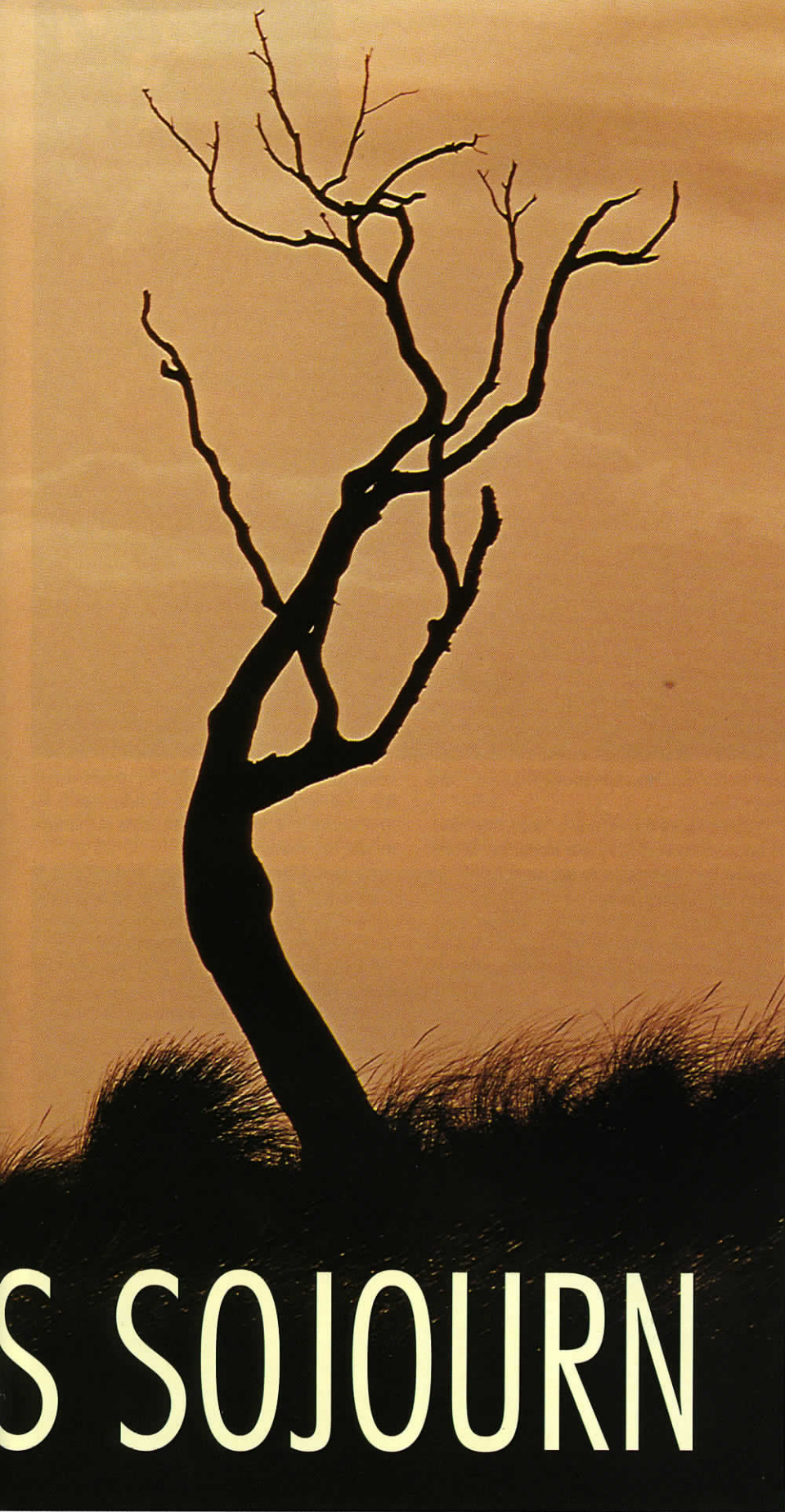


Even the international date-line avoids the Chathams. It kinks to the east to keep the islands in the same day as the rest of New Zealand, making it the first land in the world to see the sun—in summer at least.

Sun is not what most New Zealanders associate with the Chathams, although there is a surprise in store for those who view these wind-swept islands as a soggy land at the end of the weather forecast.

ROB GREENAWAY sojourns in New Zealand's remote eastern islands outpost.

A CHATHAM ISLAND



S SOJOURN

THE CHATHAM ISLANDS receive about as much rainfall as Nelson. This was encouragement enough to board a 1968 Mount Cook

Line Hawker Siddeley, lift over Canterbury's winter-white Port Hills and head out to sea on New Zealand's longest continuous domestic flight. The distance to Waitangi (Chatham's "capital") from Christchurch is the same as from Auckland to Dunedin.

We arrived at the Chathams equipped with mountain bikes and plenty of wet weather gear—the idea being to ride the main island's gravel byways. It was perhaps optimistic considering the season and the reported state of the roads.

HEADING TO THE CHATHAMS FOR ANY reason confuses some—even the booking agent. "What passports will you be travelling on," she asked. "We're only going to the Chathams," I replied.

"Yes, and will that be on New Zealand passports?"

Even though we knew that the Chathams were part of New Zealand, this request unsettled us. Perhaps we did have to present our passports—a recent and secret drive at independence perhaps?

The Chathams have to be New Zealand's final inhabited frontier, where families have lived for generations squeezing a tenuous lifestyle out of a lump of wind-sheared peat the size of Banks Peninsula—and of similar volcanic origin.

More recently a few get-rich quick harvesters have settled in to make their fortunes from crayfish and paua—pushing the average income to what the locals like to describe as four times the national average. But in the words of our host, John Sutherland of the Chatham Islands Lodge: "They came here twenty years ago to get a fast buck, and they're still here."

About 600 years earlier Moriori settled the islands and named the main one Rekohu, meaning misty skies. They were never prepared for the diseases brought by early Europeans and the weapons used by later warring Maori. The last full-blooded Moriori (but far from the last Moriori), Tommy Solomon, is remembered by a moulded concrete statue smiling out to sea, happy to be immune to the southerly squalls which regularly strike the coast. His memorial now marks the resurgence of Moriori identity, more than it does the death of one man.

The population of the Chathams has been falling recently, and currently stands at about



Mountain biking Chathams Island's network of gravel roads

700. Those remaining are becoming more independent, more imaginative in preserving their way of life—a few now focusing on tourism—but perhaps less tolerant of unprepared visitors.

“They take vehicles to places where even the locals wouldn’t dream of going,” said John as a friendly warning, before lending us his car. “We tow them out, so they can go somewhere else to get stuck, or lost.”

We got stuck, but we didn’t tell John. We got lost, but fortunately not in the car. Regular falls of hail and snow kept us off the mountain bikes for two days, but two days in a vehicle, at the least, was needed to get the lie of the land, to plan where the best mountain biking was, and to get personal advice from the locals. There is no better place for advice than the pub in Waitangi.

The local brew—Black Robin Beer—is fermented in Kaingaroa, the island’s most northerly fishing settlement. It’s a yeasty mixture, and at \$5 per 750ml plastic bottle, a costly drop.

We were arguing its good points (you have to go to the Chathams to drink it) and its bad points (you have to go to the Chathams to drink it) when a bearded man in studded leather approached.

The island is reputed to have the highest ratio of Harley Davidsons per head than any other community in the world, although

Gary in his leathers only looked the part and didn’t ride.

“You’re lucky to see snow here,” he said. “It hasn’t snowed here for decades. When was the last time it snowed here Bob?” he asked of a fishing friend playing the pokies.

“Last winter. And the winter before that,” Bob replied, without looking up.

“Yeah, that’s right. Do you want a game of pool?”

Gary played a poor game of pool—surprising, considering the amount of practice he should have had over winter. We joked that since we were both hopeless one had to be a pool shark lulling the other into a false

sense of security. I was careful to not upset the pub’s pool winners’ ladder and so graciously lost, but got all the tips necessary to see the main island.

“Stop at Blind Jim’s,” Gary advised. “That part of the lagoon is where the most fossilised sharks’ teeth wash up. And in this weather you’re likely to find bucket-loads.”

“We’ll have a look on the way to the dendroglyphs,” I said.

“Yeah, and have a look at the tree carvings while you’re there,” said Gary.

DENDROGLYPHS ARE CARVINGS MADE IN the trunks of living kopi trees by the Moriori, within the past 200 years. Generally a human figure with obvious ribs and a heart-shaped head, they are an icon of the Chathams.

Before farming became a prospect over a thousand were identified. Land clearing, stock damage, museum collections and fire have consumed all but a handful in three or four locations, and these by nature are temporary exhibits.

Their enigma gives the bleak island an unsettling presence, and as evening grew we were happy to leave the skeletal faces staring blindly into the past.

On Gary’s advice we checked out Blind Jim’s to find a wide patch in the gravel-and-pot-hole road system of the island. Here the molasses-coloured water of the lagoon lapped against coral-white sand. In amongst



Day of the Dendroglyphs—Elizabeth checks out the old Moriori tree carvings at Hapupu Reserve.

the weed we expected to find small, fossilised sharks' teeth said to be about 40-million years old. Gary could have been right about the bucket-loads, but someone else had just found them.

For the next several days squalls from the south battered the island, but each lasting only twenty minutes and interrupted by an hour or so of glorious, cold sunshine, always preceded by a sharp rainbow. Elizabeth calculated the weather to be a great improvement on Wellington.

During a pause in the weather we left the safety of the road to explore the northern edge of the island. Sun-drenched beaches we were promised, and so we found.

We skirted the clear brown waters of Lake Pateriki to reach a narrow bar which separated the lake from the sea, high-stepping it through the pig fern and dragging a sorry-looking sheep from a peat-stained stream on the way.

The sun shone, the sea was blue and for the first time that day we removed a layer of clothing, feeling the sun's heat cheating the windchill. To me this was wild, remote New Zealand at its best—rugged, coastal, deserted and sunny—less than an hour from a car (or a boat) but still requiring trendy, high-tech clothing.

When a windward rainbow warned of another squall we headed back. The white sand of the lake's lee shore was being flooded by wind-pushed water and the bar would soon broach. To speed our exit we chose the clear verge of the lake's edge. At several points small streams drained into the

lake and at each little delta the sand was soft—soft enough at one point to take my leg to the knee, without any resistance. One wet sock—hardly a disaster. I continued on and headed across what looked like an easy stretch of beach and stumbled into quicksand—unexpected, carnivorous and unstable liquid sand—like in the old cowboy movies but without the warning signs.

The sand grains (shell mostly) were large—about a millimetre or more in diameter—and buoyed by a flow of water escaping from under the nearby cover of peat. I didn't examine this fact until sitting, dripping, on a nearby lump of sedge that I'd grabbed on the way down. The beach resumed its flat appearance as if nothing had been there. It would probably look the same if we'd been under it.

That's soft adventure, Chatham style, I guess.

Another day passed, conditions cleared, the wind dropped and we dragged the mountain bikes out for an airing. The highest point of the Chathams is 287 metres above sea level, the roads are rough but tidy and almost deserted, the views are stunning and the sense of discovery still very much alive. In short, a perfect place for a mountain bike.

While cruising along a sea of bracken, by rivers the colour of Monteiths beer, exploring white, sandy beaches framed by banks of black columnar-jointed rhyolite—like fossilised bees' nests, we counted our blessings.

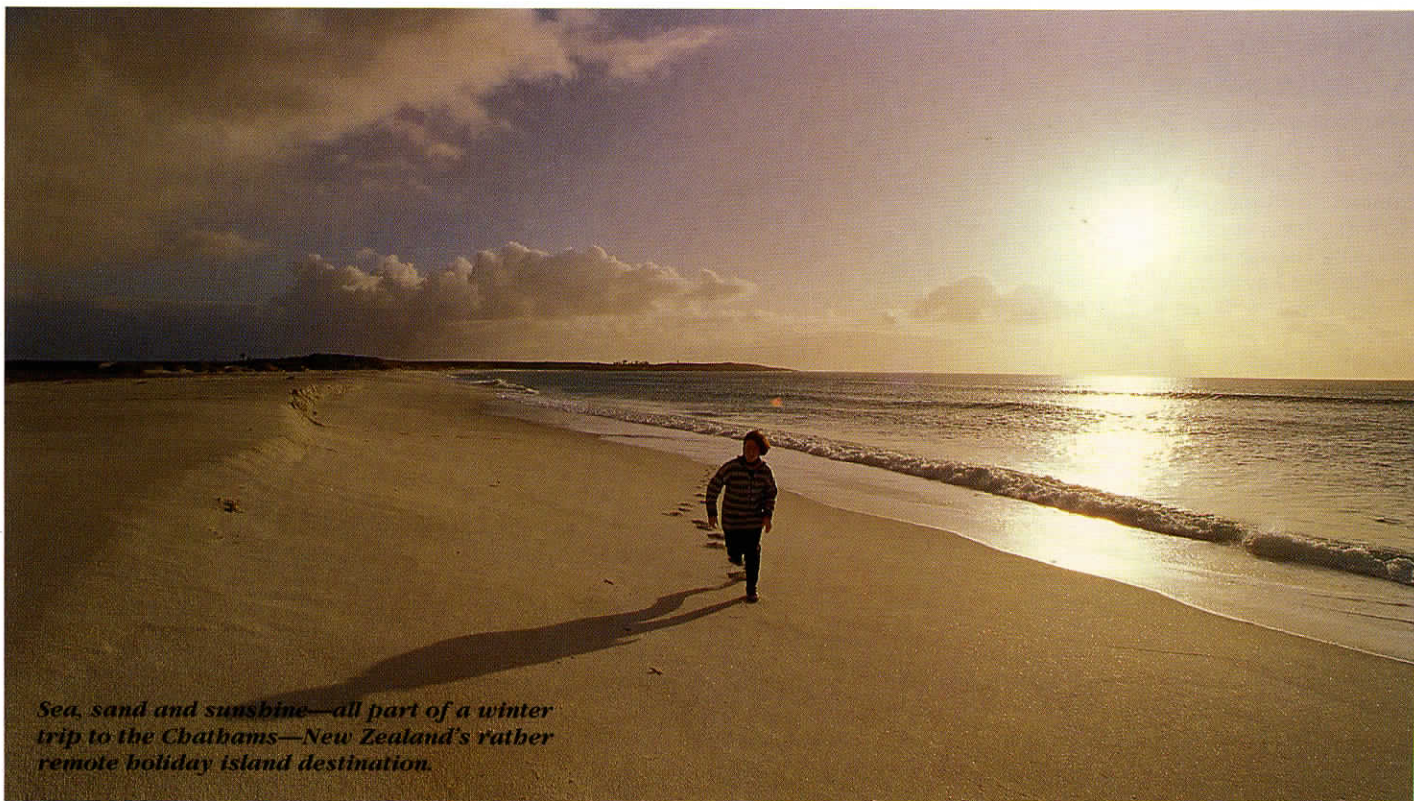
Winter—two people, two bicycles—and the entire island to ourselves. ☼

DOING IT

TO VISIT the Chathams fly with the *Mount Cook Line* on their twice weekly schedule from Christchurch or Wellington. Besides the beginning and end of the school holidays there is unlikely to be much competition for seats (on the 44-seater *Mount Cook Line* Hawker Siddeley there were seven passengers on the way out and four on the return, including us).

You'll be paying \$344 each way for a direct flight, and \$418 if the schedule requires you doing a dog-leg through either Wellington or Christchurch. Note that there could also be a charge per mountain bike. There are no formed camping areas on the islands and you are best accommodated at the *Chatham Island Lodge* (ph 03-305 0196) for \$80 share twin per night (they also have a self-contained cottage that sleeps six for \$100 per night), the *Hotel Chathams* ('the pub', ph 03-305 0048) for \$78 share twin per night, or the *Tuanui Motels* (ph 03-305 0352) for \$55 share twin per night. Meals are available at them all.

There is no public transport, no public loos, and plenty of gravel roads. The *Lonely Planet* guide to New Zealand suggests hitch hiking is "quite easy" on the Chathams—surely the result of a coincidence rather than a trend. If you want good advice on what to do, talk with the locals—although a tourism plan is currently being formulated for the island and more structured information is probably forthcoming.



Sea, sand and sunshine—all part of a winter trip to the Chathams—New Zealand's rather remote holiday island destination.