

Queen Charlotte Sound for the Millennium

by Sandy Ferguson

I'd woken to the sun blazing in on New Year's day, first mistake, it was 1/4 of an hour early!! We'd parked the van outside a friend's house and it was their security light blazing in our back window!! Clouds blocked the millennium dawn.

We drove up the coast that afternoon to camp at the Ure River and the next morning, as we headed into Blenheim, the clouds building over the Sounds looked most discouraging - so, sunny Nelson for a few days until the wet weather in the Sounds blew through.

By Thursday it was go now or never. Picton was grey but mild as we ate lunch on the grass by the beach, watching hire kayaks being loaded. We were to see these same ones about 8.00 p.m. heading into Ruakaka, why so late (and tired looking) we never found out.

We loaded and launched from Waikawa, about 5 minutes drive from Picton and an hour's less paddling, headed east, hugging the coast to keep out of as much wind from the south as possible. It was possible, when crossing bays, to get a bit of a lift about halfway across them as the wind, funnelling down the steep valleys leading into them, spread out at the mouth of each bay. When we reached Curious Cove it was decision time, Tory Channel or Ruakaka (left or right)? Ruakaka was down wind as we hurried across the sound, ready to dodge anything that appeared. The fast ferries (both), which come from Wellington via Tory Channel, had gone through sometime before so hopefully anything else (the regular ferries and fishing boats) would be a bit slower.

The camp ground in Ruakaka had a few tents, power boats and kayaks on it but I hoped the bay before (marked for water skiing) would be empty - it was except for a couple fishing from their kayaks, a couple of new rental singles from Waikawa. A neat little bush fringed bay with just enough room to park the kayaks off the beach and pitch two or three tents. Two kayaks and one tent left plenty of room to sit back and spread out the kitchen, so stove out, billy on and a cup of coffee. Later, after dinner, we threw lines at the milling fish, just off the beach, with no effect.

Friday morning dawned clear and still. Our original plan, Tory Channel and the whaling station was dropped and plan B, Blumine Island was adopted. We stopped at the salmon farm, at the mouth of the bay, for a chat. The diver was about to carry on clearing dead fish from the bottoms of the nets, the seal was just sitting on one of the rafts, the orca from earlier in the week didn't appear and the kingfish, reported to be around earlier in the morning, must have left too.

We stopped a bit east of Snake Point for lunch, sitting on a convenient jetty before crossing the channel to the island against a steady breeze of between 10 and 15 knots. The campsite was empty, the sun shone and a herd of wekas (herd?!!) roamed around, ducking poorly aimed sticks and stones hurled in their direction. These woodhen are always an annoyance, stealing anything not tied down. Later one pecked W's toes as she was reading a book. Across the Sound a continual stream of traffic passed, some heading into Endeavour Inlet, as we had dinner and coffee, watching the sun drop behind the mountains and clouds build and dissipate over the northern hills.

Saturday morning was one of those mornings that kayakers go off on trips to see, it was calm and bright. Out of the bay and just before the north-eastern point, a couple of wharf piles stick out of the water. I landed to hunt the gun emplacements and W went off to fish. Behind the beach, hidden by the bush to the water's edge is a large area where our entire kayak club could find room to camp. I followed the track through the thick bush, the first blockhouse and nearly a kilometre later the second blockhouse, but no gun emplacements! I ran back until the first blockhouse, a metre or two down the side track and there it was, a massive lump of concrete. I found out later from Andy that I

must have been close to the second one at the far end of my run.

Back in the kayak and W was waving at me, she'd managed to hook the South Island. With 40 lb line and my tippy kayak, it took a bit of pulling to unsnag and reel in. As we carried on round the island, the clouds from the south started to build. We stopped at a beach, before the south east point, for lunch, sheltering out of the wind against a little bit of cliff.

Round the point and the gathering clouds started to fall out of the sky. On the last little beach before the long stretch to the western point, I hauled out and we donned wet weather jackets and I made sure the compass was handy. The channel ahead disappeared in the clouds but reappeared before we left the island and headed for Snake Point. A little before the point we stopped for a warming brew and something to eat before the final run into Ruakaka Bay. There was a group of kayakers in "our" bay so we camped at the right hand end of the "official" bay.

Next morning was fine again but with the expectation of wind. We stopped for a minute to re-trim W's kayak and talk to the kayakers in "our" bay. They were from Wellington and I recognized one of the kayakers, the late Russell Ginn's Herroshoff design. We had a quick chat before leaving them to their packing. Once out in the Sound, the wind was on our quarter and we made very good time until, turning into Waikawa Bay the wind picked up behind us for a final sprint to the marina. We wandered round the marina looking for a ramp. Once ashore, I assembled the trolley and towed the kayakers out of the marina to a convenient place to load the van, walked the 200 metres to the relation I'd left it with, loaded and we were ready for the drive home and work...

The Queen Charlotte Sound roughly lies east/west with Tory Channel branching off it to the south east. To the north and west another separate system of Sounds, the Pelorus Sound and Kenepuru Sound all of them drowned valleys.