

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

By Pam Wade
Images by Pam Wade and JB Leedy



Fiordland Express' skipper Dave has seen it all in his six years of ferrying trampers to the top of Lake Te Anau to begin the four-day hike along the Milford Track: people with their sleeping bags in supermarket carrier bags, wearing street shoes, wanting to know where the shop is to buy their food. He has to admit, however, that one thing he's never seen is the track itself. "You can drive to Milford, you know," he points out but nothing dents our eagerness to get started on this Great Walk, especially since we're going with Ultimate Hikes. This means that we're not only well prepared and equipped, but also smug in the knowledge that for us each day will end with hot showers, a three-course meal and a comfortable bed.

There are independent walkers on the boat too, immediately identifiable by their huge packs and determined expressions. Not for them the sybaritic luxuries of lodge life, instead, they will be sleeping in dormitories at the Department of Conservation huts, cooking their own food in the communal kitchen, and washing — or not — in cold water at the basins in the toilet block. They're doing it the hard way, and are giving off a slightly superior vibe. We don't care. At the end we'll be just as entitled to buy the t-shirt, but we'll have had a much more pleasant time en route.

Certainly, the walk to Glade House, our first night's accommodation, is undemanding. A mere 20-minute stroll from the jetty, the lodge lies beside the Clinton River in a grassy clearing.

It's not new, but neither is it old, we're to discover that fire, flood and landslide are constant threats to the longevity of the track lodges. There is history, though, and in a small room cluttered with quirky memorabilia I learn that in 1888 Quinton Mackinnon, a wee Scot big on tenacity, cut the track we're to follow, and discovered the pass that will be the high point of what's been called for a century now "the finest walk in the world".

Before that, though, there's the 16km of Day Two to cover, following the Clinton deep into the mountains. On the map it looks easy, a gentle rise along the valley to the next lodge but in Fiordland the weather is as critical as the terrain. Fickle, unpredictable and with a taste for drama; it's why we've been issued with multiple layers of rain protection, even in summer. When I open my curtains on swirling mist, steady rain and a rampaging brown river, I feel glum, and when head guide Dan delays our departure while he waits for reports from the DoC ranger up the track, even anxious. The expert opinion is that the track is walkable, however, and we trail off over the swing bridge and into the bush where the rain is transmuted into big fat drops plunking down from the trees, less depressing, even if just as wetting.

At first we pick our way around the puddles, but soon there's no choice but to say goodbye to dry socks and tramp right through, wincing as the icy water reaches our toes. Within the hour, cold feet are the least of our problems, as we plough manfully through sections where the river has flooded the track, higher and



higher until the water's hip high. Lunch is uncomfortable, with talk of helicopter rescue — but soon after, Fiordland changes its mind again and the sun blasts down, the valley saturated now with colour, the bare rock of the valley walls streaked with exuberant waterfalls.

They make for a spectacular view from the lounge at Pompolona Lodge where we sit later, warm and dry, sipping drinks and watching the helicopter that might have rescued us instead mundanely delivering the groceries on the end of a rope. Our clothes are hanging in the super-efficient drying room, there are salmon rillettes for dinner and on the wall a poster describes tomorrow's climb to the 1,154m Mackinnon Pass. Eleven switchbacks bring the gradient down to a manageable 1:8, and I sleep well in my comfortable room, despite the keas marauding along the veranda outside, looking for something to shred.

The next day is filled with scenery so glorious that the toil becomes irrelevant. Lush bush that surrounds lakes reflecting white glaciers against blue sky gives way to alpine gardens, the stone path edged with the perfect waxy flowers of Mt Cook lilies. All around are sharp-edged peaks and U-shaped valleys, golden tussock and tannin-stained tarns. From the top, near the skep-shaped stone memorial to Mackinnon, I can see both Pompolona and tonight's Quinton Lodge, each tucked into the bush far below where I stand feeling on top of the world. A weka trundling through the tussock and keas clowning around entertain me during lunch but then it's time to start the long, long descent. I scramble down uneven steps and over boulders, grateful for my poles. Flights of stairs take some of the strain alongside tumbling waterfalls, the spray pleasantly cooling in the hot sun.

It seems to take forever, but at last I reach the comforts of Quinton Lodge. This isn't the end of today's challenge, however, 45 minutes away is Sutherland Falls, at 580m the highest in the country and, though my knees are protesting, unmissable. I'm so glad I make the effort, because it's astonishing. Powered by the rain, the three leaps of the falls roar like a jet plane, the trees around the plunge pool thrash about as if in a hurricane and the spray drives horizontally. There's no



chance of standing behind the falls today, but their sheer force is exhilarating.

Tonight's bird is a kiwi, its call piercing the stillness but I scarcely register it. In the morning we set off, feet fluffed up by a Foot Love session, pleased with the reassurance that today's 21km are described simply as 'undulating'. And so they are: they undulate along the Arthur River and down a rocky hill, undulate some more into luxuriant rainforest and past waterfalls, and then undulate still further around cliff-faces and along a lake. It's a whole lot of undulating, but the waterfalls — and we're all by now waterfall connoisseurs — are irresistibly picturesque, especially Mackay Falls, of '100% Pure' poster fame.

And then, quite suddenly, I'm there. Beyond the hut is the final milepost, not 54km, but in Milford Track tradition 33.5 miles. This is Sandfly Point, and the pesky varmints are there in swarms, making it hard to pose for the final photo. We scuttle onto the boat, which takes us round the corner into Milford Sound where Mitre Peak dwarfs us as we slip past into the marina. And just like that, we're back into civilisation, and our Great Walk is over. Tonight we can go to the pub, and tomorrow we'll have a boat trip out along the sound to the sea before climbing onto the coach. On the drive back to Queenstown, we'll pass Te Anau, where Dave the skipper will be taking another load of trampers up to the top of the lake to start their Milford Track. Lucky them! 🍷



CHECKLIST

The five-day Ultimate Hikes package includes guides, some equipment, transport, a boat trip on Milford Sound and accommodation in well-appointed lodges along the Milford Track: www.ultimatehikes.co.nz.

Highly recommended is some luxury before, and especially after! Centrally-located and lakeside, Eichardt's Private Hotel has rooms in the historic 1860s building plus four charming and comfortable Cottage Suites. www.eichardtshotel.co.nz
Tucked out of sight at the Glenorchy end of Lake Wakatipu, Blanket Bay's rooms, suites and chalets are supremely luxurious, with everything else to match: www.blanketbay.com

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