

TRAVEL



SOUNDS FABULOUS

Looking up Doubtful Sound with Parson's Rock just showing at the mouth of Hall Arm. Picture by Kara Matheson, Fiordland Explorer Cruises

Deep in the heart of Fiordland National Park, Justine Tyerman explores a lake, an underground power station, an alpine pass and a sound . . . or fiord.

The weather looked as dubious as the name suggests as we headed for Doubtful Sound early one autumn morning. We sped smoothly across a calm Lake Manapouri in the high-speed catamaran, Titiroa, in misty grey drizzle. Massive, glaciated peaks and ranges peered above the clouds which filled the steep-sided valleys and cirques, masquerading as glaciers of the last great Fiordland ice age 20,000 years ago.

I had visited Milford Sound many times but Doubtful Sound was always elusive . . . just out of reach due to time, distance or budget. On this occasion however, it was planned and booked well ahead as a post-Milford Track treat. The tramp was magnificent, but after four days and 53 kilometres of lugging packs, we were looking forward to being taken care of on a guided trip which required minimal use of our legs and involved no carrying of weights.

Halfway across the lake, a hint of pale gold on the horizon heralded sunrise, casting a shimmering path across the water and illuminating the dark clouds, hopeful signs that the weather might do what Fiordland is so famous for . . . the unexpected.

One of the world's wettest regions, Fiordland's annual rainfall varies from a mere 1 metre at Manapouri township, to 3.5 metres at West Arm, 8 metres at Deep Cove, and in 2009 a staggering 16 metres at First Arm on Doubtful Sound.

We were prepared for the worst, wearing our full wet-weather tramping kit (I vaguely thought snorkels might have been a prudent addition to the day pack), but the mist obligingly continued to lift revealing wonderful wooded islands and a lake shore fringed by dense beech forest.

Arriving at West Arm on the far side of the lake, we were ushered into a visitor centre where I could have happily spent the morning, reading about the fascinating history of the area and the

Maori legends of creation with their mellifluous place names which always sound so much more poetic than the English versions. Manawapouru or Manawapouri, meaning Lake of the Sorrowing Heart, was formed by the tears of two sisters, Motorau and Korowae, daughters of an old Maori chief in the region.

I also refreshed my knowledge of the valiant Save Manapouri campaign (1959-72), credited as the birth of New Zealand's environmental consciousness. The original Manapouri Hydro Power Station scheme involved raising the lake level by 30 metres, which would have flooded the shoreline beech forests and drowned most of the lake's 34 islands. There were huge, widespread protests and in 1972, the government of the day confirmed that, while the power station would go ahead, the lake level would not be raised. An entity called the Guardians of Lake Manapouri, Monowai and Te Anau was created to oversee management of the water levels.

The power scheme at West Arm was extraordinarily audacious. Built inside a mountain 200 metres below lake level in a cavern excavated from solid granite, the station is New Zealand's biggest. The project took 1800 workers eight years to complete in extremely harsh conditions and 16 men were killed underground or during construction of the road over Wilmot Pass linking West Arm on Lake Manapouri to Deep Cove on Doubtful Sound.

Completed in 1971, the power station was largely built to supply electricity to the Tiwai Point aluminium smelter near Bluff as well as feed into the South Island transmission network.

The word earthquake kept fighting to be heard inside my head as we boarded a bus and headed two kilometres down the dark spiral tunnel to the machine hall deep inside the mountain. I knew the trip involved going to the underground power station but I had somehow pretended it was not

really underground. So I made a deal with my fear. I locked it in a box and said I would let it out at the end of the trip if it didn't spoil the experience for me. I also reasoned that if 45,000 people were brave enough to visit the power station each year, the majority being overseas tourists, I must not be a wimp.

The bus was driven by our guide, the delightful Chris Hughes from Fiordland Explorer Cruises, one of those incredibly capable, multi-talented, Kiwi blokes you instinctively trust with your life . . . which was just what we did. Chris, a born story-teller, had done everything from guiding and DoC (Department of Conservation) rangering on the Milford Track to bridge building. Had it not been for his calm, jovial manner I might not have been able to focus on the experience of learning about and actually seeing for myself one of New Zealand's greatest — and most controversial — engineering achievements. The station utilises the 230-metre drop between the western arm of Lake Manapouri and the Deep Cove end of Doubtful Sound 10 kilometres away to generate electricity.

My fear stayed so well locked up, I was the last to leave the massive 111-metre long, 18-metre wide, 39-metre high cavern with its seven shiny, blue "exciters" which sit on top of the power generators. It was an awesome experience and felt rather like being on the set of a James Bond movie, as Chris suggested.

Turning the bus around in the tight confines of the tunnel was a masterful feat which was loudly applauded, especially by a German lady in the front seat who was quietly freaking out and wanted to be out of there in a big hurry.

Once back above ground I asked Chris about earthquakes and he said despite the close proximity to the alpine fault where the Indo-Australian plate dives beneath the Pacific plate — a fact I should have also locked in the box — a



A plaque on a rock marks where the water level would have reached had the lake been raised.



The machine hall 200 metres underground.



The 2km road down to the power station.



Chris Hughes from Fiordland Explorer Cruises.

powerful 7.8 Fiordland quake in 2009 caused no damage to the power station and was barely felt by the men working underground.

The next part of our adventure was the bus trip over Wilmot Pass, another incredible feat of construction. Surveyor Ernest Wilmot gave his name to the pass although the Murrell family from Manapouri, at whose lovely historic Grand View House we stayed the previous night, claim their ancestor Robert Murrell discovered the route in 1888 and helped build the track to Deep Cove in 1901.

The 22-kilometre road between Doubtful Sound and Lake Manapouri, one of New Zealand's most remote roads, was built in the mid-1960s to provide heavy equipment access for the construction of the power station. Floods, snow, mud and landslides lengthened the project from 12 months to two years. Chris said it was the most expensive gravel road ever to be built in New Zealand, at something like \$2 a centimetre.

"Maybe it took so long because half the time the workers would have been swatting sandflies," he said.

He reminded us that sandflies were technically a protected species in a national park so we were obliged to watch the fiends as they sucked our blood and refrain from killing them . . . technically.

Fiordland's legendary sandflies — and rain — got the better of the Jurassic Park film crew when they went to film there a decade ago. They evidently high-tailed it to Hawaii to complete the movie . . . the wimps!

To compensate for the fact there was zero visibility over the pass, Chris kept us entertained with amusing anecdotes, largely based on fact.

During construction of the power scheme, 300 married men boated to work each day from Manapouri, 900 single men lived at West Arm in a village with a post office, gym, pub and very