

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU DREAM

CHASING WHALES AROUND THE AUCKLAND ISLANDS

PART FOUR

Part four on the voyage of the MV Strannik, Rodney Russ takes us to the deep south on a winter expedition to the Auckland Islands to see the Southern Right whales.

CRUISING THE AUCKLAND ISLANDS



- 46°S



Stuart Island

South Island

I am sure I am not the only person to have imagined their ideal boat in the destination of their dreams. In my case, the boat that I had designed and built was strongly influenced by one particular expedition I had dreamed of doing for many years.

I had fallen under the spell of the New Zealand Sub Antarctic Islands in 1972. I was a cadet with the NZ Wildlife Service when I was invited to join a joint NZ, Australian and American Expedition to the Auckland Islands. It felt like the three-month expedition was over before it even began. I became besotted with the Islands and their human and natural history. I returned to the sub-Antarctic several times in my role as a fauna conservation officer with the NZ Wildlife Service. But that still wasn't enough. Between 1985 and 2018 I made over 120 expeditions to the Sub Antarctic Islands as owner and expedition leader for Heritage Expeditions, a company I had founded to offer travellers including birders, botanists, geographers, historians and adventurers the opportunity to experience the islands themselves. I also co-authored a book entitled "The Galapagos of the Southern Ocean" to both inspire and inform readers about the value and importance of these Islands. That still wasn't enough.

- 48°S

There was still one expedition that I desperately wanted to do, a winter expedition to the Auckland Islands to see the southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*). The Conservation Management Plan for the Islands specifically excluded winter tourism expeditions. The Coastal Management Plan for the Islands threw its weight behind the protection of these whales by adding extra regulations regarding shipping in and around the Islands. The goal of all of this legislation was to protect the southern right whales and with justification. In 1920 this population of southern right whales was thought to number only about 40 individuals down from an estimated 30,000 before they were hunted. Today the population is about 2000. The Auckland Islands provide a refuge and safe breeding/nursery ground for the whales during their winter migration. The Auckland Islands or archipelago lie some 240 nm south of the Port of Bluff at 50° 40' South. They are one of six Sub Antarctic Islands owned and administered by New Zealand. At 442Km² the Auckland Islands is the largest of the six. Geologically they are the remnants of two extinct volcanos that were the last active some 25 to 10 million years ago. The Islands were heavily glaciated during the last glaciation leaving numerous deep fiords on the eastern coastline. There are two sheltered harbours, Port Ross in the north and Carnley Harbour in the south. The strong prevailing westerly winds at these latitudes have and continue to, shape the western coastline.

- 50°S



Auckland Islands



- 52°S

- 165°E

MV Strannik moored up in sheltered bay in the Auckland Islands, after a 240nm trip from Bluff.



EARLY DISCOVERY

The Islands were discovered in 1806 by Capt. Bristow who was an employee of the Enderby Brothers, a British-based sealing and whaling company. The family was to become synonymous with the Islands. There is archaeological evidence that NZ Maori either lived on or visited the Islands before European discovery. Sealing gangs arrived at the islands within a few months of its discovery. Tens of thousands of seals were taken, the exact number is not known, but within a few years' sealers reported there were hardly any to be found and the Islands were abandoned but not before pigs, cats and mice had been either deliberately or accidentally introduced to most of the Islands within the archipelago. These introductions had a profound impact on the wildlife and several bird species became extinct. Whalers followed the sealers. Large numbers of pelagic whaling vessels roamed the Southern Ocean in search of whales. They hunted whatever species they could find. Southern right whales suffered more than others.

The population was decimated from estimates of 30,000 to around only 40 left by 1920. They were called the 'right' whale to hunt because of their slow-moving, curious and docile nature. The Enderby Brothers established a whaling settlement, Hardwick, on the Auckland Islands in 1849, it lasted just three years. Poor leadership and lack of whales contributed to its demise. Records show that they caught just one whale in Port Ross during that period.

SHIP'S GRAVEYARD

The Islands lay in a direct path of the sailing vessels clearing Australian Ports for Cape Horn. The earliest charts had the islands marked in the wrong position. The heavy fog and strong winds that circle the globe at these latitudes made Captains fearful and weary. As many as 10 ships, possibly more, were wrecked on the Islands. The Rifleman 1833, The Grafton 1864, The Invercauld 1864, The Minerva 1865, The General Grant 1866, The Derry Castle 1887, The Compadre 1891, The Stoneleigh or Marie Alice 1895, The Anjou 1905,

and The Dundonad 1907. Each of these wrecks has its own incredible story, some told in first-hand accounts written by survivors. There is the remarkable story of The Grafton survivors building their own sailing dinghy and three of them sailing to NZ to get help. This has to be one of the great small open boat journeys in the world alongside that of Shackleton's James Caird, Bligh's Bounty Launch and Waxell's open boat journey from the Commander Islands to Kamchatka. There is also the search for the Gold bullion that the General Grant was supposedly carrying. The ship was becalmed and drifted into a cave on the west coast of the main Auckland Islands. Only 15 of the 83 people on board survived after a storm came up and effectively entombed the vessel in the cave. Another 4 were to perish before the remaining 11 were rescued. Numerous syndicates and individuals have searched in vain for the cave and the gold, its whereabouts remains one of the great mysteries of the Southern Ocean. The NZ government of the day responded by building castaway depots

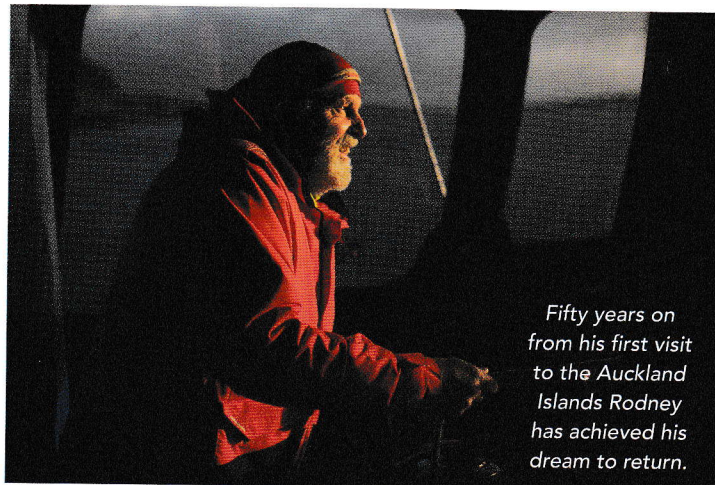
and sending regular patrols to scour this and the other sub-Antarctic islands for wrecks and castaways. These patrols ceased in the early 1900s with the opening of the Panama Canal. A small cemetery at Erebus Cove contains graves from the settlers and the shipwreck era.

COAST WATCHERS

Fears that the Auckland (and Campbell) Islands might be used by enemy shipping during world war 2 to stage an attack on New Zealand, led to the deployment of coast watchers. Two stations were established on the Auckland Islands and one on Campbell Island. The Auckland Island stations were manned from 1941 to 1945 by young men chosen because of their interest in natural history.

The remains of these bases and nearby lookouts can still be visited today.

Adams Island (the southernmost island in the archipelago) was declared a nature reserve in 1910 the remainder of the islands were declared a nature reserve in 1934. Today they are managed by the NZ Department of Conservation. Some of



Fifty years on from his first visit to the Auckland Islands Rodney has achieved his dream to return.

the introduced animals have been successfully removed but pigs, cats and mice remain on the main Island. An ambitious program to remove these pests, based on other successful island eradication's in the Southern Ocean has just been abandoned as it was deemed too expensive. Limited tourism is permitted but

is heavily regulated and confined to a small number of landing sites with strict criteria and controls on the number of persons allowed ashore at any one time. A coastal management plan deals with water activities including permitted levels of biofouling (virtually zero) and anchoring locations for visiting vessels.

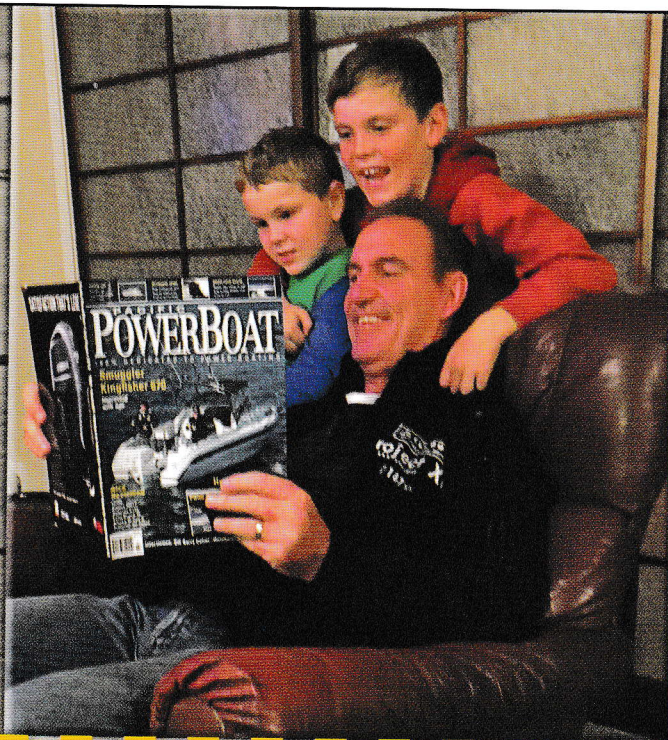
PERMITS REQUIRED

To obtain a cruising permit is an onerous procedure and one that very few

private yachts undertake. There is nothing in the current legislation to stop a yacht from sailing to the islands at any time however they must have a clean hull permit and if they want to land will need landing permits. Anchoring is only permitted in certain areas so anybody contemplating a voyage would need to familiarise themselves with the Coastal Management Plan. The

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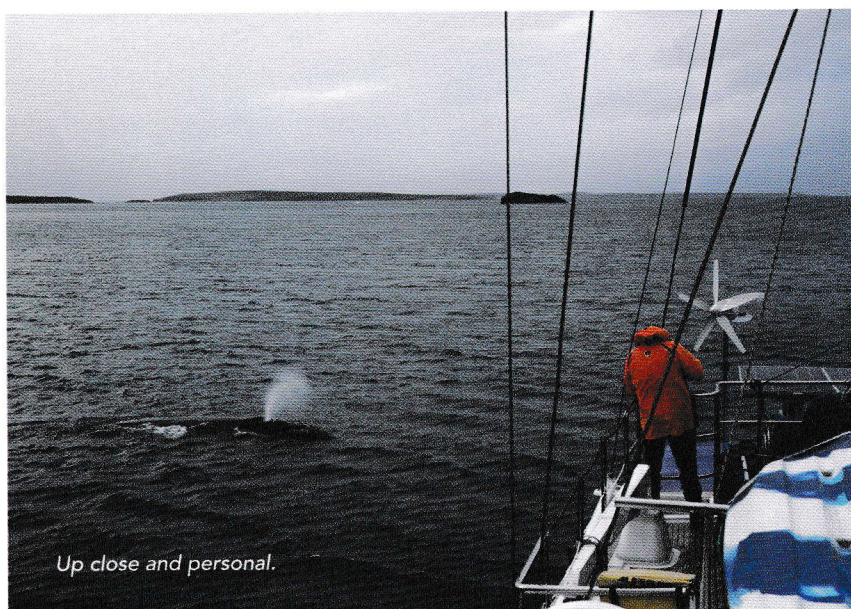
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The Auckland Islands provide a refuge and safe breeding/nursery ground for the whales during their winter migration.



most recent charts NZ 286 and NZ2862 have a good amount of detail for most of the Islands although there are still some uncharted areas, especially on the west coast. A handful of Expedition Cruise ships visit the Islands from November through to March each year and there is a scampi fishery east of the Islands and the scampi boats often seek shelter during rough weather (which can be quite prolonged and frequent). We sailed as a Private Yacht (MV Strannik has dual registration) this meant that we were not bound by Maritime NZ regulations which in my opinion are unnecessarily draconian, considering the Islands are at best only two days' sail south of NZ. I had offered a US-based documentary team, who were making an international documentary on right whales the opportunity to join the expedition to get some unique footage. Also included in our team were three scientists from the University of Auckland who were conducting a long-term study of the whales and including them extended their field season by a couple of weeks. This was a win-win for everybody. Between them, the filmmakers and researchers obtained all the necessary permits and permissions for the Expedition from the Department of Conservation. All I had to do was to make sure the vessel was compliant

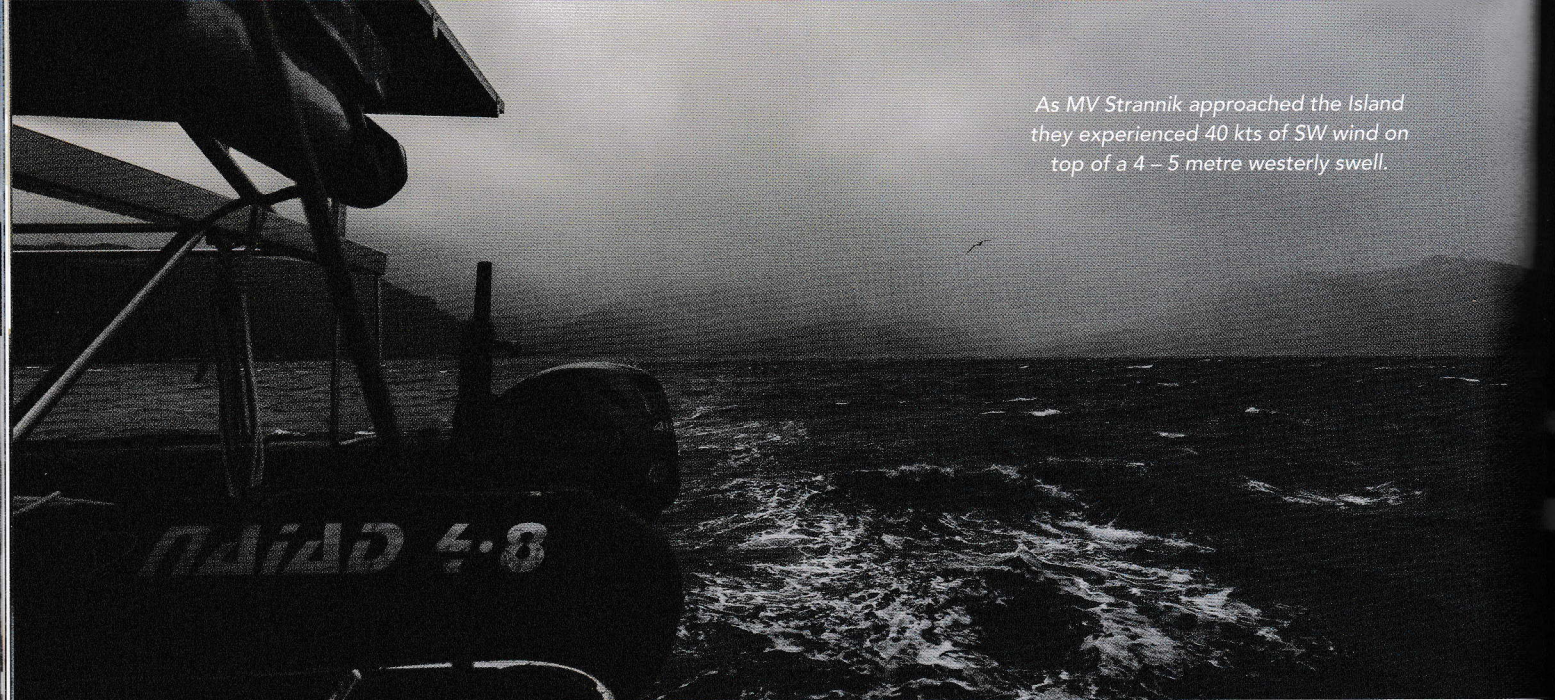


Up close and personal.

with the clean hull requirements of the Coastal Management Plan. We stopped in the Port of Dunedin on our way south from our home Port of Lyttelton. Here an approved DoC diver inspected the hull and gave us the thumbs up, not perfect but within the tolerances permitted under the Plan. The crew consisted of myself, my engineer and three deckhands to help with hospitality (cooking cleaning) and deck. They were all friends, two were professional photographers and the

third was a medical doctor with remote medicine experience. There had been a question over the participation of the US film crew because of travel restrictions under Covid-19, but they were issued a visa and a managed isolation slot (2 weeks mandatory isolation on arrival in NZ). With the team on board, the last thing we had to do was a full quarantine check by the Dept of Conservation staff. Because we had landing permits all our clothing and footwear had to be checked

As MV Strannik approached the Island they experienced 40 kts of SW wind on top of a 4 – 5 metre westerly swell.



for seeds and dirt and a specially trained rodent dog searched the ship for any stowaway rats or mice. We were given the all-clear and almost unbelievably we sailed on time in perfect weather and with a better than hoped-for forecast for our run south. We had 240 nm to run, we hoped to average 8 knots giving us a transit time of 30 hours. If the forecast was accurate the southwesterly wind and swell would be increasing during the last 6 – 8 hours of the run otherwise they were predicting a light air of SE with 5 metre swells. As we approached the Island we experienced 40 kts of SW wind on top of a 4 – 5 metre westerly swell. Those seas don't bother Strannik. The Naiad active stabilisers were working a little harder than normal to give us a smooth ride.

PORT ROSS

Entry into Port Ross during the hours of darkness is strongly discouraged because of the risk of collision with whales. We were to see at least two animals that showed evidence of being hit by vessels. As it was dark when we arrived we anchored in Smith Harbour until first light the next day. I had expectations of what it might be like in Port Ross ... the experience eclipsed that expectation. Words can't describe the thrill of finally being amongst these whales after years and years of dreaming. The researchers and camera crew got underway that afternoon and worked from dawn to dusk in all weathers except for one

day when they were forecasting 60+Kts of NW. Our anchorage in Erebus Cove was relatively sheltered, but winds of this magnitude could bring in a significant swell so we took the opportunity to visit Carnley harbour which has a slightly better anchorage for this weather. The Scampi fleet (5 boats) was also sheltering here. We anchored in 16 metres of water. We had a 150kg Bruce anchor on 120 meters of chain. I didn't sleep that well as the wind gusts were well over 60 kts but we didn't move. Back in Port Ross the following day we landed at Erebus Cove site of the old whaling settlement, the cemetery and castaway depot. We also landed at Ranui Cove and visited the old Coastwatcher's hut and lookout.

With a multitude of images and 97 biopsy samples from the whales to add to their collection the research team were happy. The lead researcher joined her research vessel that had arrived at the Island to continue the work. We headed home, again another dream run, we were 26 hours to Port Pegasus on Southern Stewart Island with a light air of southerly wind behind us. From Port Pegasus, it was an easy run back to the Port of Bluff. Fifty years on from my first visit to the Auckland Islands I had achieved my dream, which had not only shaped the lines of Strannik but my whole career of expedition travel in the world's remote places. ☼