

New Zealand Journal

2/23/2012 - 3/11/2012

Tom and Shirley Butt

The impetus for this trip grew out of an invitation from [Jeff Saarman](#) and Theresa Ferrari to join them on their sailboat in New Zealand sometime during the two months they planned to be there. Jeff is part of [Saarman Construction, Ltd.](#), a highly regarded San Francisco construction company that specializes in construction defect repair. I have had the pleasure of working with them many times over the last couple of decades.

The Saarman family has an interesting seafaring history. The patriarch, [Paul Saarman](#), was born in Estonia in 1925, where he was an avid sailor in his youth. He used his maritime skills during WWII to ferry targeted individuals away from the Nazi occupation, and performed similar service during the Soviet occupation, eventually leaving to immigrate to San Francisco himself. The extended Saarman family sailed around the world for 2 ½ years in the 1970's, before founding their company. Several years ago, Jeff and Theresa, with their sons and various other family members representing three generations, sailed another boat from San Francisco to the South Pacific. They sold that boat in Australia and subsequently purchased Bushido II in New Zealand from its original owner. Jeff's parents, Paul (88) and his wife Irma (83), were on the boat with Jeff and Theresa until shortly before we arrived.

Our plan was to take a little over two weeks and spend about half on the boat sailing out of Auckland with Jeff and Theresa and the balance on a road trip to the South Island.

Day 1 – Saturday, February 25

The flight from San Francisco to Auckland on February 23 was 13 hours, and we lost a day by crossing the International Date Line, arriving at 5 am on February 25. We took a taxi from the airport and arrived at Waitemata Yacht Harbour at 6 am, while it was still dark. There was little moonlight, and our first look at the sky was rewarded with the Southern Cross and its Pointers shining brilliantly, not far from the constellation Orion, upside-down from our usual view of it. Jeff and Theresa were waiting for us on Bushido II, and after breakfast at sunrise, we set sail for the Coromandel Peninsula, east of Auckland, via the Motu Korea and Motnie



Leaving Auckland behind on the Bushido II



Shirley at the helm



The ancient mariner

channels, in the [Hauraki Gulf](#). With a stiff southwest wind that gusted above 40 knots, we arrived well before dark and anchored at [Coromandel Harbour](#). We saw massive numbers of Fluttering Shearwaters on and just above the water during the crossing.

Bushido II is a 16.5-meter yacht designed by [Elliott](#) and built in New Zealand in 1998. I don't know all the sailing lingo, but it was highly automated compared to the last boat I owned some 40 years ago. Theoretically, it is designed to sleep as many as eight. Or nine people, with two heads, but all but two bunk areas were used for storage during our visit. The galley and cabin area are very commodious, and we slept very well in the forward cabin, lulled by the rocking of the sea.

Day 2 – Sunday, February 26

We sailed north along the west side of the Coromandel Peninsula and around [Cape Colville](#) to the east side of the peninsula, anchoring at Port Charles. We caught a good sized [Kahawai](#) on a trolling line while en route and later a 'keeper' Snapper, both of which were turned into sashimi and consumed as hors d'oeuvres before dinner. We learned, as an unexpected bonus, that Jeff was a professionally trained chef before he got into the construction business and that both he and Theresa are very talented and creative cooks.

In the harbor, we saw a Cook's Petrel and a variety of terns and gulls. Night skies and the Milky Way were incredibly brilliant those first few nights, with the Southern Cross always prominent.

Right, Shearwaters



We snagged a Kahawai on a trolled lure and turned it into sashimi



Waking up in Blind Bay



Day 3 - Monday, February 27

With a good southerly wind, we sailed north across the Colville Channel to [Great Barrier Island](#) and anchored at Allom Bay, a subset of Blind Bay on the west side of the island. We caught a good sized Trevally that also ended up as sashimi. We watched a couple of solitary Little Blue Penguins swimming in the water and several Pied Shags (Cormorants) on the shore.



Sunset in Blind Bay

Day 4 – Tuesday, February 28

With the sun out and the weather warming, we swam to shore and explored the beach before weighing anchor. Birds spotted included White-Fronted Terns, a Kingfisher, and Oystercatchers. En route to Wangaparapara, we saw large groups of Australasian Gannets on the water, as well as some Black Petrels. Our destination was Oneura Bay (“Red Cliffs”), distinctive for the colors and patterns of the rock.



Fish for dinner



Jeff and Theresa plot the course



Crossing the Colville Channel

Day 5 – Wednesday, February 29

We took the dinghy to shore and followed a trail over the hill, through a manuka (tea-tree) forest, to Smokehouse Cove, so-called for its do-it-yourself fish-smoking facilities, along with hot baths, maintained by volunteers. We were anchored near a mussel farm and were advised by fishermen in another boat that it was okay to harvest the smaller black mussels attached to the floats, but the green lipped mussels hanging below were private property. I felt a little like Jack London in his oyster pirate days, but I hope it was truly legal. In any event, we quickly gathered a large bucket of mussels that we consumed over the next three days.

Pulling out about 12:30 PM, we motored through Governor Pass into Port Fitzroy Bay and anchored at the part known as Akapoua Bay. Taking the dinghy to shore, we walked maybe half a mile to the tiny town of Port Fitzroy, had a beer with the locals at the market and took a trail to a nearby waterfall. This was our first exposure to the local flora, which was technically subtropical but looked to me like Jurassic Park. Dinner included some of the mussels we gathered and meticulously scrubbed. It stormed and rained all night, which made for great sleeping.



Dinner aboard Bushido II



Fresh mussels for dinner



Mussel pirates in disguise set off to plunder commercial mussel farms



Day 6 – Thursday, March 1

The day started windy and rainy but cleared in the afternoon. Because of uncertain weather, we stayed put and arranged for delivery of a rental car for use the next day.



Confusing crossroads at Port Fitzroy,



Downtown Port Fitzroy, the Times Square of Great Barrier Island



Mmmm, more fresh mussels and New Zealand wine



Theresa and Shirley at Port Fitzroy waterfall

Day 7 – Friday, March 2

We drove with Jeff and Theresa across Great Barrier Island to pristine and deserted Whangapoua Beach. In the nearby wetlands, we saw a number of strange-looking Pukeko, or purple swamphens, as well as Paradise Ducks. This was my first experience driving on the left side of the road, and it was terrifying. After stopping for lunch at Motu Café, we drove to nearby Whangapoua Estuary, home to a variety of shorebirds. We delivered Jeff and Theresa back to the boat and drove back around the island to check in at Sugarloaf Chalet located at the beach near the airport. The one rental unit was very comfortable, with separate rooms for sleeping and cooking/lounging as well as a detached shower room, but the whole area, including the adjacent residence and private campground, was surrounded with junked cars and debris, like a hillbilly cabin in the back woods of the US. We also had our first encounter with the infamous biting sandflies. A short walk along the beach were the gorgeous ‘mermaid pools’, large deep tide-pools surrounded by sandy beach. They looked inviting to swim in but were too cold for comfort. Dinner was at Angsana, a Thai restaurant, which didn’t rise to Bushido’s standards. We planned to fly out the next day to Auckland, but an impending “weather bomb” was making that questionable.



Sunset at Tryphena



Red-billed Gull on our dinghy

- Impressions of New Zealand: Sheep, ferns, Jurassic, one-lane bridges, glaciers, waterfalls, beaches, rivers and lakes.
- New Zealand weather reports never use the terms “clear,” “sunny or warm. Weather is either “nice” or “fine,” or it is raining.
- All New Zealand wine is screw top. No corks.
- Trails are “tracks” and hiking is “tramping.”
- New Zealand trail crews are the best in the world.

Day 8 – Saturday, March 3

Although the weather didn't seem that bad where we were, the "weather bomb" had hit and no planes were flying. We had to reschedule flights and lodging for the next two days, which ended up costing a premium. Being marooned, we had a chance to explore Great Barrier a little longer, driving some of the shorefront roads and walking in to soak in Kaitoke Hot Springs. We had both breakfast and lunch at The Wild Rose Café in Tryphena, a really nice but simple restaurant where we hung out all morning and enjoyed the gathering of locals at the market next door. We rented a room at the Pohutukawa Lodge, actually a part of Currach Irish Pub, next door to The Wild Rose, and ate dinner in the pub, amid cheering rugby fans.



Kaitoke Hot Springs



On Great Barrier, old cars never die...



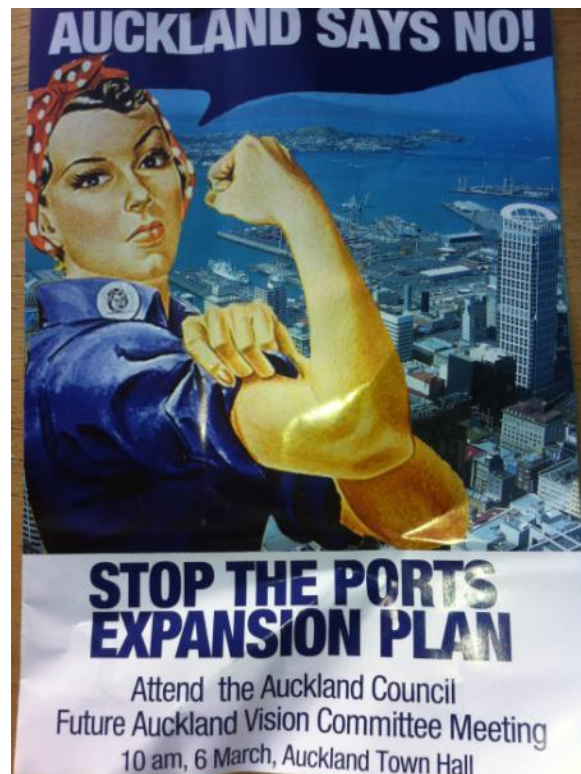
The Wild Rose Café in Tryphena

Day 9 – Sunday, March 4

The sun came out, and planes were once again flying by mid-afternoon. Great Barrier Airlines took us back to Auckland - an incredibly scenic flight over Hauraki Bay. For you sailing types, we sat behind Pippa Blake, the widow of yachting legend Peter Blake. After checking in at the Auckland Airport Bed and Breakfast, notable only for its location, we caught a ride downtown with another guest. Downtown Auckland didn't look particularly intriguing, so we took the ferry across the channel to Devonport, a Sausalito -type village, had lunch and explored the area on foot the rest of the afternoon. After drinks at sunset at one of many bar/restaurants at the America's-Cup-themed Auckland waterfront, we took a long bus trip back to our B&B.



View from the airplane - the Sugarloaf and beaches on east side of Great Barrier Island



Upscale development comes up against container port expansion in Auckland Harbour. Rosie the Riveter invoked to stop expansion.



Above, a relaxing day in Devonport, a short ferry ride from the Auckland waterfront

Left, Auckland waterfront, built for the 2000 America's Cup

Day 10 - Monday, March 5

We got up early to catch a plane for Dunedin. Jetstar, reviled on many an internet post, charged us nearly double for missing our previous day's flight, due to being stuck on Great Barrier Island, and piled on a hefty excess baggage weight charge. In Dunedin, we picked up the car we would use for our road trip and headed for the nearby Otago Peninsula, hoping to see the famous Yellow Eyed Penguins. We skipped the Albatross excursion and signed on for what turned out to be a private guided tour for the two of us at "Nature's Wonders" in an amphibious ATV. We did see a few Yellow-Eyed Penguins from a distance, a couple of young Little Blue Penguins up close and personal, and a lot of young Spotted Cormorants, as well as a colony of NZ fur seals frolicking just below us. We also saw a stoat chase a rabbit through the steep sand dunes where the penguins hang out. The rabbit got away!

Stoats are one of several non-native mammal species, originally introduced to control the rabbit population, that are now widely trapped because they feed on endangered native fauna, including penguin eggs. Finally, we drove about five hours west, past countless herds of sheep and deer, to Te Anau, arriving just before dark and checking in at The Cat's Whiskers, our B&B. Dinner was very good at Red Cliff restaurant.



A nature tour at Land's end at the Otago Peninsula



A good reason for keeping plastic out of the oceans



Tracking the elusive Yellow-Eyed Penguins



Fledgling Cormorants on a cliff at the Otago Peninsula



The peak sheep population was 70 million in 1982. Today, there are only 40 million, but still 10 sheep per person



The lighthouse and Albatross refuge on the Otago Peninsula

Day 11 - Tuesday, March 6

After a brilliant rainbow over the lake during breakfast, the day turned grey and rainy. They say you should pick a clear day to visit Milford Sound, but we only had one chance and couldn't wait. A two-hour drive from Te Anau, Milford Sound is a fiord that was formed by sea intrusion into an ancient glacial valley. The road in follows a high glacial valley. Think Yosemite and Going-to-the-Sun Highway in Glacier National Park, but it is even more awesome, if that is possible. This is one of the wettest places on earth (264 inches annually), so there are a thousand waterfalls. The end of the valley is blocked by a 3,000 meter rock wall, but there is a one-lane tunnel that delivers you to its mirror image on the other side, where the road leads down to Milford Sound. We ate at Pizzeria da Toni in Te Anau. It wasn't as good as Red Cliff but substantially less expensive, and we enjoyed conversation with fellow travelers at adjoining tables.



A rainy day on Milford Sound



The road to Milford Sound, a thousand waterfalls



Day 12 – Wednesday, March 7

We drove to Queenstown and checked in at Blue Peaks Lodge before driving another hour along the lake to the staging area for the [Routeburn Track](#), one of the top two “tracks” in New Zealand. We hiked (“tramped” in New Zealandese) about 9 km. each way, to the first and second huts, Routeburn Flats and Routeburn Falls, about a third of the way on the track. In the New Zealand system, tent camping is not allowed on these popular tracks. Instead, through trampers make advance reservations to stay at “huts” that provide a mattress in a bunkhouse and food preparation facilities, for a fee. The Routeburn Track is \$51 NZ per night, and you provide your own food, cooking pot and sleeping bag, as well as making car shuttle arrangements. As an alternative you can pay around \$1,000 a day for a “guided” tramp that provides everything in an upscale lodge adjacent to the hut



Looking back into Routeburn Flats from the Routeburn Track

(posted prominently only for those on guided tours). Dinner at Queenstown was at Flame, recommended by a young couple from Seattle we met at the Routeburn Flats hut.



One of many swinging bridges on the Routeburn Track



Valley at the beginning of the Routeburn Track



Routeburn Falls at the Routeburn Falls Hut on the Routeburn Track



Beginning of the Routeburn Track



Day 13 – Thursday, March 8

After checking out the waterfront in Queenstown, we drove to Arrowtown and walked around, had tea and muesli at the Lost Café, formerly The Garage, as recommended by a local friend of a friend. Stopped in Wanaka for ice cream. This was a long day's drive from Queenstown to Franz Josef Village, leaving the more arid eastern slope to return to the land of ferns, waterfalls and sandflies, most of which was along the west coast. Our overnight was at 10 Cottages, which felt like 'Katrina cottages', and dinner was at Alice May. We stopped at a salmon farm for lunch, where we met a young family from Christchurch who live in their badly earthquake-damaged home.



The Queenstown waterfront on Lake Wakatipu

Day 14 – Friday, March 9

We spent most of the day hiking to Robert's Point overlooking Franz Josef Glacier. It was one of the warmest and sunniest days of our trip, and most of the trail was through shady, wet, sub-tropical forests, an interesting contrast to the glacier. This was only about a 12 km round-trip but technically challenging, much of it a scramble over wet boulders. We liked Alice May so much, we had dinner there a second time, and we stayed a second night at 10 Cottages.



Looking down on Franz Josef Glacier



Day 15 – Saturday, March 10

This was our last full day of adventuring, and we stopped on the way to Arthur's Pass at the coastal town of Hokitika to visit the Wild Foods Festival, touted as celebrating both local foods (mostly seafood) and exotics such as fried insects and grubs. It was, however, mainly a costume and beer party that attracted thousands from all over the south island. In mid-afternoon, we tore ourselves away and headed up to Arthur's Pass and our lodging at Arthur's Pass Chalet. The weather was warm and sunny in Hokitika but turned to rain up on the pass.



A gang of "terrorists"



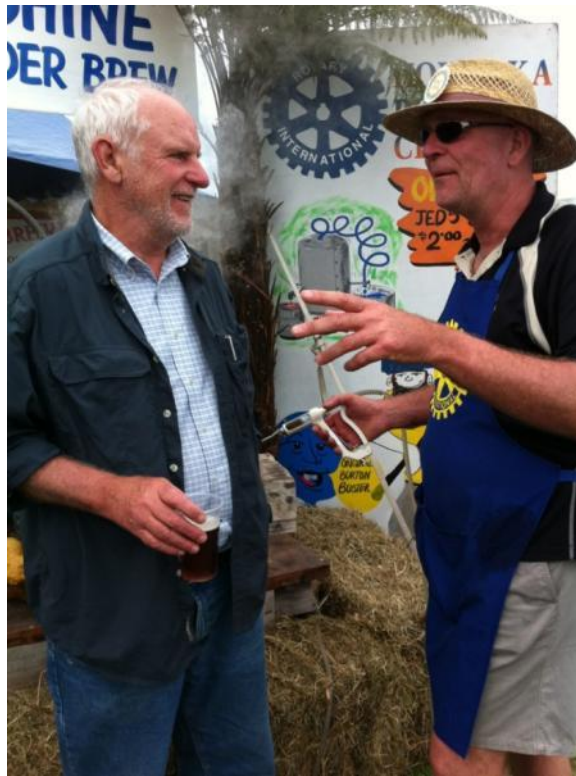
A good New Zealand Pinot Noir before dinner at Arthur's Pass Chalet



New Zealand's western beaches between Franz Josef and Hokitika



Looking west from Arthurs Pass



Left, a local Rotary Club booth at the Wild Food Festival



Last moments in New Zealand – boarding the plane to San Francisco

Day 16 – Sunday, March 11

It was about a two-hour drive down to the Christchurch Airport where we turned in our car and caught the plane to Auckland (another Jetstar, but uneventful). After a four-hour layover, Air New Zealand departed at 6:30 pm for San Francisco, with a 12-hour flight that delivered us at 10:30 am the same day!