

Fiordland

Michele Surcouf spends 10 days aboard a charter boat, paddling some of New Zealand's most picturesque waters.



Just when you think your best adventures are behind you, along comes an invitation for a kayaking trip in Fiordland National Park to dispel middle-aged worries.

For the second year in a row, I'd been invited by a friend to join a group of 8 men on a 10-day trip to one of the most remote parts of New Zealand. My gym-buddy girlfriends wondered why I'd even want to go on a boat full of guys fishing and hunting. I told them it was an opportunity not to be missed. Without going on a charter boat, you just can't get there, and the scenery is spectacular. They'd asked "Why were you invited?" I didn't have any illusions. It was to boost the numbers of bums on seats. It certainly wasn't for my fishing or hunting prowess. Like many, I'm hypocritical. I like eating fish and venison, but I hate seeing animals being killed, so I leave that to the guys who actually want to do it. And as all the men are happily married, it wasn't in hopes of any romantic liaisons. No, it was just to make up the numbers.

Last year (May 2009), our destination had been Preservation and Chalky Inlets. We'd left Doubtful Sound with high hopes, but due to a 50 knot southerly days on end, we had to forego getting there, and spent the whole of the trip in the Dusky and Breaksea Inlets. Don't get me wrong, it was great, but I demurely sat on the deck of the SeaFinn for 10 days, enviously watching four of the guys adventure off in kayaks, while the other guys pulled blue cod from the sea. Last year, kayaking hadn't even occurred to me, but this year I was determined. Kayaking looked like much more fun than handling slimy fish.

To ensure that we made it to the most southwestern part of Fiordland we went in by helicopter. The first flight took six of us crammed into the tiny bubble piloted by a young man

who looked all of 12 years old. The 35-minute flight from Manapouri to Preservation Inlet took us over the jaw-dropping, steep, rugged mountains of the Park. Safely deposited on the shoreline near our awaiting boat, we unpacked our gear and awaited the second flight, which brought in the last three guys and two double kayaks dangling precariously under the whirlybird.

Starting the adventure aboard the 62-foot SeaFinn, skippered by Chris Lemin, I had some apprehension about my first foray in the double kayak. It had been years since I'd done any paddling, and I worried that fitness would let me down. But once in, spray skirt secured, and Tony the back seat driver, I felt like the proverbial 'duck to water'. And, amazingly, it seemed my regular gym routine had given me enough strength and endurance to paddle for hours on end; on our second day covering 20 kilometres.

While four of us kayaked, the others aboard the SeaFinn were busy stocking up with fish and venison. Captain Chris is truly the all-round, quiet, and incredibly capable, southern man. As the sole operator, he not only tackles all the duties of running the boat, including cooking fantastic meals, he even dives for the crays. That man makes a wicked seafood chowder, even more welcome after an afternoon of kayaking.

While the rest of the country languished under a wet, easterly May gloom, Fiordland was mercifully spared the bad weather and was unseasonably warm and sunny. Given that last year was freezing cold and wet, I hardly dared to dream that it would last. But amazingly it did. The fantastic weather gave us a look at Fiordland far better than one can see



Doubtful Sound put on picture postcard weather.



*Gareth Rapson and Wayne Jackson reflect
on life in Doubtful Sound*

on postcards.

Paddling the shoreline was like gliding through the abyss. Rocks, and bush were so perfectly reflected on the water that it was nearly impossible to see where reality ended and mirroring started. The water varied in colour from fiord to fiord, some areas black like molasses, some as clear as crystal, and others as green as emeralds. Away from SeaFinn we enjoyed the stillness, occasionally broken by calls of bellbirds and kea,

jumping barracuda or surfacing seals. While motoring SeaFinn had the pleasure of the company of dusky and bottlenose dolphins.

On all but one day we explored the inlets, beaches, rivers and pounding waterfalls of Preservation Inlet, Chalky Inlet, Dusky, Breaksea, and Doubtful Sounds. Though the weather was glorious, yes, the sandflies were bad, but hey... it can't all be perfect. The calm water reflected mountains and cliff-faces on such a grand scale that you simply must





The glamour of kayaking. Michelle and Tony keep themselves warm and the sandflies off.

be there to realize it. Still photographs don't do it justice.

By day ten, all I wanted to do was keep paddling so it was with great sorrow I left Fiordland. Even if I am invited back, it could be rare to have such a run of good weather and good paddling buddies.

Back in Nelson, all I could think about was exploring the great places around here. I soon bought myself a kayak and took it for its maiden voyage – that was just yesterday. Perhaps there are a few more adventures for this old girl yet.



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