



The cruise ship Noordam, which holds 1,900 passengers, explores Milford Sound, which author Rudyard Kipling called "the eighth wonder of the world." HOLLAND AMERICA LINE

Overwhelmed by New Zealand's beauty

Cruise through Fiordland National Park offers one stunning view after another

GLEN PETRIE

"That's the waterfall Hugh Jackman jumped off."

A woman beside me at the ship's rail pointed out Stirling Falls, a cascade that drops three times the height of Niagara into New Zealand's Milford Sound. "In the movie," she explained, meaning X-Men Origins: Wolverine. The cascade was indeed worthy of a Hollywood film, as were other waterfalls that sprang from the green cliffs, dropping like white ropes to the sea.

Easy access to the natural spectacles of New Zealand (or Aotearoa in Maori) drew me to this 12-day cruise, and the first stop was Fiordland National Park, perhaps the most stunning part of the country, in a remote corner of the South Island. It's twice the size of Banff National Park, honoured with UNESCO World Heritage status for its "superlative natural phenomena" and "stunning natural features," such as 14 deep fiords, peaks to rival the Rockies, native wildlife and unique ecosystems.

Much of Fiordland's rugged terrain can't be reached by road or even by footpath, but cruises go where roads don't. Holland America's 1,900-passenger Noordam showed me around three of the most prominent fiords — Milford Sound (Piopiotahi), Doubtful Sound (Patea) and Dusky Sound (Tamatea).

Milford Sound is the country's scenic crown jewel, hailed as "the eighth wonder of the world" by Rudyard Kipling. Noordam glided quietly across its glassy waters. Vertical walls closed in on either side.

"It looks like Norway," said my film buff acquaintance, and I was reminded of coastal British Columbia, my home. The ship slipped into the lee of triangular Mitre Peak, New Zealand's own Matterhorn, the iconic star of countless Instagram pics. Passengers raised their smartphone cameras as if making offerings. Mitre Peak rises 1,683 metres above its mirrored image.

Missionaries named pointy Mitre Peak after a bishop's headgear, but they may also have wanted to counter the more prosaic Maori name of Rāhōtu, meaning an upright part of the male anatomy.

Near the apex of the fiord, Lady Elizabeth Bowen Falls tumbled over ridges in a final 162-metre plunge after travelling 10 kilometres from its source atop Mount Grave. We passed a local tour boat and waved to its passengers. Most visitors to Fiordland see only Milford Sound because that's where the road is. Noordam paused, rotated, and set a course for more remote inlets.

I settled into a deep chair in the Crow's Nest lounge to watch the view through walls of glass. The aroma of fresh coffee wafted from the bar. Noordam is more Queen Mary than Carnival Funship, furnished in dark woods, brass accents and heavily framed nautical artwork. Her teak steamer chairs look straight from the Titanic. You won't find waterslides, rock-climbing walls or go-kart tracks. You will find afternoon classical concerts, fine dining in four restaurants, a well-stocked library, a top-rated spa and no fewer than a dozen bars.

I watched the narrow entrances to fiords pass by: Caswell, Charles and Nancy Sounds. Legend says the ragged coast was carved with an adze wielded by the Maori God Tu-te-Raki-Whānoa. He was called away to the interior before he could complete it, hence its roughly hewn appearance.

Sipping a long black, I tracked the ship using my phone's GPS and saw that Noordam steered a diagonal shortcut down Thomson Sound — a channel, actually — to reach the middle of Doubtful Sound.

Captain Cook named Doubtful Sound but didn't enter it, finding it a bit tight even though it's twice the size of Milford Sound and deeper at 431 metres. New Zealand's tallest waterfall is here, Browne Falls, at 836 metres, though it's mostly hidden by foliage.

Some of the cliffs seemed to lean



Countless waterfalls cascade into Milford Sound. The more it rains, the more waterfalls appear. GREATSOUTHISLE



Mitre Peak rises 1,683 metres above Milford Sound. GREATSOUTHISLE

over the ship. I was amazed that beech trees and giant ferns could grow in a thin layer of moss on vertical rock. They often fall, taking an avalanche of vegetation with them.

Someone shouted "Dolphins!" and I joined the rush to the rail to see a cluster of jumping fins disturb the water. Fiordland is home to bottlenose dolphins, penguins (thanks to Antarctic currents) and fur seals.

Dusky Sound proved different again, littered with over 350 islands, and Noordam picked her way gingerly around them. No roads reach Dusky Sound, though

you can arrive on foot over the Dusky Track. It'll just take you about 10 days.

Resolution Island, named for Cook's ship, is home to one of the country's first nature reserves. Conservationist Robert Henry spent years ferrying native kiwi and kakapo birds to Resolution to save them from introduced predators. His efforts came to naught when weasels made their way ashore.

On Seal Island, native New Zealand Fur seals jostled and barked. Sharp spires rose from the sea as we exited the fiord. Cook had seen

them, too. "Five high peaked rocks standing up like the four fingers and thumb of a man's hand"

The ship exited the last fiord at dusk and bucked the waves of the open sea; she'd spend the night proceeding to our next stop, Dunedin, and more scenic exploration. I'd booked a vintage train ride into the rugged Tiers Gorge.

Over a dinner of succulent New Zealand lamb in the main dining room, I discussed with my tablemates how Fiordland could be topped in upcoming port calls. Ahead lie wildlife sanctuaries on the Otago Peninsula, the lovely capital of Wellington, kayaking on Marlborough Sound, wine tasting in Hawke's Bay, the hot springs of Rotorua and big city Auckland. We agreed that Fiordland could very well turn out to be the highlight of a port-packed cruise, and felt privileged that we'd cruised fiords that many tourists, and some New Zealanders, never see.

Glen Petrie is a regular contributor to Cruise Travel Magazine for over 30 years; has two Lowell Thomas Awards for cruise writing, and is currently judging the cruise category of the Australian Society of Travel Writer's annual awards competition.



The Crow's Nest lounge on Noordam, left, allows comfortable viewing of the passing scenery through glass walls. One of Noordam's pools, right, has a retractable roof for inclement weather.

