

The **Tasman Sea** and tiny parts of **New Zealand** aboard the **Carnival Spirit**

Marathon sea-watching, hitherto thought to be extinct megafauna, passing cyclones and losing our cruise-ship virginity on a ten night cruise to the North Island of New Zealand



28th January to 7th February 2018

Mayette and Steve Anyon-Smith

Short Summary

Many of my friends had said that going on a cruise was like being trapped inside Penrith RSL 24 hours a day. In our case, they couldn't have been more wrong. We signed up for a ten night cruise out of Sydney on the Carnival Spirit, an 88,000 ton tinny. Despite kissing a passing cyclone and having some less than optimal weather as a result, we had a fabulous experience with an awesome ship, wonderful crew, superb food and an incredible list of seabirds and sea monsters. Within hours of returning to Sydney we booked another cruise!

For me the destination, four sites on the North Island of New Zealand, was less relevant than the journey getting there and back and this report reflects this.



The Plan

The plan was to celebrate our 25th Wedding Anniversary by doing something we hadn't previously tried. One of the wonderful things about cruising is that you don't have to think too much – the ship's captain does most of that. So the plan was to be on the ship when it left Sydney Harbour and still be there when it returned to port. We learnt that there are a range of ways that passengers (and crew) can fail in these rather basic planning principles.

Itinerary

Date	Arrive Time	Port	Depart Time
28 January 2018		Sydney	17:30
29 January 2018		Tasman Sea	
30 January 2018		Tasman Sea and Pacific Ocean	
31 January 2018	09:00	Bay Of Islands Cruising, New Zealand	19:00
01 February	07:00	Auckland, New Zealand	18:00
02 February	06:00	Tauranga, New Zealand	16:45
03 February	11:15	Napier, New Zealand	17:30
04 February		Cook Strait and Tasman Sea	

05 February		Tasman Sea	
06 February		Tasman Sea	
07 February	06:30	Sydney	

Carnival Spirit

Ship vitals

The ship was built in 2001 in Helsinki, Finland at a cost of \$US375 million. Some statistics:

Tonnage:	88,500 GT
Length:	963 ft (293.52 m)
Beam:	106 ft (32.31 m)
Draft:	25.5 ft (7.77 m)
Decks:	12 decks
Installed power:	62,370 kW (83,640 hp)
Propulsion:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diesel-electric • 2 × ABB Azipods • (17.6 MW (23,600 hp) each)
Speed:	22 knots (41 km/h; 25 mph)
Capacity:	2,124 passengers
Crew:	961

The ship moves through the sea beautifully. It virtually doesn't roll at all due to the miracle of stabilisers. It pitches and yaws a bit but not to the point that walking about is difficult. Given that we intersected with Tropical Cyclone Fehi and often had 50 knot winds, I figure that our ship was a juggernaut not easily intimidated.

Booking and processing

We booked our cruise direct with the company, Carnival Cruise Lines. We paid \$A1199 each for a “guaranteed balcony”. The room could not be selected for this type of fare.

The booking, on-line check-in and processing at the Overseas Passenger Terminal at Circular Quay in Sydney Harbour was simple, slick and cheerful. Passengers were issued with an electronic “ship card” for entry and exit to the ship and for all purchases on-board. The whole ship is effectively cashless. All prices are in Australian dollars.

Cabin

We were thrilled with our Empress Deck “stateroom” (#6131), with balcony. The beds were spot-on and the in-room facilities excellent. The flat-screen TV had a squillion channels including some dedicated to technical data on the cruise – latitude / longitude, speed, sea depth, wind direction, number of passing cyclones etc.

The en-suite bathroom was well designed and the hot water in the shower was instant.



Soap, shampoo etc is supplied. The only minor omission is the lack of an electric jug for coffee. There is a ship safety issue with electrical appliances apparently. Our cabin was very quiet.

Food

Shipboard fare far exceeded expectations.

Although we could have taken advantage of free “fine dining” we just never got around to it. The buffet meals were delicious, fresh and easily accessible. Importantly you could get the exact amount of nosh required, something that was lost (or was it?) on some of the ship’s guests. The variety of venues and food on offer was inexhaustible.

Drink

Tea and coffee machines were scattered about the place. The coffee was pretty lame. It was an American ship after all’s said and done. You could buy coffee, but that required effort to get to the bits of the craft that sold it. Similarly fruit juice and non-carbonated lemonade was available, as was drinking water and ice.

Soft drink and alcoholic drinks needed to be purchased. I noted that a can of Coke cost \$A2.70. A 1.5 litre bottle of water was \$A4.50. A range of Australian and imported beer was available in bottles and on-tap. I stayed with the house beer, "Thirsty Frog" (made I think by Lord Nelson Brewery in Sydney). This cost \$A8.95 for a pint – so this was similar to pub prices for a schooner in Sydney. Wine at around \$A46 a bottle was a bit silly so I didn't drink any. Fairly logically, although disappointingly, the duty free alcohol in the shipboard shops could not be opened on board.

On-board facilities and activities

There are three swimming pools. They are small - an eel would struggle to turn around in them. I think I managed five strokes per lap and failed to crash into the edge bits, or any frustrated eels as far as that goes.

There are so many other free and not-so-free facilities that a whole day could be spent



searching for them and you wouldn't find them all. Indeed at one point an emu-hunt was organised for the small number of kids on board where they had to find various points in the ship. It's entirely possible that some of the poorer searchers might still be looking.

I rarely partook of any activity that wasn't happening in the immediate area. My

primary focus was staring at the sea and chatting. The latter was possible whilst indulging in the former. I did a rough calculation that 80 hours was joyfully spent looking for sea critters.

Staff

All of the crew were exceedingly friendly and helpful. Most were aged under 30 years. The majority of the 60 nations represented were either Filipino or Balinese. There were smaller numbers of Indians, Thai and Latin Americans. The captain is Italian and most of the ship's officers and senior staff are European.

All of the 960 crew were allowed to chat as long as they wished, provided their work was getting done. They said they were happy and they certainly seemed to be. We loved them all. I managed to use my eight words of various languages to great effect. If there were mixed races serving behind the bar I would blend (some might say mangle) three different languages together. The staff would be in stitches and nobody else waiting to be served ever

seemed to get the joke. Curiously I was always served before anyone else – I'm sure they know on the first day who would ultimately tip them.....



Passengers

Most of the passengers had been on cruises before. For some it was a way of life. We heard very few complaints from anyone about anything. Many of the punters were from regional NSW or interstate as Sydney-based cruising options seemed to be more common than those from other Australian ports.

There were several tribes represented on our cruise:

- The smokers. Cigarettes on board cost \$A10 per packet. So the more you smoked the more you saved. These folk were confined to the front of Deck 9 and only on the starboard side. They were largely sedentary, more inclined to be a normal size, say less than 150kgs, and mixed little with others on board. Some were nocturnal.
- Those that owned a suit. We saw this fairly rare caste only fleetingly as they dressed up to nosh with the captain or attend other such events. I'm fairly confident that captains dread this kind of traditional shipboard nonsense - but I'm often wrong too.
- The caged lions. These dudes paced round and round the ship endlessly. There may have been some guilt that all the food they were consuming would go in and not come out again.
- The party animals. There weren't as many of these as one might expect. Apparently cruises to tropical islands are their preference. Nevertheless they could be relied upon to understand what a 24 hour bar is. To be honest they weren't ever a problem – not to us anyway. Some didn't get to complete the cruise outside of their cabins or the ship's prison. I'll get to this later.

- Cruise ship tragics. I envied these occasionally. They had been on many cruises and knew what to do to take advantage of all the offered activities – shows, theme nights, lip-sync and other competitions, and other things that I don't know (or particularly care) about. Some had detailed and valuable knowledge of the ships themselves, the companies that ran them, the best times to buy tickets and what to do if one of the last and best represented tribes fall on you.
- The “Penrith RSL” mega-fauna. Words fail me here. We saw one of these on the way to the city in our train – oh no, with a Carnival Spirit baggage tag. Her “pants” had their fly undone. The owner couldn't see this due to curvature of the girth – unless, I suppose, she had a mirror on a selfie-stick. She displayed a mound that would have frightened a mallee fowl. As it transpired she was one of the smaller members of a tribe rarely seen outside of cruise ships (or Penrith RSL, I'm reliably informed). This group never leaves the ship. Actually, except for returning to their cabins once a day, they don't leave the buffet areas. Few make eye contact except with others of their ilk. They were seemingly happy.
- Me. I was the only person amongst the 2000 passengers with binoculars.

Sea-watching from a cruise ship

I'll get to the wildlife lists later. This note is more an opinion on the order of difficulty of seeing and identifying stuff.

I was forewarned by some that sea-birding on ships was difficult – I found just the opposite was true.

Some that know me will say that I'm rarely seen with

binoculars on pelagic trips. This is almost entirely due to the problem I have with a moving deck in combination with moving wildlife. Our big tinny only ever moved in one direction at sea – forwards. It didn't lurch all the over the shop. It was like sea-watching from a headland. Much of the time we were facing the wind. Most birds fly into the breeze so I could get prolonged views from whatever height in the ship that I wished, allowing for where there was little or no wind. I found looking through the clean windows on Deck 9 (when it was windy) or higher up (when it wasn't) to be perfect. From 30 metres or more in the air you can see a long way to sea.



Curiously the birds seemed to totally ignore the ship – seemingly more so than they do with smaller vessels. Even birds sitting on the water would often fail to take wing on close passes.

Our Shore Excursions (with some more detail in the Diary section)

Bay of Islands

We booked a tour of the Bay of Islands soon after arriving on board in Sydney. This cost \$A140 per person and ended up being a bit of a waste of money. This wasn't the fault of the local geography. Ex-Tropical Cyclone Fehi was visiting. Consequential to this was an inability on behalf of our fancy new catamaran to put to sea. We had paid for an itinerary that couldn't be delivered. The shore-based company wasn't going to cancel the charter or else the cruise ship goldmine would have disappeared into the ether. So we poked about the islands in the bay.

Having said this the whole area is very scenic with myriad islands of different shapes and sizes, clear waters and not too many people. It is also rich in Maori and European history. The Treaty of Waitangi was signed here. Some native forest, allegedly with the odd kiwi roaming about, can be accessed from behind the Treaty site a short walk from the wharf. A long trail leads through forest to a distant waterfall. Some endemic birds were seen here.



Auckland

I had my heart set on visiting the Auckland Museum and wasn't disappointed. They have possibly the largest display of Maori and Pacific Island art and artefacts in the world, along with a whole lot more besides. We walked to the museum and returned by bus.

If I ever return to Auckland I will book a tour to Tiritiri Matangi Island where many of the local endemic birds have been re-introduced. We couldn't get there at the time of our visit as the sea was too rough.

Tauranga

I walked to Mount Manganui, only a few hundred metres or so away. Beaches and other headlands were easily accessed nearby. It was perfectly pleasant without being exciting. Although there is some good forest on the mountain there are very few native birds.

Tauranga is the city from which visits to the Lord of The Rings movie sites are accessed. Many of the ship's passengers went there – at \$A160 a head. Most of them said it was a worthwhile experience. Some cared to differ.

Napier

I suppose ships have to stop somewhere. We walked to the Napier Botanic Gardens. Quite nice. I have no idea what visitors to Napier do with themselves after the first day.



The overall vibe of visiting just four sites in the North Island of New Zealand

The cities we stopped in were very modern, clean, graffiti-free, safe and organised. They had the same shops as Australia and for all intents and purposes they felt like a cleaner and less bustling version of the “big island over the ditch”. And in Sydney’s case – and this was disappointing, with less Maoris!

There was clearly less ethnic diversity in Auckland than Sydney. People in the streets seemed cheerful enough. Outside of Auckland I chatted with locals whenever I could and couldn’t find any fault with any of them. Many thanked me for stopping to have a chat.

Weather

We had some rain and wind from ex-Tropical Cyclone Fehi for the first half of the holiday. It didn't ruin our experience and possibly even added a layer of interest. It wasn't cold and as we spent so much time on board ship and under cover if we needed to be, the weather was less relevant than on other holidays.

Safety and Security

We learnt that on board a ship in international waters the captain has extraordinary powers. He or she can lock you in your cabin, acquaint you with the ship's prison, fly you off the ship in a helicopter (at the passenger's cost) or dump you on an abandoned island if he or she so chooses. We heard stories from passengers and crew of all of these options being exercised.

Ring a lawyer won't work either. Not in international waters.

Wildlife

Forest and shorebirds

The New Zealand forest that was easily accessible to our cruise ship was very limited. I managed just five endemic songbirds. I could have given them all individual names. Had I



visited an offshore island with introduced predators I would have easily tripled this number. The best site was across the road from the Treaty of Waitangi Visitor Centre in the Bay of Islands. Mt Manganui at Tauranga was disappointing. We saw all four of the endemics at Napier Botanic

Gardens.

Introduced forest birds outnumber indigenous ones by a large margin.

Shorebirds are a slightly different proposition. The numbers of oystercatchers can boggle the mind. I was happy to see New Zealand dotterel right next to the wharf in the Bay of Islands and a single spotted shag while we were tied to the wharf in the harbour at Napier.



Seabirds

Tropical cyclones are rarely high on a holiday wish list. For those folk with an interest in seabirds they present

an opportunity. Seabirds are often displaced, deliberately or otherwise, by storm fronts or low pressure systems. For us whilst a few tropical species were seen further south than might be expected the stormy conditions made many others difficult to identify.

The eastern side of Cook Strait was nuts. Thousands of seabirds could be seen scattered all over the sea. It was difficult to focus on individuals when so much was happening at once. One deep sea trawler had an estimated 700-800 albatrosses behind it – and this was the worst time of year for albatrosses! I have never seen such a variety of seabirds in the one place. And given that the majority of them were albatrosses they would have won the “greatest bird biomass I’ve ever seen” contest easily.

The ship’s captain would have been my newest best friend had he stopped for a couple of hours and berleyed up....

There were mystery birds seen every day. Some were clearly rarities that don’t much like ships.

Bird*	Off Sydney	West Tasman	Central Tasman	Coastal NZ	East Cook’s Strait	West Cook’s Strait	Land / shore
	(forward only)	(return only)					
California quail							8B, 10T
Feral Goose							7A
Mallard							6B, 30N
Southern Royal Albatross					20+		
Northern Royal Albatross					8		

Bird*	Off Sydney	West Tasman	Central Tasman	Coastal NZ	East Cook's	West Cook's	Land / shore
Antipodean Albatross			1R		2		
Wandering Albatross (<i>exulans</i>)		3					
White-capped Albatross					200+		
Salvin's Albatross					20+		
<i>Unidentified albatross</i>					700+		
Northern Giant Petrel					1		
Cape Petrel					2		
Providence Petrel	1						
Grey-faced Petrel	60+		100+F, 25R	30+	1+		
White-necked Petrel			2F				
Mottled Petrel			2R				
Black-winged Petrel		3	35+F				
Cook's Petrel	1			40+	5		
Pycroft's Petrel				80+			
Gould's Petrel		7	1F	1			
Stejneger's Petrel						1	
Fairy Prion					30+		
Broad-billed Prion				1	3		
<i>Unidentified Prion</i>				1	40+	25+	
<i>Unidentified Pterodroma</i>	2	4	15+F		lots		
Westland Petrel					1		
Buller's Shearwater			1F	500+	30+	10	
Wedge-tailed Shearwater	80+		50+F, 5R				
Sooty Shearwater			1R		10		
Short-tailed Shearwater	5						
Flesh-footed Shearwater				10	15		
Fluttering Shearwater				10	20+		
Hutton's Shearwater	1						
White-faced Storm-Petrel			3F	1			
Gray-backed Storm-Petrel				3			
Red-tailed Tropicbird	1					1	

Bird*	Off Sydney	West Tasman	Central Tasman	Coastal NZ	East Cook's	West Cook's	Land / shore
Bellbird							1N
New Zealand Fantail							~30
Eurasian Starling							10
Common Myna							~40
Eurasian Blackbird							100+
Song Thrush							4
Dunnock							2
House Sparrow							150+
Chaffinch							12
European Goldfinch							6
Greenfinch							5
Yellowhammer							6

*in the order shown in *The Hand Guide to the Birds of New Zealand* by Robertson and Heather

B - Bay of Islands

A - Auckland

T - Tauranga

N – Napier

F – Forward journey

R – Return journey

Sea Monsters

Given the amount of time I spent staring at the sea, the sea monster count was a shocker – until the last day at sea. I've learnt just a few things regarding looking for mammals at sea. These are:

- Sea monsters wait for you to go to the toilet,
- They pop up in front of people that don't care to see them, and
- They know exactly when you need to get that first beer, so four PM is the best time to trick them.

By Day 9 I'd seen:

- One small pod of **common dolphins** off Sydney,

- Two distant unidentified whales breaching in the middle of the Tasman Sea in a gale,
- A few **bottlenosed dolphins** off the Bay of Islands,
- A male **New Zealand fur seal** hauled out at Tauranga,
- A single **sperm whale** east of Cook Strait, and
- Ten or twelve **dusky dolphins** 200nm west of the Cook Strait – okay, that one made me happy.



If I hadn't already decided to book another cruise Day 10 made my mind up. We were in the deepest part of the Tasman Sea and the wind had dropped to less than five knots from the south-east. The sea was quite flat. The occasional wandering albatross started to pop up. Now these guys like to feed on dead stuff. They wouldn't be hanging about in a windless part of the sea for the sake of the scenery. I mentioned this to

Mayette.

Minutes later she made a start on her beaked whale list when six **Blainville's beaked whales** were seen logging 200m away. These were in 5000m of water 232 nautical miles out and 110 degrees from Sydney.

At 215nm were five **short-finned pilot whales** just 50m from the ship and seemingly oblivious to its presence.

The 190nm mark saw our first pod of three **Gray's beaked whales** 200m away, porpoising in the direction of a wandering albatross and some grey-faced petrels. These were so full of food they couldn't fly. At 175nm a second pod of four **Gray's beaked whales** slid down the other side of the ship close by and in perfect light. Nearby were seven Gould's petrels in company with three wedge-tailed shearwaters and a grey-faced petrel feeding on an oil slick. Mayette's beaked whale #2.

Others on the ship reported tuna leaping out of the water on the other side. One chap said he saw three pods of whales and some dolphins but he couldn't describe them.

At 164nm out a distant **sperm whale** could be seen blowing.

The light had failed by 155nm. I made an important decision. Until this point in the cruise I had felt sated with just the two pints of beer each day. Out of the utmost respect for beaked whales, and nothing else, this wasn't going to be one of those days. I started plotting who I'd call when I reached port and in which order.....

There is a strong possibility I will book the same cruise next year.



Diary

Day 1 – 28 January 2018

I'd never been a cruise before and was looking forward to it. The opinions of friends varied but were mostly negative. High on the list of possibilities was being trapped by very large people as they grazed though crowded food troughs in preparation to being violently ill from pathogens only found on cruise ships.

Mayette joined me for our 25th wedding anniversary celebration on the Carnival Spirit, ironically the very ship I was once offered employment as the resident naturalist.

We had opted for an early check-in (1230) for our 1730 departure. This was on the basis that we weren't doing anything else and we could familiarise ourselves with some of the ship. As it happened they allowed us on the ship at 1130. The check-in process was hassle-free.

We booked our only pre-paid shore excursion at the Shore Excursions desk and started making friends with some of the Filipino, Indonesian, Peruvian and Indian crew.

I was a little surprised that the free food restaurants were already in full swing for lunch. I naively thought that this would only happen after we left the wharf. By midday or so one large, old and barely held together lady had already over-eaten and had made a deposit on herself and the carpet. Maybe this was Penrith RSL after all?

The crew have their country of origin written under their names on their name badges. So I managed to practise my severely limited Thai, Bahasa, Uzbeki, Troy and Atlantis language skills.

I met Carol, from Arizona and wife of the ship's doctor, on Deck 10 as we pattered out of Sydney Harbour. We were to have regular long chats about the state of the world and American politics. Carol explained that passengers on Carnival's American-based ships were much larger than their Australian counterparts (!!!) and were incredibly culturally insensitive when it came to how they treated the crew. Wow.

Just when I thought I'd seen everything a shadow fell over me. This guy had other large folk staring. He had his own postcode and had sub-let some of the valleys between the larger rolls of flab.



Surely a beer was needed prior to the compulsory safety briefing. The said briefing was the most unsafe activity on the whole cruise.... In an emergency it would be hilarious to watch a few tiny Filipino and Balinese control the seething hordes of people that would need lots of prior notice to stop moving in any particular direction.

We dispensed with our pilot a mile or so off Sydney Heads and in doing so allowed the watercraft to motor up to its 22 knot cruising speed.

Short-beaked common dolphins were seen in attendance with wedge-tailed shearwaters and a red-tailed tropicbird.

Our "stateroom", #6131, was awesome. This cabin has a balcony, allowing for some great birdwatching

from a stable platform. A red-tailed tropicbird, Cook's petrel and various other seabirds were sighted before the light failed.

Mayette had survived her earlier dizziness and was starting to enjoy herself.

Day 2 – 29th January 2018

Comfortable beds delivered a fair night's sleep. To be honest I was too excited to sleep very well – this from looking forward too much to birding in the central Tasman Sea. The hours

melted away as I stared into the middle distance. Just 15 knots of northeast wind made conditions pleasant. This was to change as we chased down a tropical cyclone in our path.

Grey-faced petrels were scattered all over the sea. These were to be by far the most common open ocean bird seen on the cruise. There were enough other bits and pieces to keep me interested. These included a white tern, and Cook's and Gould's petrels.

The wind increased to 25 knots as the day wore on.

One of the crew, Charmaine, gave Mayette some anti-seasickness pills. This improved her health and her mood immeasurably.

Two very large whales breached a couple of times a long way from the ship. They couldn't be identified. A white-necked petrel flew nearby.

Day 3 – 30th January 2018

The night wasn't all that pretty. Ex-Tropical Cyclone Fehi was tracking into our path. This system later trashed Nelson on New Zealand's South Island and caused widespread flooding elsewhere. The wind had increased to 30 knots from the east and the sea was rising to four metres or so. Dawn was replaced by low cloud and rain.

This was our wedding anniversary day. I greeted Mayette and sneaked upstairs for a coffee. Not a bird to be seen. Nor were there any people. Oh no, maybe someone had killed an albatross!? Come to think of it I hadn't seen any.

A lovely cooked breakfast preceded a morning of staring at the rising sea. Lots of black-winged petrels and a few white-faced storm-petrels and others were seen feeding on an oil slick. This was probably as a result of a tuna getting smashed by something much larger as it considered its sins while attached to a nearby long-line. The ship ran over the said line. I paid a visit to the stern to see if we had several kilometres of dead fish trolling behind us. Such was not the case.

The ship had slowed slightly to 19.9 knots with a 36 knot easterly headwind. This made it physically impossible to walk to the bow.

Mayette was talking to everyone she crossed paths with. Meanwhile Putu, our gay Balinese cabin steward had decorated our room with balloons, condoms, origami towels and whiteboard marker. Actually I lied – there were no condoms. No need for that sort of thing.



Day 4 – 31st January 2018

I was amazed that Mayette had slept well enough during a wild night at sea. The ship ploughed through the swells admirably.

The sea and sky were mostly gray as we approached the northern tip of New Zealand. The wind had dropped and huge numbers of Pycroft's petrels could be seen along with a few gray-backed storm-petrels.

As we approached the Bay of Islands, hundreds of Buller's shearwaters, kelp gulls, gannets, a lone black-billed gull, white-fronted terns and a few other stragglers came into view.

The ship is too big to dock anywhere in the Bay of Islands so out went the starboard anchor. The ship was kept in position by rotating the azipods. Tenders (the ship's lifeboats) were used to ferry passengers to shore.

We left the Carnival Spirit at 0930 for the shore at Paihia. Here we transferred to a fancy new catamaran for our Hole-in-the-Wall and Bay of Islands tour. The skipper dropped a few hints about the inclemency of the weather as we left the wharf. I knew then that we wouldn't get the



tour we paid for.

Russel, the one-time New Zealand capital was visited along with a spot where Captain Cook bothered to stop. Myriad other islets and coves of historic significance were pointed out. Places where French people were slaughtered by Maoris were high on the list. A very pretty part of the world indeed.



After making a sloppy effort of getting to sea, the skipper abandoned the tour in the “interests of passenger safety” and strategically dumped us, not back where the tender vessels docked, but in the middle of town. We got straight onto a shuttle bus. Mayette went onto the ship. I went a’roaming.

Large numbers of South Island pied and variable oystercatchers were loafing about on a paddock.

Behind the Treaty of Waitangi Visitor Centre is a patch of native forest with birds in it. Across the road from this is a trail to a waterfall with even more forest and more birds. To be honest there aren’t that many more birds because this isn’t possible in the introduced predator paradise that is New Zealand. Managed to see many tuis, grey warblers, New Zealand fantails and two magnificent New Zealand pigeons. Also met some lovely local people out for a stroll.

The forest is weird with nothing aside from tree ferns that looked vaguely familiar. This same forest is stocked with so many exotic birds it made my head spin. Blackbirds, other thrushes, various seedeaters and coveys of California quail all provided distraction.



A New Zealand dotterel was seen right next the wharf. Here I queued for an hour to get onto a tender. The rough seas and rising wind made the tendering process difficult. Apparently two cruise ships in recent days had cancelled their Bay of Islands stop altogether.

We were advised that the following day's weather was really going to crap. Never mind, all in all we'd had an excellent day with a bit of everything. 42 different birds were seen. Not too shabby.

We potted out of the bay just before dark. A small pod of bottlenosed dolphins rode the bow for a minute or two.

As the wind picked up to 43 knots we passed the Hole-in-the-Wall feature that we failed to visit earlier.

Day 5 – 1st February 2018



Maori war canoe, 1836, 100 warriors, one bit of wood!

At 0600 we docked in downtown Auckland. The MS Maasdam was moored nearby. The weather wasn't pretty with a strong wind and occasional showers.

We strolled 3km to the fabulous Auckland Museum. This had been recommended to me by various friends as being worth a visit. It certainly was. There are so many exhibits that interested me that I knew not where to look. The standout item was a Maori war canoe carved in 1836 from a single piece of wood. This monster housed 100 Maori warriors.

I believe I read or heard somewhere that the Auckland Museum has the largest display of Maori and Pacific Island art and artefacts in the

world. After a couple of hours we couldn't absorb any more information and trundled off in search of a bus to take us back to the ship.

The city is very clean and modern. There are some beautiful parks and gardens. Noice.

A small booth on the harbour sold tours to a small offshore island that had been restocked with New Zealand endemic birds. I would have loved to have gone there. Serendipitously

the day's ferry was cancelled due to high seas so I didn't have to choose between the island and the museum... hmm, next year?



moa and Australian senior

We arrived at the ship at the same time as the rain. It didn't stop for the rest of the day but this hardly mattered. We weren't camping after all...

The afternoon was spent relaxing and talking about cruising with Alan and Sue Partelle from Shoalhaven Heads. We became firm friends with this happy couple.

We departed Auckland at 1840. A 50 knot northerly gale was howling as we traversed a large bay before making a right hand turn for our next port, Tauranga. And for the first time since we left Sydney we had a following sea.

Day 6 – 2nd February 2018

I woke just as we were mooring at Tauranga. Sunny patches with no wind.

I walked to Mount Manganui after a hurried breakfast. The plan was to return and pick up Mayette after a couple of hours chasing birds on the mountain's remnant forest. I didn't find any "new" birds but met a number of chatty and pleasant locals who walk or jog up the hill as their daily exercise. Apparently this partially sheep infested peak sees over one million visits a year.

Most of the birds on the mountain are exotic. There were a few tuis, grey warblers and fantails. A single shining cuckoo was heard.

I collected Mayette but she was struggling with her frozen shoulder amongst other things and soon returned to the ship. I wandered the low trail around the headland, stopping only to photograph a New Zealand fur seal hauled out on the rocks. Continuing along a nearby beach and onto an adjacent headland I met a professional bush regenerator who was

pondering the local bush's first class collection of invasive weeds. We chewed the fat on exotic plants and animals for an hour or so. Mark showed me some Maori engravings and seabird nesting burrows. Nice guy.



I pondered going for a swim but the logistics of having my belongings safely secured did my head in. I ended up doing 40 laps in one of the ship's pools. That translates to 200m. I would have kept going except that a largish chap immersed himself

in the pool, displacing most of its water.

A slothful afternoon of crosswords, gasbagging and beer.

We left Tauranga at 1730. This allowed a few hours of staring at the sea. For the first 30km not a single vertebrate was seen save for one flying fish.



Eventually a good number of Pycroft's/Cook's petrels came into view. An early night.

Day 7 – 3rd February 2018

Woke late at 0700! Gale force easterly winds had put the Carnival Spirit behind schedule. For the first time it was cool enough for a jacket to be needed.

Our late arrival into Napier provided the advantage of more time to sea-watch. However the result was disappointing. No cetaceans were seen and aside from Pycroft's/Cook's petrels, very few birds. To this point I hadn't seen a single school of baitfish in New Zealand waters.

The ship docked in the pokey harbour at Napier at 1115. Incredible that the vessel could get into the tiny space at all. We caught the shuttle bus to the city and walked to Napier Botanic Gardens. The gardens were established in 1855. Well worth a visit, peaceful and almost no people. There are four endemic birds – tui, bellbird, NZ fantail and NZ pigeon. We saw them all along with hundreds of exotic birds. Bellbird was new for me.



We strolled back to town and having nothing better to do went back to the ship for a late lunch. Another 40 laps in the pool.

Every day Mayette would insist that we partake of the “fine dining” experience in the Empire Restaurant for dinner. Every day we couldn’t be bothered as the buffet food was so good!

Remarkably we exited Napier “harbour” at 1945 without hitting or killing anything. We had now left New Zealand for the last time. I expected we’d pass through Cook’s Strait during the night. This was not to be the case.

Day 8 – 4th February 2018

Land on the starboard bow! So we hadn’t passed Cook Strait after all. This was great news – a Cook Strait pelagic. In the pre-dawn gloom a southern royal albatross appeared from my bed. Quick, get on deck!

It was difficult to know where to look. Between 700 and 800 albatrosses could be seen behind a deep-sea trawler (that sensibly moved out of our path) and scattered elsewhere across the fairly placid sea. Fifteen or so different seabirds were present at the same time. Most of these were white-capped albatrosses. Both southern and northern royals, Antipodean and Salvin’s were identified. Myriad petrels, prions and shearwaters gave them company. A lone sperm whale appeared in 1080 metres off the port bow. Others saw a small pod of dolphins on the starboard side. Bugger.



The Cook Strait is quite narrow. Both North and South Island can be seen in one camera shot. We passed the mid-point at 0800 and emerged in a relatively shallow bay that stretches for 150nm or more without getting much deeper than 100m. Gannets and Buller's shearwaters prevailed here with only four albatrosses seen. A red-tailed tropicbird and two fur seals passed near to the ship.



The breeze, such as it was, had dropped away to nothing. Sadly the wildlife had gone elsewhere too. We strolled the ship, briefly investing (rather poorly) in some poker machines in the casino, and marvelling at what the other passengers were getting on with. I mused how sad I would be to get off the ship in a way that never happens with me and aeroplanes.

Back to my lonely vigil and finally a pod of dusky dolphins, probably the world's most active sea "monster" hove into view, leaping clear of the water before vanishing, possibly for ever. These were 200nm clear of the Strait. I had given up hope of seeing them.

For mine it was the most exciting day at sea for many years – all the more as I wasn't expecting it.

Day 9 – 5th February 2018

I tried my very best not to wake early. This failed.

A 20kn south-westerly whipped up a few white-caps. I was certain this was our last day at sea and was getting my head around the end of our holiday. A pleasant member of the smoking caste informed me that this wasn't the case. Although other passengers agreed with me. Hmmm. I'll ask the crew. Nope – one more day at sea. Yay! How had I got this minor detail so wrong? Well, cruises advertise on the basis of the number of nights, not days, like other travel companies.

The ship had slowed considerably, to 16 knots. This is because the only time the ship can dock in Sydney is in the early morning. So getting in a half day or some hours early or late doesn't work as there will be another cruise ship in the way. Unlike Indonesian ferries you don't tend to walk across several cruise ships pasted together.

Intrigue. Alan told me that after the 1980s theme night in the theatre some boys (allegedly from Bankstown) put the hard word on some girls in one of the pools after the show. The girls didn't like it. The boys were locked in their rooms by security for the duration of the cruise.

A report circulated the ship that a Mass Stranding Event was taking place at the rear of the ship! Quick – grab camera, let's go. I'd never seen one of these. It turns out that there is an eight minute gap between the end of breakfast and the start of lunch. Many of the mega-



fauna caste rush to disrobe and get a quick taste of sunburn before reclaiming their spots in the buffet. As my old boss was want to say "all that meat and no potatoes". I now know why people that attend mass strandings are psychologically impacted.

A check of my on-board account showed that I

had bought two bourbons at a bar that I'd never even heard of. I interviewed Vesna at Guest Services and she cancelled the charge.

The bar staff know me as "Gilimanuk Steve" after the western Balinese town. This was an in-joke enjoyed by the bar and myself and utterly incomprehensible to other patrons. Loved it.

Meanwhile Mayette's retinue of Indonesian and Filipino friends continued to grow. Many of them had been invited to stay with us.....

Seabirds were thin on the water with a Stejneger's petrel the standout highlight. Grey-faced petrels were generally not too far away but there was little else.

Day 10 - 6th February 2018

BONUS DAY AT SEA!

One of the joys of cruising is that you don't have to make too many decisions. The captain makes most of them: where to go and how fast, who to marry, imprison, shoot etc. The consequences of a poor understanding of the itinerary are not too severe. In this case I would have woken to find that the ship was not at Circular Quay. It wasn't as if I could have got off the ship a day early by mistake.....

I write my notes, coffee in hand as the first of the day's grey-faced petrels wheels past with the sun pondering its rising options over my right shoulder. I looked over a calm sea with a light southerly breeze that was to drop off to nothing as the day progressed. A spectacular rainbow and rain-shower was a harbinger, perhaps, of things to come. The morning was quiet with just two mottled petrels being the best of the birds.



After lunch we passed through 5000m of water. Google Earth shows some massive seamounts in this area. A pod of Blainville's beaked whales logged close to the ship in milky calm waters. Their tiny very triangular dorsal fins, size, colour and amazingly blotched appearance likely rules out any other beaked whale.

Shortly thereafter a distinctive current line was seen – the only one on the whole voyage. A wandering albatross patrolled it.

Others in the ship soon reported to me they'd seen jumping tuna along with dolphins and whales. A very small group of short-finned pilot whales approached the ship to within 50m.

A pod of Gray's beaked whales showed well, porpoising on the port side of the ship but going astern. I had seen these animals years ago off Royal National Park.

A feeding wandering albatross in the company of Gould's petrels and wedge-tailed shearwaters had me telling Mayette that more sea monsters were about. Almost immediately another pod of Gray's beaked whales pattered astern with great views in perfect light on the starboard side of the ship. A lone sperm whale bounced along the surface in the distance. Then the sun went down. Damn.

A phenomenal day of wildlife, chatting, beer and saying goodbye to too many new friends. I tipped our housekeepers and barmen. Quite sad – almost teary knowing that the cruise had for all intents and purposes come to an end. I couldn't get over it – three beaked whale sightings in one afternoon!



Day 11 – 7th February 2018

We docked in Sydney Harbour just before sunrise. For once I was one of those dudes on the cruise ship as others went to work. We were in no hurry to leave. When we did so, a little after 0700, we found ourselves at the railway station within ten minutes. Very slick. Well done carnival Cruise Lines – I'll give you 9.5 out of 10.

We went home and booked our next cruise – to Vanuatu and New Caledonia in April.



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