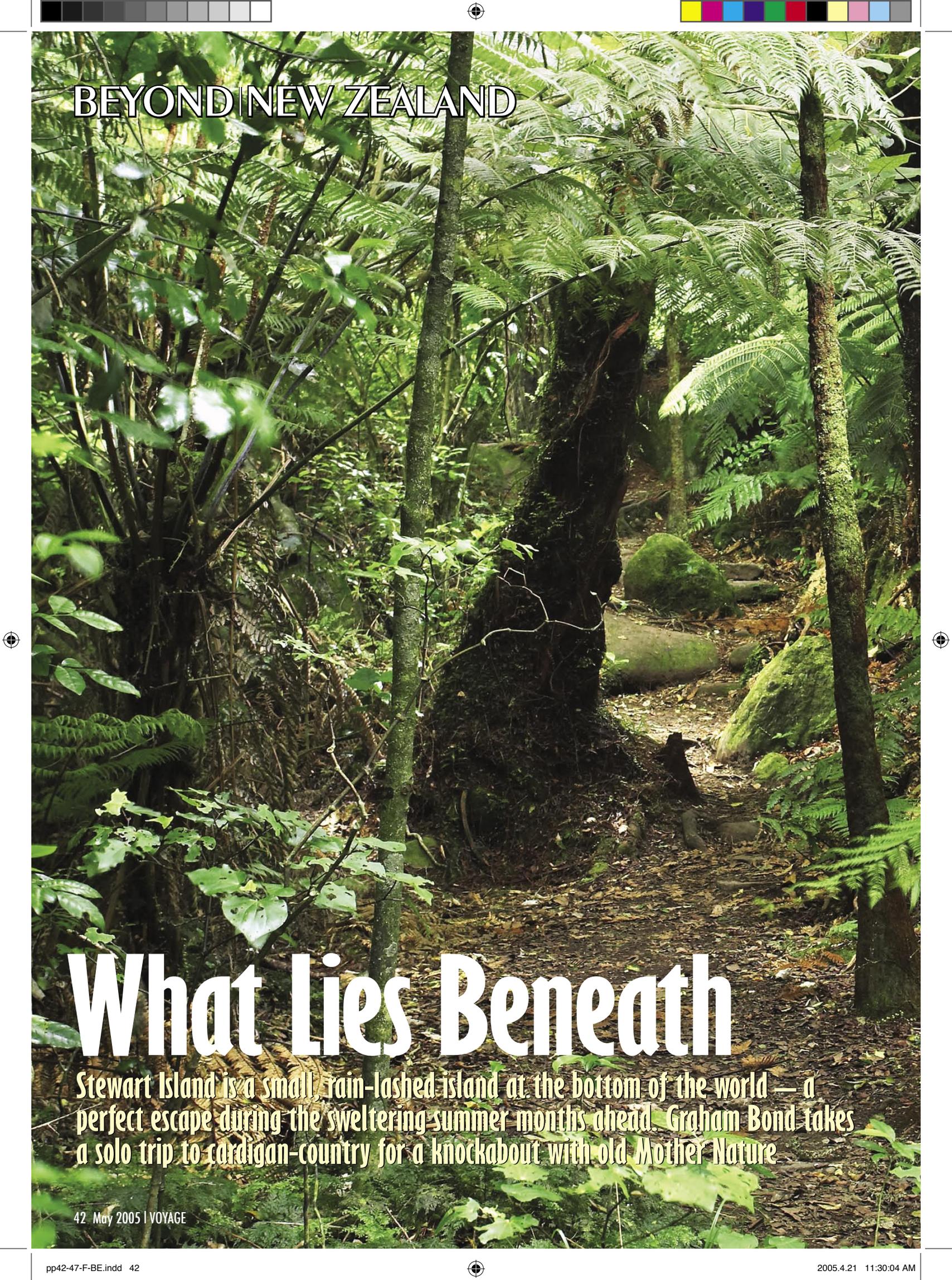




BEYOND NEW ZEALAND



What Lies Beneath

Stewart Island is a small, rain-lashed island at the bottom of the world — a perfect escape during the sweltering summer months ahead. Graham Bond takes a solo trip to cardigan-country for a knockabout with old Mother Nature



PHOTOGRAPHY: PANORAMA STOCK





Castaway: (above) The distinctive dunes of Stewart Island's Smoky Beach; (below) The flightless, nocturnal kiwi is the national symbol of New Zealand and its people

With the world outside the window spinning, my concentration is firmly on keeping breakfast down, making it even more difficult to lip-read the cabin attendant as she calls out to me from across the aisle.

"Other people pay to go on rollercoasters but I *get* paid to do this every day," she laughs. "It's not a job. It's entertainment."

I just make out her words over the roaring engine and a loud thump as another wave pummels the boat, sending it sideways into a four-metre ocean trough. She reclines in her seat with a cup of coffee balanced

a place where Mother Nature rules supreme.

New Zealand is a land of outdoor pursuits, and they can be broadly divided into two kinds – gentle and non-gentle. Stewart Island offers a balance. If the boat ride is as terrifying as a bungee jump from the Nevis Highwire, the lifestyle on dry land is about as docile as you would expect from a deserted island at the bottom of the world.

Well, not quite deserted. The island is home to around 390 people. They are a hardy, seafaring folk and, given that even a simple shopping trip involves a ride on *that* boat, they have to be. The local supermarket – appropriately named Ship to Shore – does a roaring trade in fresh vegetables and

Stewart Island is a place where Mother Nature rules supreme.

expertly in one hand. Just behind her, a Japanese tourist seems to be using a similar-looking cup as a sick bag. Delirious on a cocktail of endorphins and seasickness, I squeeze the handles in front of me. Every second I hang on is a second closer to our destination.

Stewart Island lies 35 kilometres off the southern coast of New Zealand's south island. The two landmasses are separated by the fearsome Foveaux Strait where wind, tide and current tend to pull in different directions. The resulting rollercoaster ride feels an integral part of the trip. For Stewart Island is

fishing tackle but for anything more ambitious, locals look north to the city of Invercargill. The close-knit community is currently going through something of a crisis. The fishing industry has hit problems and real estate prices are rocketing, tempting many families to sell up and seek a life on the mainland.

Rising land prices are indicative of Stewart Island's current tourist boom. And there are many temptations for outsiders, beyond the peace and quiet. The island is a paradise for amateur fishermen and birdwatchers – it's home to the densest concentration of kiwi in the country. Known to the Maori as Rakiura – land of the glowing skies – it's also famed for its remarkable





sunrises and sunsets as well as the *aurora australis*, aka the Southern Lights.
Stewart Island's climate is less appealing. Though

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temperatures are mild, it's still cardigan country all year round. Rain falls on three out of every four days, often rendering the firmament a blanket grey. However, the weather is changeable and the skies are just as likely to turn blue in the blink of an eye.

Drizzle accompanies my arrival at the tiny fishing village of Oban – the island's only settlement clustered around Halfmoon Bay, and home to a host of family-run guesthouses and B&Bs. As tempting as they sound in this weather, I am not destined to take shelter in their cosy interiors. I am headed for the 36 kilometre-long Rakiura Trail, the newest of New Zealand's nine Department of Conservation (DOC)-designated Great Walks. Opened in 2002, it attracts thousands of hikers each year. Most choose to visit in summer when daylight hours are long. For no other reason than I like a challenge, I'm here to spend three days walking on a rain-lashed island at the bottom of the world – in winter.

Prior to my arrival, I had conjured a mental image

of Stewart Island. It was a wild, inhospitable land of snow on granite – an antipodean version of Iceland, perhaps. I would feel like Ranulph Fiennes as I battled into the blizzard. I would be a hero. Or maybe not. It's day one and, under now blue skies, I find myself photographing azure bays, striding across golden sands and marvelling at just how

utterly wrong a person can be.

The sense that I've failed to create a dangerous edge for myself disappears as I arrive at Port William. I am staying the night in a DOC hut, one of thousands placed at intervals along walking trails across the country, built to provide a modicum of comfort for inexperienced campers. A quick tour confirms the presence of the essentials: mattress, kitchen, running water, fireplace. Some kind soul has even chopped the wood for me. Sadly, whoever did has long-since left. I am totally alone.

As darkness falls the rain is supplanted by a howling wind. From inside the hut I look out onto the bay, drenched in milky moonlight. There are no lights, no cars, no people – my own private kingdom. The sand, sea and forest glisten with a silver sheen. It would be beautiful were it not so frightening. I spend my first night as a 'pioneer' reassuring myself that it's impractical for a psychopath to have followed me all this way out here.

Fear turns to triumph the next morning. I wake

Bay Leaf: (clockwise from top left) Peaceful Ringaringa Beach; Thick foliage covers the entire island; The forest is alive with dripping mosses and trickling streams





Local Icons: (above) Stewart Island is home to the densest concentration of kiwi in the country; (below) Wacky wellies on display in Stewart Island's theatre; (opposite page) This famous signpost in the town of Bluff – Gateway to Stewart Island – points out just how remote you are



to the sound of waves lapping at my private beach. Walking along the sand at sunrise, with no human voice to distract me, I rediscover senses I thought had been destroyed by the day-to-day grind of city life. I pay attention to every last detail: the birdsong, the gentle llop of the tide, the way the retreating waves create beautiful canyons in the sand.

The second day's hike takes me into the heart of the rainforest which completely covers the island. From across the bay, the *rimu* and *kamahi* trees look old and

My spirit is soaring by day three but the physical strain is beginning to tell.

withered, their upper branches brushed into a fine point by the wind. The view, however, changes under the canopy. The forest comes alive with dripping mosses and trickling streams. The ground turns to porridge in places. But boardwalks cover the boggiest areas and the track frequently makes inventive use of the ancient staircases of tangled tree roots.

Stewart Island's forests are teeming with birdlife: *tui*, fantails, parakeets, cuckoos, warblers and *kaka* (bush parrots), amongst others. The incredible sound of their singing stops me in my tracks. I gaze up into the branches and listen to the unrehearsed orchestra of clicks, purrs, trills and whistles, safe in the knowledge that this is one rainforest where nothing too poisonous will jump out at me.

A lookout tower at the highest point of the track – a

300 metre mountain ridge – rises above the canopy offering stunning views across the thick, impenetrable shell of forest. The barbed trees stretch all the way to the sea. There are no gaps or clearings, and no sign at all of human life, a glimpse perhaps of what New Zealand looked like 200 years ago.

Experience and reduced expectation makes the second night a more comfortable affair. Yet more rain beats down on the North Arm Hut as I watch clouds race across the night sky. Stacking and prodding the logs on the open fire comprises the after-dinner entertainment and the glowing embers represent the perfect companion to an evening of quiet contemplation.

My spirit is soaring by day three but the physical strain is beginning to tell as I make the final trek back to Halfmoon Bay. The landscape changes again as the route begins to hug the still waters of Paterson Inlet. The thick vegetation means the bays are remarkably sediment-free and sparklingly clean. Despite the muscular twinges, it is a happy march back to the boat and my first glimpse of humanity for 52 hours.

The sun shines all the way home. The peaks and troughs of the Foveaux Strait are just as deep as the first time around and, once again, I'm delirious. But somewhere in there I have discovered an inner calm. Having played second fiddle to her for the previous three days, I'm happy to be knocked about a bit by old Mother Nature. She continues to remind visitors to this majestic island that life will go on, with or without us lot. **V**



PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM NEW ZEALAND

Essentials

Go by...

Plane. From Beijing and Shanghai to Auckland with Qantas (www.qantas.com.au) for RMB 10,770 return and RMB 10,330 return. Air New Zealand (www.airnz.co.nz) operates regular daily flights between Auckland and Invercargill, via Christchurch.

Stewart Island can be reached by boat or aeroplane. The Stewart Island Experience ferry operates between Bluff and Halfmoon Bay and takes one hour. Stewart Island Flights offer a daily service between Invercargill and Halfmoon Bay. The journey takes 20 minutes. (+64 (0)3 218 9129)

Stay at...

The South Sea Hotel

Built in the 1930s, this historic beachfront hotel is the largest accommodation option on the island. Rooms in the main hotel have shared facilities but there are nine newer self-catering motel units close by. The hotel bar - 'The Pub' - is the main watering hole on the island with plenty of swarthy locals happy to share a story or two. (+64 (0)3 219 1059; www.stewartisland.co.nz)

Tokoeka Bed and Breakfast

This spacious, friendly B&B has three rooms, one of which has its own spa. With private gardens and panoramic views of the village and ocean, it's one of the best of Oban's many hosted accommodation options. (+64 (0)3 219 1143; www.stewartisland.co.nz)

Department of Conservation Huts

Simple, back-to-basics accommodation offers the chance to really get out and explore the island from remote hiking bases. Passes on the Great Walk trail cost NZD 10 per night and must be purchased in advance from the DOC Visitor Centre on the Main Road. (+64 (0)3 219 0002; www.doc.govt.nz)

Eat at...

Wharfside Cafe

Watch the fishing boats come and go while enjoying fresh seafood and a glass of New Zealand wine. (+64 (0)3 219 1470; www.stewartisland.co.nz)

Go in...

The island is colder and quieter during the winter months (May-September) when some of the shops operate limited hours. The long daylight hours and warmer weather in summer can lead to Oban becoming strangely busy, making booking ahead essential.

PS...

Whenever you go, bring clothes suitable for all weather. It rains on 275 days of the year. There is no bank on the island, so bring plenty of cash. If you are planning on hiking to the DOC huts, remember to bring your own sleeping bag, cooking equipment and food. And whatever you do, don't forget sandfly repellent. The tiny insects are the scourge of the South Island. And they bite.