

TRAMPING IN NEW ZEALAND 2010

New Zealand is a land of stunning natural beauty; jagged mountains, raging rivers, fiords, scenic beaches, even active volcanoes. It's where 'Lord of the Rings' was filmed. The country lies 1000 miles southeast of Australia.



There are two main islands (North and South). Our destination in 2010 was Fiordlands National Park, located in the southwest corner of the South Island. Tramping in New

Zealand is a national pastime. Fiordlands NP offers three of the best multi-day hikes anywhere in the world...the Milford, Routeburn, and Kepler tracks.





After flying and sitting in airports for more than 30 hours, we finally arrived in Queenstown, NZ, a small lakeside resort town of about 15,000 people. This is a major center for outdoor adventure, including tramping.



There were 5 of us on this trip. Our favorite breakfast restaurant was called 'the bakery.' Mutton Pie anyone?



We traveled by bus to the town of Te Anau (entrance to Fiordlands NP), then by boat across Lake Te Anau to the Milford trailhead. The Milford track is often referred to as ‘the finest walk in the world.’ The track is 33 miles long and is hiked in 4 days and 3 nights.



The first 2 days you are walking thru the Clinton Valley adjacent to the Clinton River. The bottomlands of the valley consist of bogs and grassy wetlands. However, at times the valley floor can be very dry and rocky. Mountains on either side are heavily forested with beech trees. The upper reaches of the mountains give way to heath, moorland, or just plain rock.



The trail crosses the river in several places on long suspension bridges. The water is crystal clear and has a greenish/turquoise hue. Part of this may be due to the presence of rocks from which Greenstone (Mountain Jade) is found. The water is so clean that it can be drunk straight from the river...no purification is needed. Camping is not allowed. All hikers must stay in huts, such as this one. Each hut can accommodate only 40 hikers. As such, permits to hike this (and other trails) must be secured months in advance.



A park ranger lives at each hut. He/she is available to answer any questions to make sure everyone is accounted for and remains healthy. Gas burners are available for stovetop cooking. Hikers must bring all their own food and cookware. Bunks, lavatories, and sinks are provided...but not showers. There is no hot water.



Mountain views from the valley floor are stunning.



On the third day, we hiked up and over the McKinnon Pass, a 1500 foot ascent. See the tiny figure standing on the edge of the abysses by the pond? That's me.

The sign post marks the top of the pass. The weather can be very unpredictable up here...high wind, cold rain or even snow with freezing temperatures. I'm dressed for it. The fog parted just enough to get a panoramic view of the Clinton valley, from which we came.



The descent from the pass is exposed along towering cliff edges. Inclement weather can bring additional hardships. However the valley below (Arthur Valley) is warmer, more lush, and tropical, due to its closer proximity to the ocean, which also increases rainfall. There are beautiful waterfalls everywhere!





The last day of hiking ends at Milford Sound. This is a fiord that runs 10 miles inland from the Tasman Sea. Milford Sound is acclaimed to be New Zealand's top tourist destination because of its natural beauty. Sheer rock faces and mountains rise 4000 feet on either side of the fiord and waterfalls abound everywhere. It is the wettest inhabited place in New Zealand (250 inches/year).





The Routeburn tract is an Alpine walk with stunning vistas of sweeping valleys and lakes, and majestic peaks. The tract is 25 miles long and usually hiked in 3 days and 2 nights. The route was originally followed by native Maori travelers and traders, making their way between villages on the coast to inland settlements.





A spectacular view of the Humboldt Mountains and an area known as the Routeburn Flats. This picture was taken from the hut where we spend our first night. The following morning we started an ascent up the rocky path to the top of the mountain range.



We passed by a small alpine lake known as Harris Lake. Shelters are strategically located in case of severe inclement weather.



The high point of this trek is a rocky outcropping known as Conical Hill. The views from here looking down into the Hollyford Valley and Peaks beyond were awe inspiring. This was my favorite vista in all of New Zealand.



There are four species of psittacine birds found in New Zealand today, the Kea, Kaka, Kakariki, and the extremely rare Kakapo. One of the highlights of this hike was to see a Kea in the wild. He was sitting on a railing by a roadside overview. They are large birds...about the size of a macaw. It was so exciting!





The Kepler tract was our third hike. 37 miles long, 4 days of hiking, 3 nights in shelters. Also found within Fiordlands NP, the hike begins and ends from the shores of two lakes, Lake Manipouri and Lake Te Anau. Typical of New Zealand, it was raining when our hike began. This tract traverses through spectacular scenery including many different landscapes; lake shores, beech forests, wetlands, and a rocky mountain ridge.



The shoreline of Lake Manipouri. Hiking through the Beech forest. Our packs weighed about 25-30 lbs.



We reached the second hut at 2 PM on the second day. Because the weather was unusually clear, we decided to forge ahead, climbing 1500 feet to the mountain ridge just ahead to take in the view. This ridge line is known as an arête...a knife-edge path along the crest of the mountain, not meant for the faint of heart. Wooden steps and ladders help hikers traverse particularly steep and dangerous sections of the hike.

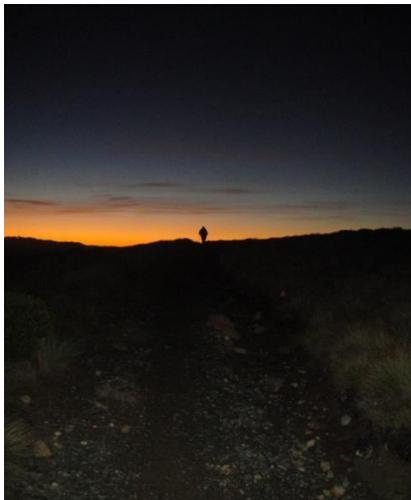


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The panoramic views were breath-taking. We went back down to our hut for the night. During the night, a storm moved in. We traversed the ridgeline a second time, but now we were fighting strong winds, pelting rain, and frigid temperatures. As you can see, it was miserable. It was a struggle to get to the third hut, where I collapsed into bed shortly after arrival.



We arose the last morning of our hike and headed out early. The sky had cleared and we were treated to a beautiful sunrise. Tramping in New Zealand was a fabulous vacation. I would recommend this trip to anyone who likes outdoor adventure

