



*Elegant evening dining at Ratimera Bay for a Steam Punk dress up pilgrimage in 2013, perfect for everything except the date. Sadly, Paul and Karen Grant were a week ahead of schedule. Backdrop of a tranquil Queen Charlotte Sounds at dusk.*

It was well attended but, with a blustery forecast, we backtracked to a superb Department of Conservation campsite at Ratimera Bay, a lovely golden sandy beach, freshly mown lawn and clumps of native bush to provide tent shelter from a rather strong northerly.

Late evening, we were gathered around a driftwood fire when the Phantom, who was clad in a slinky, head to ankle, black, plastic ensemble with only the whites of his eyes and pink of his lips visible, appeared out of the night towing a river kayak. His appearance was accompanied by suitable incantations and chants from those assembled. After a ceremonial throwing of gravel and small stones accompanied by more incantations, the kayak was devoured by fire and the Phantom mysteriously vanished back into the night from whence he had first appeared.

Later that evening the Phantom was awakened by wind rattling his tent. A rather fresh gusting northerly (50+ knots) blessed the pilgrims with its presence at 1.30am. The Phantom observed one naked body desperately chasing a tent through the trees and another naked body chasing clothes along the beach, items of apparel that had been draped over an improvised clothesline through the trees.

For those sensitive paddlers who are offended by the thought of noxious glassfibre smoke fuming into a night sky from the sacrificial river kayak, the Phantom was also concerned by the threat of rising sea levels and increasing ozone holes. His model of a river kayak and paddler contained not one iota of glassfibre!

Sadly, there were repercussions from whitewater paddlers. At a gathering by the Matakītiki River near Murchison they shoved an old glassfibre sea kayak onto a raging night fire. A breeze was blowing. Glowing embers of glassfibre mesh hovered in the night sky before descending onto the paddler's tents. A holey mess of their tents was left, so holey, in fact, they could have been blessed by the Pope himself.

Following the success of that inaugural pilgrimage it became an annual event. As dress standards were initially lax, we decided to adopt formal evening attire for future Saturday nights and would, the following year, ritually sacrifice one of those vermin of the sea, a jet ski.

As the years progressed we dropped the stoning, chanting and

sacrifices but went for an annual dressup theme. There were some beauts, like Super Heroes, Inflatable Toys, Vikings & Virgins and a very popular Dancing with the Stars. They were always marvellous gatherings of Kiwi kayakers and a few overseas strays. As always, at 6.00 on the Saturday evenings, paddlers disappeared into tents to emerge in splendid costumes for laid back wining and dining.

Late spring weather was always a gamble. Despite shelter from the open sea, strong winds can funnel through the Sounds, with challenging paddling.

One year, a West Coast couple headed up to the Sounds, paddled out to Ratimera Bay and dressed up elegantly on the Saturday night for a Steam Punk theme. The evening weather was perfect, no wind and a stunning golden setting lighting the picnic table but no other pilgrims arrived. Despite organizing the pilgrimage, the bloke was a week early with the date. The following weekend the weather forecast was so bad the real pilgrimage weekend was cancelled.

Another year, Welsh paddler Trys Morris was pushbiking down the West Coast on her honeymoon. Justine Curgenven had told her to call in to the 12 Mile. With agreement from her brand new husband, Trys joined me for a marvellous Sound's pilgrimage with Susan Cade from Wellington bringing Trys an evening gown and jewellery across on the ferry for the Saturday night dressups.

Then Covid locked New Zealand down. The pilgrimages were just a past memory. In 2022, with travel restrictions lifted, it was time to resume the annual pilgrimages; however, tragically on 10th September, two of our wonderful pilgrimage dressup queens, Cathye Haddock and Susan Cade, drowned after a nature photography boat charter boat was violently capsized off Kaikoura by what is thought to have been a whale surfacing. Both women were not only experienced expedition paddlers but also good photographers, writers, dancers and cavers.

To mark 12 months since both women drowned we decided to hold a Memorial Marlborough Sounds Pilgrimage in October. Since they were both fond of a good dressup evening and Cathye was our costume judge for the 2007 pilgrimage, dressup theme for this 2023 pilgrimage was Dancing with the Stars. Our celebrations on Saturday were tinged