

# Clouds clearing

After a dip in ship visits over recent years, is the tide turning for New Zealand's cruising fortunes?

Jane Archer reports

**A**s an island nation with miles of coastline and everything from history and culture to wildlife and wine, New Zealand is made for cruising. Passengers can visit geothermal parks with steaming rocks and bubbling mud pools, wander botanic gardens that are filled with exotic plants, go hiking and explore the self-styled art deco capital of the world.

However, despite the fact that the country has so much to attract cruisers keen to journey Down Under, several cruise lines have left its shores and those of its neighbour, Australia, where most New Zealand cruises start or end.

Cunard, Disney Cruise Line and Virgin Voyages no longer call here, while Carnival Cruise Line is switching *Carnival Adventure* from year-round sailings in Australia and New Zealand to a seasonal operation from April 2028. Carnival cited "the uncertain regulatory environment in Australia and New Zealand" among its reasons.

In all, ship visits in 2025-26 are down 41%, according to New Zealand Cruise Association chief executive Jacqui Lloyd, resulting in a massive fall in the income cruising generates. The most recent figures show the total value of the cruise industry to the country's economy dropped 9.8% in 2024-25 to £535 million.

But that seems to be helping to turn the tide for the New Zealand cruise industry, with a proposed government ban on cruise ships entering Milford Sound – a highlight of many itineraries – now dropped, and a strategic plan to grow cruise income by 2040. Costs remain relatively high and biofouling regulations are strict, but with nearly 10,000 jobs dependent on the cruise sector, Lloyd says the government has recognised that cruise "delivers value for the economy, environment and communities".

On a recent sailing around the country, the shift was evident: volunteers are on hand in ports with maps and advice for passengers, while shops have signs outside welcoming cruisers with offers and discounts. ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## CRUISE | NEW ZEALAND

### SIGHTS IN *the* SOUNDS

If wind and weather allow, most cruises around South

Island aim to include a few hours of scenic sailing in the sounds (which are actually fiords – spelt with an i in New Zealand – but

misnamed by British explorers of old). Milford is the most spectacular, with soaring peaks and tumbling waterfalls. Doubtful Sound and Dusky Sound, named by Captain Cook because he didn't think he could navigate inside one and first saw the other at dusk, are less dramatic but beautiful nonetheless.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Azamara Quest in Christchurch; Waitangi Treaty Grounds; Majestic Princess in Milford Sound

PICTURES: Jenna Taplin-Jenna Lyn Photography; Johnny Hendrikus; M Crawford



### KIWI CRUISING

Despite some lines reducing their focus on this region, many still sail to New Zealand between December and March, the southern hemisphere summer. Cruises are typically two weeks long and most depart from Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane.

Big-ship options include Norwegian Cruise Line, which has 11-day sailings between Sydney and Auckland from £1,475 (excluding flights) in February 2027, Royal Caribbean International, Carnival, Celebrity Cruises and Holland America Line.

Princess Cruises is so buoyed by the more welcoming environment that it has two ships sailing round-trip from Sydney and Brisbane to New Zealand, or one-way between Sydney and Auckland. Prices start from £1,329 for 14 days departing from Brisbane in February 2027, excluding flights.

In the smaller ship arena, Oceania Cruises slips a 17-day voyage from Perth to Auckland (departing January 7, 2027) in among a few sailings between

Sydney and Auckland. Viking also has various 15-day cruises between Sydney and Auckland.

Unusually, expedition line Swan Hellenic skips the Australia leg, instead offering a 13-night New Zealand-only cruise from Dunedin to Auckland departing March 8, 2027.

Wait until 2028 and Azamara Cruises does the same, offering 14 and 10-night New Zealand Intensive cruises round-trip from Auckland in January and February 2028, starting from £2,889 and £2,519 respectively, excluding flights. Azamara also sails between Sydney or Melbourne and Auckland.

In the all-inclusive luxury sphere, Silversea has the greatest choice of Australia and New Zealand cruises. Regent Seven Seas Cruises and Crystal have a few sailings, while Seabourn is visiting New Zealand on its 2027 world cruise.

### NORTH AND SOUTH

Most itineraries tick off Tauranga, Napier, Wellington, Lyttelton (the port for Christchurch) and Port Chalmers (for Dunedin),

and include a day of scenic cruising in Milford, Doubtful and Dusky Sounds in the Fiordland.

A few visit the beautiful Bay of Islands, from where passengers can visit the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, – the first pact between the Māoris and British was signed here in 1840. Silversea adds Gisborne, where Captain Cook first set foot in New Zealand – it has museums and monuments exploring interactions between the Indigenous population and European settlers – and Akaroa (near Christchurch), where wildlife tours go in search of dolphins and white-flipped penguins.

Oceania offers art, food and sheep-shearing demos on calls into Timaru, while Azamara goes to Picton for wine, kayaking and mussel-tasting. In action-packed Auckland, daring souls can ascend the Sky Tower for a base-jump-style thrill at 192m, though Princess offers a relaxed alternative with a tour of Waiheke Island and its wineries.

In Tauranga, clients can enjoy beach time or a Māori cultural tour that ends with a haka ceremonial

dance. Holland America Line has trips to Rotorua's Te Puia geothermal park, home to bubbling mud pools and the Pohutu geyser, which sends water shooting 30m into the air.

Popular excursions in Napier are wine tasting, with 60 wineries in the area, and wildlife-spotting, visiting the world's biggest mainland gannet colony at Cape Kidnappers. NCL offers both, plus a tour of Napier's art deco architecture, built after an earthquake in 1931 – free Hawke's Bay Museum tells the story.

In Christchurch, the Quake City exhibition recounts the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes, but fans of *The Hobbit* may prefer to visit Middle Earth. Farther south, boat tours from Port Chalmers look for albatross and blue penguins, while the historic Taieri Gorge Train rattles from Dunedin into Central Otago, past forests, over viaducts and through tunnels dug by hand. Princess has excursions featuring the train, sightseeing in Dunedin and visits to neo-Gothic Larnach Castle, which appeals to British visitors due to the region's Scottish links. **TW**