

# AWAY FROM IT ALL

## STEWART ISLAND



Stewart Island has a bewitching effect on visitors, discovers **Bridget Martin**

**T**HE cosiness of the nine-seater plane to Stewart Island seems to encourage intimate confessions. The New Yorker with whom I share a small seat gives me a shy, sheepish smile. "I fell in love," she confides. She is not talking about her partner but the reaction they both had on their first visit to Stewart Island and the reason they moved there.

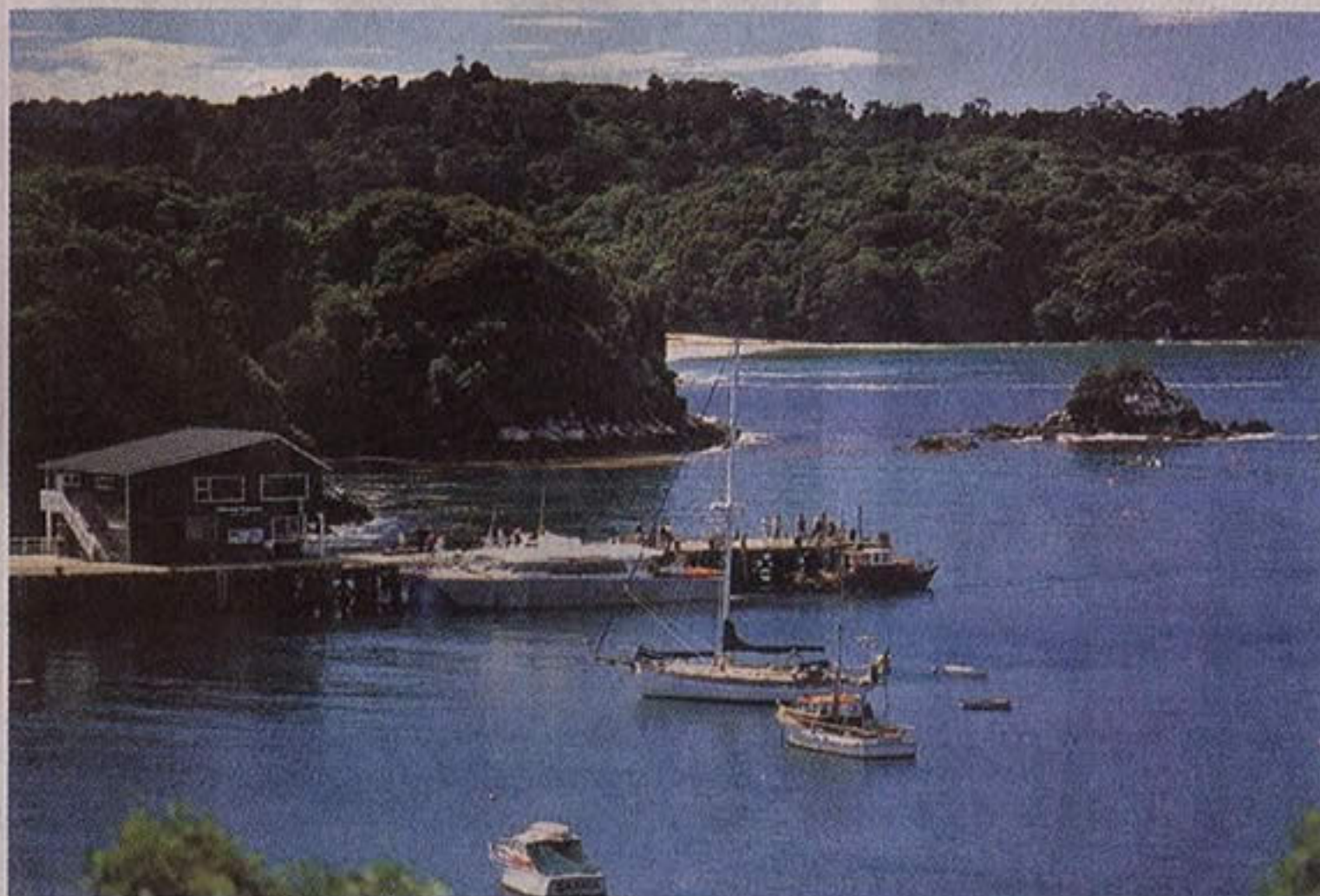
I soon understand why they felt that way. Our tiny plane swoops over extremely pretty white-sand beaches, deserted crescents backing on to dense bushland dotted with small cottages. Within a half-hour of leaving Invercargill, our bags are in a sea-view room at the South Sea Hotel and we are gazing across the harbour as the ferry arrives.

A few hours later we are standing in the dark on a cold beach, holding our breath with a huddle of strangers. In front of us is a kiwi; not a New Zealander but the much rarer bird. Our guide, islander Phillip Smith, cautiously turns his dimmed spotlight on what to us is a dark lump on the sand. I lift my binoculars and the dark lump resolves itself into a strange, round-bottomed bird that is vigorously delving its long beak into the sand. It is the Stewart Island brown kiwi.

According to Maori legend, Smith tells us, the demi-god Maui, while using the South Island as his canoe, caught an enormous fish (which myth says was the North Island), with Stewart Island serving as his anchor.

Considering its situation, just an ocean away from the Antarctic, it is remarkably mild. "We get less rain than Auckland," Diane Smith, wife of Phillip, informs us. We have been expecting some wild weather but during our stay it is remarkably calm, with peaceful, opalescent skies. Rakiura, the island's original Maori name, means "glowing skies".

In March 2002, 83 per cent of the 1680sq km island became Rakiura National Park. A high



**Happy landing:** The wharf at Oban, where bands of birdwatchers disembark

## SELF-CATERING THE BEST WAY TO GO

**W**E spend one night in the historic South Sea Hotel before moving into a self-catering cottage. The hotel, with its busy bar, simply called The Pub, and a restaurant specialising in local seafood, is the social hub of the island. It's a short walk from the ferry wharf and near the Stewart Island flight depot. Double or twin rooms with a sea view cost \$NZ100 (\$84) a night. Nine motel studio units, with queen and single beds and self-catering facilities, cost \$NZ135 a night. More: [www.stewart-island.co.nz](http://www.stewart-island.co.nz).

About 30 self-catering cottages are available on the island, often with views over the harbour. Just bear in mind that the township of Oban is hilly and a short distance

proportion of the native vegetation remains and the island lacks stoats, weasels and ferrets, all of which have destroyed much of the birdlife elsewhere in New Zealand. As a result, the island is alive with birdsong: bellbirds and tuis chime from roadside shrubs and parakeets and native wood-pigeons fly overhead. For this reason, Stewart Island attracts birdwatchers; most of them make a pilgrimage to nearby Ulva Island, five minutes away by water taxi. This island has never been logged and, due to the lack of predators (rats and possums have been banished), conservation authorities have been able to reintroduce a number of threatened species. In 2000, 30 South Island saddlebacks (last seen on the island 140 years before) and 16 Stewart Island robins were released. They've done well; the robins added 30 chicks to the population last season.

Ulva Island, situated in the middle of the

on the map can mean a steep gradient. Free transfers are usually offered and are useful when you are burdened with luggage, but after that you can find yourself toiling up and down hills in search of supplies. More: [www.stewartisland.co.nz](http://www.stewartisland.co.nz). (Confusingly, this is not the same site as the South Sea Hotel, so check e-addresses carefully.)

There are no ATM facilities on the island and, although EFTPOS and credit card facilities are available, some businesses accept only cash. There is a small, mini-supermarket, the Ship to Shore, which does a fine line in bait and general hardware as well as basic food.

Stella Martin

extensive, sheltered Patersons Inlet, was the site of the area's first post office, built in 1872 and used until 1923. Collecting the post, the irregular arrival of which was advertised by the hoisting of a flag, was an important social occasion for the far-flung settlers.

We wander through the groves of native trees — rimu (red pine), rata, miro and totara — all of which are heavily decorated with ferns and mosses. Birds are all around and relatively unconcerned about human visitors. With a flurry of wings, a Stewart Island robin, complete with coloured bands on its legs, lands by my boot. They may be rare, but they are not hard to see, attracted to potential food in leaf litter scuffed up by human feet. Elsewhere, red-crowned parakeets are abundant and we spot a kaka — an enormous native parrot with massive hooked beak — profiled against the sky, cracking open nuts.



**Sailors' hideaway:** Lonneckers Beach



**Comical enthusiasm:** The weka or native rail

At Boulder Beach, an unusual shape is picking through the seaweed. It is a weka, the native rail. When it spots us, it comes trotting purposefully in our direction or, more precisely, towards my backpack, lying on the sand. It pokes its head inside but, alas, I have no food on board. As that disappointed weka gives up, others come running. Their enthusiasm is comical but unrewarded.

The only town on Stewart Island, Oban, also referred to as Halfmoon Bay, is home to fewer than 400 residents in scattered cottages, nestled in bushland. Visitors arrive on Stewart Island without cars: there is a shuttle taxi but only 20km of roads, compared with 300km of walking tracks, so most visitors spend their time on foot. Serious trampers can undertake the 125km North West Circuit around the island but, for the less energetic, a variety of shorter walks radiates out from the town. We are kept busy for a week, exploring bays, inlets and forest glades.

As Diane Smith drives us and our baggage to the airline depot, she tells us she came to work at the South Sea Hotel when she was 18. "That's where I met Phillip," she explains. Thirty-five years and various grandchildren later, she has no intention of leaving. Stewart Island does that sort of thing to people. Already we are planning to return.

## Checklist

Stewart Island is easily accessible from Invercargill at the south tip of the South Island. The Foveaux Express ferry leaves from Bluff, 27km from Invercargill, several times daily; the 39km trip takes an hour. More: [www.foveauxexpress.co.nz](http://www.foveauxexpress.co.nz). Stewart Island Flights offers three daily 30-minute services in each direction. More: [www.stewartislandflights.com](http://www.stewartislandflights.com). ■ [www.stewartisland.co.nz](http://www.stewartisland.co.nz)