

FAIR CHASE

BY GREG MORTON

A day out with the locals

The MV Aari heads out of lovely Moeraki for productive fishing grounds.

The trip south had already been very successful by the time I reached Moeraki, a detour in behind Oamaru seeing a red deer and pig squeezed into the two chilly bins onboard.

North Otago is a hunting, shooting and fishing paradise, one I enjoy visiting often. The Waitaki River is the main waterway for trout, salmon and kahawai; the Kakanui Range is a great deer-hunting location; big boars live in the Herbert Forest; wild sheep inhabit the Waianakarua River headwaters; paradise ducks are commonplace; sea-run trout and whitebait push into smaller rivers such as the Shag; and offshore there is superb blue cod fishing. What's not to like?

I arrived at the Moeraki Camping Ground mid-afternoon and noticed immediately what a calm day it was. While that made me feel hopeful for another calm start to my charter-fishing session the following day, I had a faint sense that it was a calm day wasted.

I spent the next couple of hours turning big hunks of venison and wild pork into smaller bagged hunks of venison and wild pork, and popped the result into the camp freezer. Fishing gear was then extracted and readied for the morrow.

I always go out with local company Moeraki Fishing Charters, owned by Callum and Kirsten Buchanan, though this trip I would be on their new boat, the MV Aari. This is the boat blurb taken off their website, www.moerakifishingcharters.co.nz: 'The Aari is a 40-foot alloy vessel and has a large deck space and excellent on-board facilities, including good toilet

facilities, large kitchen and inside seating area, full cover out the back and drop-down covers, high deck railings along with brand new rods and Alvey reels. The Aari is surveyed to take groups of up to 15 passengers.'

Callum and Kirsten own a house in nearby Hampden, and after quite a few years running this business, they can now be regarded as locals. Their other boat is the *Kiwa*, which they still use for smaller charters.

The next morning I was pleased to see another calm day – though I had got things right by just one day, with Callum cancelling the following couple of charters as a mean southerly was on its way.

The next angler to jump on board was Lesley, who I recognised immediately as a staff member at the college where I teach. We both did the "Fancy meeting you here!" greeting, but it was me who was the interloper, and she the local. Lesley has a long history of Moeraki camping holidays behind her, and now owns a home in Hampden as well. Every spare moment she abandons Christchurch and heads south.

Soon after, several other clients boarded, and we headed out.

I chewed the fat with Callum for a bit and commented on his new boat's yellow colour. He laughed and said many of his clients warned him he

may have bought a lemon. That is not the case, and the boat performed perfectly.

Describing blue cod fishing is not hard and needs few words: drop, strike, wind, boat – and then do it all again. The tricky part rests with Callum; he has to put us on the fish, which he does from past experience using his store of recorded hotspots plus the fruits of a bit of recent prospecting.

We started steadily, a few good cod coming over the side before a tide change saw the fishing slow. New spots were tried, but the numbers boated were fair rather than great. Species landed included blue cod, sea perch, a gurnard, red cod, dogfish, school shark, an octopus and a large skate.

We persevered, but it was the next tide change that brought the fish on. Callum saw some interesting fish sign, got us to prospect the spot, and it was all on, with just about every drop resulting in a double of big, fat blue cod. Callum himself said it was the fastest fishing he had seen at Moeraki, and in no time our quota was full.

I was fishing alongside Lesley and her time on the water was clearly evident. Cod were coming over the rail at a steady rate and she landed several doubles. In no time at all we were steaming back in. The filleting took our deckie a while as there was a lot of fish; full bags of delicious cod were distributed amongst us later on.



On returning to the wharf, the next local to put in an appearance was a huge sea lion which wallowed just below us. He was massive, and apparently has made the harbour his home. The region has no shortage of New Zealand fur seals, but not many sea lions. His nickname is Louie.

Lesley with a big blue cod.

Sea lions are less fearful of humans than fur seals, so can be quite intimidating when they boldly approach people. Feeding them is not a good idea, because they might join you in the boat looking for more food. A couple of these animals used to live at the Waitaki River mouth a few years back, and once I blundered onto a male as he slept. He reared up and roared, and literally told me to 'go elsewhere'. I did. Sadly, they are often caught in squid nets and are considered a threatened species.

I offered Lesley some of the venison and pork, so she got to take a mixed bag of wild food home with her. It had been a great day out, and I continued my circular trip through to Central Otago (another wild game paradise) to drop off some wild game at my parents before heading back a couple of days later to Christchurch – through game-rich South Canterbury.



Louie the sea lion.



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