

Cruising New Zealand & Australia – January 2008

We joined the Holland America Line ship MS Statendam in Auckland, which was great as we didn't have to fly anywhere to get it!

It was interesting to see parts of NZ from a different perspective, or even at all, as some of the places we visited are probably not ones we'd ever bother to drive to, given the distances involved and the cost of ferries, etc. Most of what we saw was scenic rather than 'sites' or 'sights', although we did have an 'up close and personal' view of White Island, which is a very active volcano, with lots of fumaroles, normally only seen by volcanologists and scientific parties. We were not able to go ashore, of course, and neither would we have wanted to as the sulphur would have rotted our shoes within the hour and the stench of it probably had the same effect on our lungs ... it was 'interesting' enough half a mile off! Those who do go ashore there apparently have to wear breathing apparatus and clothes and boots made of a special material. No metal at all is allowed on their clothing or equipment, so corrosive is the atmosphere.

New to us was our first stop, a town called Tauranga, the port for Mount Maunganui, which is pronounced almost the same as our Mangonui and which people always mix up with ours. It was an attractive place and the mount on the end of the peninsula was very picturesque.

Napier is another place we visited, and it is one of our favourite towns. We first went there with Sallie and Paul 10 years ago when here on holiday and we fell in love with it then. It was destroyed in an earthquake in 1929 but completely rebuilt in the early '30s, all in the art deco style, which we find very elegant and attractive. It was good to have a chance to revisit it even though the rain didn't let up.

Wellington was a popular part-of-call and we enjoyed our trip up the mountain in a cable car and a walk round the Botanical Gardens. As we had been before, however (on the same holiday as Napier), we did not spend long in the city but took a suburban train out to one of the old working towns which has been 'gentrified'. It has been very well done and features a lot of very individual styles of building as well as shops which are a far cry from the usual High Street chains (yes, we get that here, too). There was one selling Indian groceries and spices, another selling everything Dutch, from Delft-ware to cheese and crisp biscuits and another was a delightful, old fashioned iron-mongers with zinc watering cans, rakes and even a 'tin' bath hanging up outside – though I suspect the latter will be used for decoration or else as a giant planter rather than its original purpose ... plumbing is actually quite advanced in these parts, you know!

Picton, just across the Cook Strait and on the northern shores of the South Island came next and with it the most atrocious weather; very cold and extremely wet ...

welcome to summer! It is an attractive town in fine weather but less so in these dismal conditions, however, we donned macs and 'enjoyed' a brisk walk around the harbour and the small town, thus justifying a leisurely stop in a cosy café for a cup of excellent coffee. We were scheduled to depart late afternoon to cruise the Queen Charlotte Sound and view the spectacular scenery and, possibly, wildlife.

Unfortunately a gale blew up and the captain decided that he could not risk untying our moorings for fear of being dashed onto the rocks, so we were destined to stay there overnight. This was disappointing but of course he was absolutely right to make the decision, for the safety of his ship, crew and passengers (in that order?!). It's an ill wind (and it was!) however, and the delay in departure meant we were able to witness an interesting sight which Martin and Toby will no doubt discuss for hours – a train being shunted right onto a car ferry to pick up carriages and trucks which have been shipped over from the North island. Don't ask how many photos himself took "just for Toby" (of course!!!), but it was far more than enough. I found it quite interesting for the first ten minutes, but you can have too much of a good thing, you know – especially with icy rain down the back of your neck and a force 10 gale trying to rip off your all-too-flimsy cagoule!

Next morning dawned bright and fair and the Captain set sail early in the morning so that we could go via Queen Charlotte Sound, enabling us to enjoy the scenery after all, though the fur seals and penguins were not in evidence, unfortunately. We were due to spend a day at sea en route to Timaru, for Mt. Cook (our highest mountain) but sadly a hurricane blew up and we had to miss it out and run straight for Dunedin. It was a pretty choppy experience, with 90 knot winds and 40 foot waves, but we weathered it without mishap or sickness (though some others were a little unwell!).

Dunedin was a highlight and we arrived to bright sunshine and cloudless skies with temperatures in the upper 20s C. We had hired a car to drive to Mt. Cook but of course had to cancel it. Avis were most obliging and simply switched the reservation to Dunedin, so we had one there instead. Pretty good service as it was free, being a 'reward' on our shopper's points card! We drove round this most Scottish of cities and then up to the end of the Otago peninsula where we went to a wildlife reserve and saw fur seals (including a 'nursery' ... ahhh) and albatross, though not penguins as they only really appear at dawn and dusk, especially when the weather is warm. It was all most interesting and the scenery spectacularly bleak, quite unlike that which we have up here in the far north (Dunedin is a long way south).

After Dunedin the weather closed in again as we sailed round the southern coast up into Fjordland. We had particularly wanted to see Dusky Sound, which is only accessible by sea, but it was unsafe to enter the narrow passage so we had to forgo it, though we wouldn't have seen anything anyway, given the driving rain. It cleared somewhat later in the afternoon, however, and the winds died down so we were able to enjoy scenic cruising in Milford Sound, which is absolutely spectacular, even in the misty rain. A compensation for the bad weather is that the waterfalls, literally

hundreds of them, are in full spate and so quite incredibly beautiful; last time we went to Milford Sound was at the end of a very dry spell so we saw very few but this trip more than made up for it.

Then it was time to leave New Zealand and head across the Tasman Sea for Tasmania (oddly enough!). The Tasman is notoriously rough but given our experiences earlier in the cruise, we were all seasoned sailors by now so it didn't bother us at all – just a gentle swell, really! In Burnie, on the northern coast of Tasmania, we were met by some good friends from our days in Singapore, Mike and Hazel. They took us to their olive farm for the morning and we caught up on 20 odd years worth of news, then we went to lunch at the vineyard across the valley, with which they have an association. It was a most convivial day and Mike returned us to the ship clutching bottles of their olive oil and the vineyard's wine. En route he showed us a bit of the surrounding countryside and we also found time to stop at a wonderful, Belgian, chocolatiers where we sampled the wares and had a cuppa before saying our farewells.

An overnight hop across the Bass Strait (also notorious but very well-behaved on this occasion!) brought us to Melbourne. Here we were met by a couple whom we met on our Chilean cruise in November, and they entertained us royally, showing us every inch of Melbourne, which is a much more interesting city than we had expected, given that it sells itself on sports and shopping. It actually has some stupendous architecture and interesting history as well as fine restaurants theatres, galleries and museums. Before taking us back to the ship, Elvira and Alan took us for a drive round some of the coastal suburbs, which we found interesting as it gives a far better idea of how people actually live than just visiting the city centre.

Two nights and a day at sea took us to Sydney, our final destination. This gave us time to pack up and enjoy a convivial time with the unusually large number of friends we made on the trip. We always do make friends and enjoy the company on cruises, but this one presented even more than usual and it was probably the most sociable holiday we've ever had; we will certainly keep in touch with at least three of the couples we met. We arrived at Sydney in good order and enjoyed the thrill of sailing past the Opera House and under the Sydney Harbour Bridge – two sights which will never get hackneyed however many times we see them and, yes, in the rain again! Disembarkation was smooth and we were at our hotel in no time.

We had been lucky enough to get bookings for *La Boheme* at the Opera House that night but first we had a leisurely wander round the city and a look in the shops, where I bought a pretty, pink, evening skirt in the sales. An early dinner on Circular Quay was excellent, and the opera was superb – well sung and a fabulous production. A bonus to the evening was a woman approaching me at the end to tell me how much she admired my (new) skirt; she said she had noticed it as soon as I entered

the auditorium! I was delighted that most of the audience had taken the same trouble to dress for the occasion.

The next morning we went for a walk around the Rocks area, under the Bridge and through the old historic centre, before returning to the hotel where some old college days friends, John and Tricia, had arrived from Canberra to spend a few days with us. We enjoyed a very long and leisurely lunch with them and then spent the rest of the afternoon, what was left of it, having a snooze before we hit the town for the evening. More good food and even better wine rounded off the day and we retired ready for an early start the next morning.

We took a drive out of the city to a couple of beautiful villages on the Hawkesbury River which Martin and I had wanted to visit as they were the setting for an excellent film we had seen: "The Oyster Farmer". We carried on into the Hunter Valley, one of Australia's premier wine growing districts, where we enjoyed a very comprehensive 'tasting' at Lindemans, one of our favourites, and John & Tricia's too – they re-stocked their wine cellar royally! Luckily (or maybe not?!) we had to consider baggage allowances, or we might have been tempted to do the same. Another long, leisurely lunch followed and then we headed back into the city where we had a relaxing evening of chat until bed.

We had a bit of fun the next evening, our last in Sydney, as we had booked to take one of the Harbour Dinner Cruises. There are all sorts of options, with fun and jollity or else just a civilised meal with good wine. We booked one that morning which included a seafood buffet and wine as we wanted to chat and we are all allergic to loud noise, flashing lights, screeching 'singers' and general razzamatazz. When we got to the appointed pier and cruiser, we were somewhat surprised that no-one appeared to be receiving guests but then a member of staff approached and asked if we were for the Magistick cruise – we said we were and we were ushered onto a mock stern-wheeler 'Showboat'! We protested that this was decidedly not what we had booked and were told that 'our' cruise was not operating that night but that we had been put on this one, which was much better because it had a cabaret singer, comedian and magic show and dancing girls and cost twice as much, though we were getting it for our original price! Oh dear! There was nothing for it but to accept as by then it was too late to make other arrangements, so we decided to make the best of it ...

The food was good, although it was a set meal (salmon or chicken) rather than the seafood we had been looking forward to but the 'entertainment' was dire! We ended up leaving the 'saloon' and going on deck, which was wonderful as we had it to ourselves and we all enjoyed watching Sydney by night – which one would have thought was the point of the cruise, not sitting in a stuffy room being deafened and blinded... you could do that on shore! The waitress was a sweetie and was quite worried we were missing all the fun but accepted our explanation and offered to

bring us our coffee out on deck, which was kind. I rather think she secretly agreed with us as she told us that when her parents had visited (she was an Indian studying at the university) they did the same thing, although she said in their case it was more a question of her father being scandalised by the scanty costumes!!! In spite of it all, it was a good evening and we had lots of fun to finish off a splendid holiday.