frequently accompanied by excellent Waiheke merlot bottled under *Tiama*'s own label, shifted many prejudices against vegetarianism.

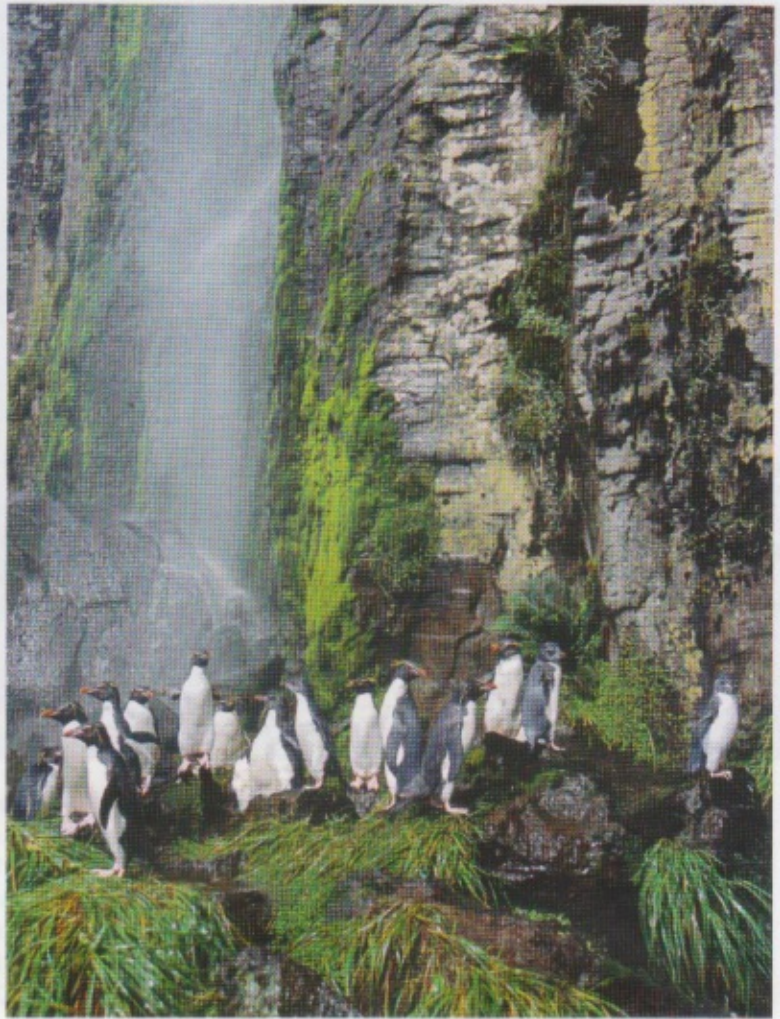
Ashore at Enderby Island, our welcoming committee was made up of dozens of sun-bathing sea lions. Along the beach, sleek females clustered around huge, heavily maned black bulls. After their ungainly waddle down the sand, these creatures become shiny, aquatic acrobats playing in the surf. In the following days sea lions, at various levels of sociability, became our regular companions.

Enderby is free of predators, a natural aviary with an astonishing collection of rare terrestrial and sea birds. In a day-long walk we observed parakeets, tomtits, pipits, snipe and flightless brown teal – all endemic to the Auckland Islands. Groups of yellow-eyed penguins marched through the orange flowering rata forest, while along the towering cliffs lashed by the Southern Ocean wheeled albatross, petrels, mollymawks and cormorants.

It was also our first encounter with the remarkable megaherbs – endemic plants to the subantarctic region. Their huge foliage and strange, colourful flowers are thought to be an adaptive response to the cold, misty climate. Their roots saved the lives of many shipwreck survivors in the 19th century – including the five survivors of the *Grafton*, who lived on a diet of sea lion and megaherbs for a full 19 months before sailing a dinghy from Auckland Island to Stewart Island in 1865. It's as heroic a tale as Shackleton and Worsely's escape to South Georgia.

Previous page:  
A Buller's albatross soars above the sea (photo Chris Morton); the *Tiama* motoring in the lee of Auckland Island. Pictured (from left) skipper Henk Haazen, writer Rob Fenwick, guide Jeremy Carol (photo Sal Souness).  
This page: The needles off the north cape of Campbell Island (photo Chris Morton).  
Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Massive bull sea lions and their harems sunbathe on Enderby Island (photo Sal Souness); rockhopper penguins on Campbell Island (photo Getty); Auckland Island shags prepare to nest (photo Sal Souness); megaherbs on Campbell Island (photo Chris Morton).









A yellow-eyed penguin rock hopping on Enderby Island (photo John Montgomery).

#### THE NEW ZEALAND SUB-ANTARCTIC ISLANDS

● SNARES ISLANDS

● AUCKLAND ISLANDS

● CAMPBELL ISLAND

Today, the islands are uninhabited, but they have been home to much varied human activity. In the 1850s a British company persuaded bold immigrants to establish a settlement on Auckland Island. Named Hardwicke, its 300 residents made it through two bitter winters before abandoning the place – frankly, it's amazing they made it through one. Later, scientists and weather observers built research stations and, inevitably being New Zealanders, we have even tried to farm sheep there.

As a result, the islands have a rich heritage. Perhaps most interesting is the coast-watching camp at Ranui Cove, where wartime governments built huts and radio masts to alert them of unwanted raiders. Some coast-watchers were chosen for their interest in natural history – so names like Robert Falla and Charles Fleming, who were both later knighted for services to science, can be found among mouldy records in the decaying camp.

At South West Cape, we embarked on another day-long walk to a waterfall high above the wild west coast and gazed in wonder at thousands of white-capped albatross nesting on near vertical precipices among yellow and purple megaherbs.

Then, after a 24-hour sail we anchored in sheltered Preservation Harbour at our southernmost destination, Campbell Island. Here, DOC has done a fine job constructing a three-kilometre boardwalk through a nursery of yellow, pink and purple megaherbs among which fearless

royal albatross – the largest seabird in the world with a wingspan of three metres – sit contentedly on crude muddy nests.

Campbell Island is an international conservation success story. In 2001, in one of the most ambitious predator eradication projects undertaken anywhere, DOC blitzed the island with rat bait from helicopters. In just a decade, the recovery of plants and birds has been spectacular. Tourists pay \$200 each to visit the islands – great value, and a good model of carefully managed tourism funding conservation.

The sail back to Stewart Island was hard work: three days, tight-hauled against 20- to 50-knot winds. We took four-hour watches with Haazen and Carol, brushing up rusty navigation skills and becoming more and more confident in the mountainous southern swells.

The slog was alleviated only by the constant squadrons of pelagic birds that soared around our wake. With Carol's help we could now recognise southern royal albatross from Campbell's albatross, or the white-capped albatross from Buller's mollymawk, or the light-mantled sooty albatross from Gibson's wandering albatross. After just 13 days at sea, we felt like old hands – and no howling wind could deny us that pleasure.

**STORY ROB FENWICK**

*Rob Fenwick is the chairman of Antarctica NZ and a trustee of the Air New Zealand Environment Trust.*

**Contact** Department of Conservation, [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz); *Tiama*, [www.tiama.com](http://www.tiama.com)