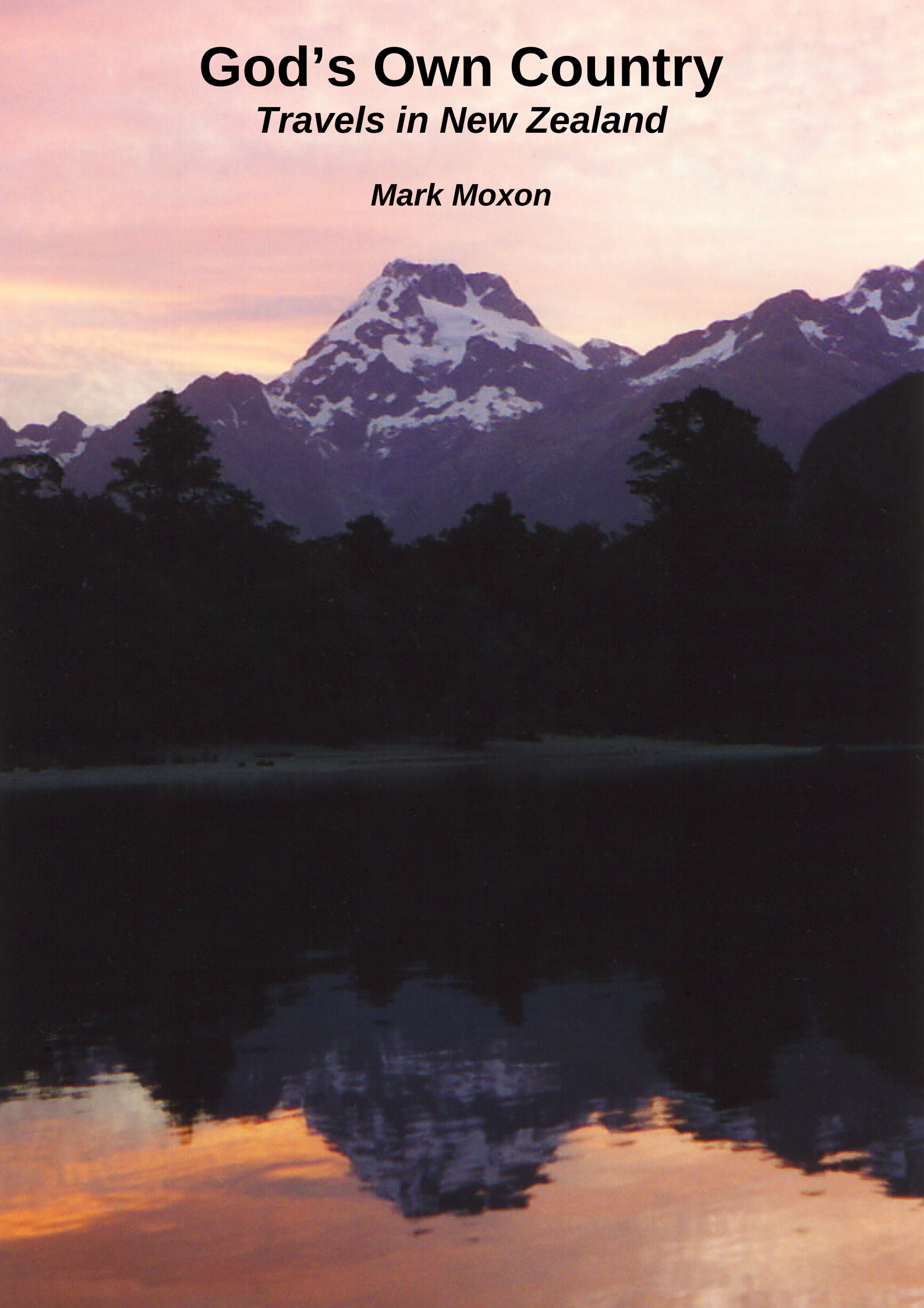
God’s Own Country

Travels in New Zealand

Mark Moxon



God's Own Country: Travels in New Zealand, v1.2.1, November 2004

Cover Photograph: Mt Madeline from Alabaster Hut, Hollyford-Pyke Route, South Island

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Foreword

This book is a collection of writing and photographs from the road, covering a six-month trip I made to New Zealand in 1996/97. This was part of a much larger, three-year journey that took me through Australia, New Zealand, French Polynesia, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, India and Nepal, from 1995 to 1998.

The travelogue for all these countries and more can be found at my personal website at **www.moxon.net**, where you can also find travel tips, recommended journeys and further free books for you to download. If you enjoy reading this book, then I'd be delighted if you would sign my website's Guestbook.

I've released this book and its companions via a Creative Commons Licence, which means you are free to distribute it to everyone and anyone, as long as you distribute it on a non-commercial basis and make no changes to it. If you know someone who might like this book, please pass it on; I make no money from it, but I do enjoy the thought of people reading it and recommending it to their friends.

Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this, some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated – and others will betray the naivety of a traveller who discovered his way in the world by throwing himself into it headfirst. It is, however, an honest account of how I felt as I travelled the world for three years, and as such, I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Moxon, September 2004
www.moxon.net

Map

North Island

Auckland

Written: 18 November 1996

The Auckland skyline

Auckland is the first place I've seen that *nestles*. Looking at the city from a vantage point like Mt Eden, the way that the buildings crowd round the edges of the city's many green volcanoes reminds me of the way a cat rubs the back of his neck against your leg; Auckland positively embraces its peaks. Some of the cones even have cows grazing on them: there can't be many other non-Hindu cities that have cows in their very midst.

How worrying, then, that the volcanic field that Auckland sits on is 'dormant' – for which read 'could wake up at any time'. The most recent addition to Auckland's igneous family is Rangitoto, a wide, forbidding peak that suddenly appeared in the middle of Auckland harbour some 600 years ago, and whose activities only stopped about 200 years ago; it's pretty untouched by humans, and its looming slopes – which always look dark, even in bright sunlight – dominate the view. My hostel was situated right at the bottom of the biggest cone in the city area – Mt Eden, a luscious, green hill with a huge crater in the top – and although most sane people wouldn't consider living in a dormant volcanic field, it's water off Aucklanders' backs.

'It's no more dangerous than driving a car… actually, it's considerably safer,' a local friend told me. He was right, of course, but when you hear that the most likely spot for the next eruption is Takapuna, home to some of the most expensive houses in Auckland, it makes you wonder how bad the casualties will be when it finally happens. New Zealand is a time bomb waiting to go off, but you'd never know from looking at it.

Initial Explorations

Rangitoto from Mt Eden

My arrival in Auckland was made considerably easier by the wonderful hospitality of Doug, the director of the computer company Acorn New Zealand, his wife Raewyn and their two daughters, who put me up in their house and gave me a job at Acorn on the technical support team, starting straight away. This job would end up funding most of my Asian travels, but first I needed to sort myself out with a roof over my head.

It wasn't long before I'd settled into my own room at the Berlin Lodge in Mt Eden, a rather pleasant suburb only 20 minutes walk from Acorn's office. When I moved in it seemed that the hostel was full to the brim with loads of incredibly friendly people from Bangladesh, who appeared to have bulk-booked the place. It was rather refreshing; the place was being run by a German, it was full of strange accents, languages and smells, and it didn't seem to be full of the normal backpacker crowd, thank goodness. I loved it.

I spent my first weekend exploring Auckland with a middle-aged American called Paul[1], who proved delightful company and a source of top-notch travel advice. Auckland is a tiny place, with only a million inhabitants, and it's simplicity itself to explore. There are trees everywhere, the air is clear, the traffic problems are minimal, and you can walk almost everywhere with ease, like most small cities in this part of the world.

[1] I'll never forget what happened when Paul asked me why Vegemite was less a spread and more an Antipodean religion: I told him to help himself to my jar if he wanted to find out why, but I forgot to tell him to only use a little bit, so he layered it on like thick jam. When I came back from work he declared that Aussies and Kiwis were obviously quite insane worshipping a spread that burned the roof of your mouth off; I didn't have the heart to tell him that not even the biggest fan of Vegemite would put it on toast *that* thickly.

One of my most enduring memories of these first few days exploring, though, was in an area where New Zealand excels and Australia fails: Indian cuisine. Although there isn't the proliferation of Indian curry houses here that you see in the UK, the ones here are of a very high quality, and the sight of blobs of meat and potato stewed in a thick, brown gravy with pools of dark, dank oil floating on the top was enough to make me go weak at the knees after an almost complete lack of Indian restaurants in Australia. A civilisation that knows what you mean when you say 'vindaloo' can't be all bad, and I was more than happy to slip into an easy life of regular income and luxury food while hunting for a suitable vehicle to take me round New Zealand.

One Tree Hill from Mt Eden

Working in Auckland

It wasn't long before work was throwing up some exciting opportunities. Because the Acorn market was (at that time) thriving in New Zealand, especially when compared to Australia, there were stories everywhere begging to be written down, and somehow I managed to get Acorn to employ me on my way round New Zealand. They commissioned me to write a portfolio of case studies of their prime school sites, as well as a collection of articles on their dealers, and even promised to give me a job when I returned to Auckland to round off my stay.

The offices of Acorn New Zealand

I would end up working for Acorn for a whole month before heading off round the country to write a total of 59 articles, each netting me NZ$100. I couldn't believe my luck; travelling round New Zealand was going to mean loads of paid work, lots of hospitality, and lots of interesting stories. Each time the teachers would be different, the stories would be different, and the schools would be different: what a wonderful way to get a unique view on the culture of Godzone. I couldn't believe my luck – all this from a chance meeting in Perth!

Working is also a guaranteed way to get a social life – perhaps because it's easier if you have an income. The combination of the Berlin Lodge and Acorn would introduce me to some wonderful people, and while I was lounging round in New Zealand's biggest city, I would spend most of my time following the usual city pursuits of eating, drinking, exploring and talking with Greg[2], Thomas, John, Anne-Marie, Sjouke, Ian and countless others. When you're travelling you're never on your own for long.

The Domain

On the Labour Day long weekend I visited the Centennial Park to the west of Auckland, at the southern tip of the Waitakere Ranges. The views were stunning, but I was beginning to understand why Aucklanders always carry umbrellas or raincoats around with them, even when there's not a cloud in the sky. Auckland's weather is completely unreliable, and while Melbourne might be home to 'four seasons in one day', Auckland feels like it's managed to invent a few more of its own. As the locals say, 'If you can see the Waitakeres, it's going to rain; if you can't see the Waitakeres, it's already raining.' Too bloody right.

The grand War Memorial Museum dominates Auckland Domain

I spent the public holiday on Monday wandering around Auckland Domain, the big park in the heart of the city (as in Australia, city parks are called 'domains'), watching the kite flyers, snap-happy tourists, panting joggers, lovebirds, touch rugby players, picnickers… classic park scenes, except this park has a completely rugged bush area, which to all intents

[2] I thoroughly liked Greg, and bizarrely *all* the photos I have of him show him either jeans and camouflaged shirt, or camouflaged trousers and blue T-shirt. This isn't particularly noteworthy, but I mention it so I can gratuitously shoehorn in one of my favourite Kiwi advertising slogans, the one for Camouflaged Condoms. The sales pitch? 'Don't let them see you coming…' Pure genius!

and purposes is a wild forest, bang in the middle of the city. What a delight, even if the weather was continuing to be reliably unreliable.

On Auckland Domain

Refuge came in the form of the Auckland War Memorial Museum, with its fascinating Maori exhibits and rather run-of-the-mill 'old' European displays. Although Captain Cook circumnavigated New Zealand just before Australia, England didn't colonise the country until well after Australia: Auckland, for example, wasn't settled by Europeans until the 1840s, by which stage Australia was well and truly colonised. This means that 'old' is even younger in New Zealand than 'old' in Australia, and this feeling even extends to Maori history.

Where the Aborigines have been around for at least 20,000 years – and recent discoveries in the Western Australian desert point to a much longer ancestry, possibly around 40,000 years – the Maoris only arrived in New Zealand in any numbers around 1350 AD. This was when they migrated from Polynesia, kicking out the existing inhabitants, the Morioris, who were themselves settlers from an earlier migration from Polynesia at least 1000 years ago. As a result Maori culture is not only considerably Polynesian in style, it has a much shorter history than then indigenous population of Australia. The Aborigines were nomadic, truly tribal, and had a unique culture; the Maoris built villages, fought each other, farmed, and their dances and rites feel – to an outsider like me – very like the ones in Polynesia. It's fascinating to explore the history of Maoris when compares to the Aborigines: they're like chalk and cheese, except for the devastating effect of colonialism…

Fireworks Over Auckland

Greg and I surfcasting on windy Whatipu Beach

The Kiwis celebrate Fireworks Night[3] in style. It's a bit strange that a country on the opposite end of the world should celebrate an event that happened 12,000 miles away and hundreds of years ago; the Australians don't even know who Guy Fawkes is, let alone what he did, but New Zealand is much more like England than Australia, and as in the UK, the locals will use any excuse for a party.

Unfortunately the rather mollycoddling attitude that is responsible for the Draconian drinking laws in this land has also decreed that Joe Public cannot buy rockets – they're far too dangerous, apparently – so public displays are fast becoming the norm… but when Greg and I went up One Tree Hill on the night of the fifth, armed with a six-pack and an umbrella, we saw a city fizzing gently as hundreds of families let off their Roman Candles and the public displays spent thousands in seconds. It wasn't as impressive to look at as you would have thought – to see a firework you have to be looking at it when it goes off, and with a 360° view, you miss most of them – but the delayed sound of hundreds of bangs was completely bizarre. Greg, a veteran of the South African army, said it sounded just like a war zone; I had to take his word for it, but I could see his point.

Surf Casting in Whatipu

Me and fishing aren't exactly good bedfellows: while I love fishing, my catch rate is bloody awful, a fact that hadn't escaped my friend and fishing partner Bill, who'd said in his last letter that he'd discovered the secret to successful fishing – to go without me. Suffice to say that visiting Whatipu did little to change this, but at least I found a new method in which to expend heaps of energy while achieving nothing: surf casting.

Surf casting, as far as I can make out, involves standing on the beach, casting a line baited with pilchards as far out into the sea as possible, sticking the rod in the sand, and settling back with a vodka and coke. At least, that's how Greg, Thomas and I went surf

[3] I think – though I could be wrong – that Fireworks Night is only celebrated in the UK and New Zealand (Australians don't bother, that's for sure). The night of November 5th is given over to fireworks, bonfires and jacket potatoes, to celebrate the failed attempt by Guy Fawkes and his gang to blow up the Houses of Parliament with a cellar packed with gunpowder (hence the name of the attempted coup, the Gunpowder Plot). It's fun, unless you happen to work in an Accident and Emergency Department… alcohol and gunpowder can be a dangerously explosive mix.

casting, and between us we managed one tiny fish (courtesy of Thomas) and a crab (courtesy of me).

Successful? No. Entertaining? You bet. The area we visited, Whatipu (pronounced 'Fatty-poo'), is the northern tip of the western entrance to Auckland's harbour, and it's rough as hell, with scary cliffs and a tide to make you think twice about even going ankle deep: this is no swimming beach. It is, however, ruggedly beautiful, and was a perfect setting for *Three Men, No Fish, Lots of Vodka, and a Beach*.

The lighthouse at Whatipu is typical of the beauty in the Auckland area

It was almost impossible to imagine we were only a few miles from Auckland… but then again, that's New Zealand all over.

Rangitoto

Written: 3 November 1996

Despite being a lazy bastard, I'd planned a kayaking trip with a couple of guys from the hostel, and at 8.30 on the morning of 20 October, Greg and I drove to Orakei harbour, where we met John (also from the hostel) and Thomas (a German molecular biologist and friend of Greg's). John was taking out a group of kids kayaking as part of his weekend job, so he set us up with our boats and life jackets, and we sailed off into the harbour, Thomas and I in one two-man kayak, and Greg in a single. Out destination: Rangitoto, the dominating island in the harbour.

Rangitoto from a kayak

Kayaking through a city harbour is simply stunning. On one hand you have the hustle and bustle of a busy port – big container ships, posers in their expensive speedboats, yachts hoisting their spinnakers to catch the breeze, a breathtaking city skyline seen from an unusual angle – and on the other hand you're out there alone, with no sounds except the slapping of the waves against the kayak, the quiet gliding of seagulls, the splashing of oars against water. It's a radically different way to see a city, and the trek across the harbour to Rangitoto took well over an hour of paddling away, discovering muscles that I didn't think had any business to ache quite so much. Poor old Greg found the single boat almost too much, and by the time we beached on the island, he was wasted, while Thomas and I felt fine.

But you can't hang around all day on the shores of an island like Rangitoto. Being a volcano, the island has a classic cone shape, and where there's a mountain to climb, you'll find me raring to go. After dragging the kayaks beyond the tide's reach, we set off in search of the summit, checking out some strange lava caves on the way, and wondering how anything could survive on this barren and rugged island, let alone the forest that covers the entire landmass. After a pretty challenging walk – enhanced by too much beer the night before, and the fact that I'm not as fit as I was when running up the peaks of Western Australia – we cracked open a bottle of Australian red and took in the most awesome view of Auckland you can imagine. The crater was quite a sight, too, a huge and perfectly conical hole in the top of the mountain, a stark reminder that at any time Rangitoto could blow its top.

The joys of sea kayaking

The return journey was even more beautiful, this time heading towards the amazing city skyline that had been behind us before. Unfortunately, Greg was having serious problems with the single kayak – he'd hurt his back on the way over – so John directed us while Greg and I swapped places, right there in the middle of the sea. I got to paddle my way back all on my own, and it was just wonderful. Kayaks have two little pedals with which you steer

yourself, and once you've worked out that it's pretty hard to roll yourself over, and that the secret is in long, slow strokes, it's a delight gliding through the gentle waves, gradually getting closer and closer to shore. I was wet, knackered and totally happy…

Kayaking to Motutapu

A pretty cove on Motutapu

Not content with kayaking to Rangitoto and back in a day, I spent the weekend of 2-3 November sitting in a motley collection of sea kayaks with John, Thomas and Greg, floating around the waters of Auckland. The trip was bittersweet: the islands of Rangitoto and Motutapu are quite stunning, and kayaking round them and spending a night on an island like Motutapu is pretty damn peaceful and enjoyable. But the pain of kayaking over 30km in two days is intense, especially when you haven't done that sort of exercise before, and I've never been so glad as the moment we landed on Sunday afternoon, with sore arms, aching backs, blisters on our fingers and salt water everywhere.

Still, the Saturday night on the island was great. We weren't supposed to camp there, so we found a secluded bay with a little forest and set up camp there. We collected driftwood, lit a fire and collected a bag full of mussels off the rocks, cooking them up on the fire. Greg and Thomas went out in a kayak with a couple of fishing lines and returned after an hour with five luscious snapper, which Thomas and I devoured after cooking them on the fire. Combined with the copious alcohol and lack of rain, it turned into a classic night out in the bush. I'd definitely do it again… but next time I'd probably take the boat.

Finding Wheels

Written: 18 November 1996

Zed in all his glory, posing by a rather windswept Lake Taupo

Zed lives! He might be younger than his older brother Oz[4], but it's obvious from that jaw line and the obstinately old-fashioned looks that he's a Toyota Corona. He's also quite a lot bigger, being a 1984 station wagon, and with the white paint and dodgy stereo he's certainly not the same as the little monster that made it round the emptiest continent in the world, but as far as spacious accommodation goes, Zed's got it just right.

With a foam mattress in the back, enough water to feed the strangely thirsty radiator, and a road map, I'm ready to tackle the Land of the Long White Cloud, from tip to tail. Insurance, AA membership and all the other little security devices secured, I've got until the end of March in New Zealand, not long enough to see everything, but long enough to put a serious dent in the map.

My workmates have been towers of strength, helping me out with buying advice galore. Buying a car is one of the most traumatic events I can imagine, but after a couple of false starts, and a rashly placed deposit on a wreck I didn't end up buying (thankfully), I finally discovered Zed and liberated him from one of the most down-trodden, miserable suburbs on the planet; without my friend Anne-Marie's down-to-earth advice, I'd have probably lost my marbles in the search for wheels.

It's also opened my eyes, travelling around and exploring Auckland in the search for cars, and schools to write about. Auckland might be beautiful when it comes to Mt Eden, Epsom (where I've been working), Parnell (the trendy area) and the beautiful harbour; but when Auckland is grim, it's very grim. Every city has its downside, and with the Maori and Islander[5] troubles, gang warfare is a way of life in quite a few areas, crime is high, and the murder rate surprising for such a small population.

[4] All my cars have had names – it makes it easier to yell at them then the steam's pouring out from under the bonnet – and Oz was the trusty Corona that got me round Australia.

[5] 'Islanders' is the name given to those from the Polynesian islands like Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and so on.

Not only have I sorted out my wheels, and therefore my house for the next few months, I've also got my tramping gear sorted out. I've bought a very light, compact tent that I can shove in my backpack and take on tramps without breaking my back, I'm slowly breaking in my new tramping boots (and ripping my ankles to pieces in the process, as per usual), and I've got my bedding sorted out for the back of Zed. All this is making my feet itch worse than a plaster cast, and it'll be a fun day indeed when I finally set off to explore.

Zed on the West Coast of the South Island; spot the mattress in the back

I don't have a plan: it's not like Australia, where there's one road round the outside, one down the middle, and that's your lot. The South Island is easier to circumnavigate – it's long and thin, so it's up one side and down the other, with the odd foray into the mountainous middle to brave the passes – but the North Island is inconveniently round, with both the coasts and the middle worth a visit. Nothing's too far away, though, so I don't foresee any problems seeing almost everything, but I've been putting off the planning until I'm actually on the road. Perhaps that's the best idea, seeing as my plans for Australia changed by the day; plans are made to be broken, after all.

Wellington

Written: 26 November 1996

Despite feeling groggy from a nasty cold I finally set off on my exploration of New Zealand on Monday 18th. The rain wasn't too bad when I left Auckland, but it wasn't long before it started filling my vision, and when I got to Lake Taupo everything was damp and cold, hardly the best environment for my aching limbs and rattling cough. However, I still managed to get a good night's sleep in the back of Zed, and the next day I headed down the west coast to Paekakariki, on the Kapiti Coast. On the way I stopped off at Otaki, home to a large beach that was being so battered and bashed by the raging sea that I cowered in the car, avoiding flying sand and ocean spray. The Kapiti Coast itself was scary: foam kept blowing onto the road from the sea, which had turned a dirty brown from the violence, and as I spent Tuesday night in a lay-by, the wind ripped through the trees and made a hellish racket.

Wellington city centre

Normally I wouldn't travel so far in weather like that, but I had to get to Wellington for Wednesday, to give a presentation to the Wellington Acorn user's group. However, when I made it to Wellington at lunchtime, the sun had come out, the sky was pure blue, and after the manic storms of the previous two days it felt like paradise. Walking round the city, which is a very pleasant little settlement on a calm harbour, though much smaller than one would expect a capital city to be, I discovered the botanic gardens, a little beach, and buildings that defied description, like the Beehive, the home of New Zealand's parliament. I rather enjoyed Wellington, much to my surprise.

Kiwi Culture Shock

I say 'surprise' because up until that moment, I'd been singularly unimpressed with New Zealand's urban developments. Auckland is fine because it is in a lovely setting, though its western and southern suburbs are pretty rough, to be honest; Wellington, similarly, is on a really pretty harbour, and it has quite a few interesting buildings, and some picturesque parks scattered about.

Classic Kiwi humour is evident in this Wellington shop name, 'bugadifino'

But most of the Kiwi settlements I've seen so far are pretty terrible: they're modern (they can't be older than 150 years anyway, and most of them were built in this century) and they all look the same. The map might be smothered in little dots, but this isn't Europe, and most of the actual towns are simply boring: the North Island has beautiful

landscape, but when settlements aren't in those beautiful areas they can be rather depressing, unfortunately.

A wind generator taking advantage of the winds whistling through the Cook Strait near Wellington

I was also getting a bit worried about the North Island landscape that I'd seen up to that point. All I'd seen was lots of grassland and forest, on millions of hills and mountains, but it was nothing I hadn't seen before. If you ignore the volcanoes and the fact that the landscape is seriously up and down – imagine crumpled crepe paper, and you're not far off – it feels a bit like Scotland, or the mountains of Wales, and above all it feels like Tasmania. My initial thought was that it would be boring – after all, when you've seen one forest you've seen them all – but after a few days' driving through the wilderness, it began to grow on me. I keep thinking I'm back home, or over in Tassie, but then again New Zealand is very English in its attitudes, unlike Australia which, if anything, tends to be more American. I realised I was going to enjoy this journey, but it was going to take a while to shake off the office in me.

The scale of the country is also a bit of a shock after Australia. For example, I drove from Auckland to Wellington in two easy days, and I could have done it in less time if I'd been in a hurry, but gone are the days of being able to drive and drive and drive, and still get nowhere. The weather is another big shock: after the dry climate of Australia, it's really rather odd to be rained on constantly, especially when you're living in the back of a car, when you notice every drop. And the west coast of the South Island, home to some stunning scenery, is the wettest area of all, so I'll just have to get used to it (though it's a fair enough trade off to have such a green and pleasant land).

Perhaps the only genuinely annoying thing about Wellington is the wind, which is beyond a joke. It's not just a quaint little oddity of life in the nation's capital; it's a daily struggle against ruined hairstyles and constant litter shooting across the street. It's a cliché, but Wellington *is* the windy city, and it takes some getting used to.

Around Wellington

The peaceful greenery of Otaki Forks

Mostof the week was spent working, first in Wellington, and then in Palmerston North, where I visited four schools, wrote four case studies, and stayed with Judy, the dealer in Palmerston. Judy is a *bon viveur*, without a doubt, and if it hadn't been for my body feeling like it had been put through the ringer, I'd have risen to the challenge. Whatever, we ate well and drank well, and generally had a ball, as one should always do when one is working. The schools were interesting, too, ranging from small schools in the middle of nowhere, to very rich public schools that made all the others look shabby. It's certainly a different way of getting to see a country from the inside.

On Saturday I left Palmerston for Otaki Forks, a DOC[6] campsite in the heart of the Tararua Forest Park. The area was – for a change – heavily forested and mountainous, and I went for a couple of little walks just to get myself going. It was pleasant to settle down without any work to do, but it would have been nicer if it hadn't been so cold and windy: if it isn't raining here, it's blowing. Summer had better hurry up and arrive permanently… the fact that the weather is 'unseasonable' doesn't help when I'm chattering away in my tent, warming my hands on a candle!

Monday saw the beautiful weather return, though, and as I drove through the Tararua Ranges back towards Wellington, down the windiest and narrowest road I've ever seen, the landscape really began to thrill. I spent the night in Eastbourne, a little beach town on the opposite side of the bay to Wellington, where I lounged on the beach, and even went for my first swim in the New Zealand sea – freezing isn't the word! Still, when you're living in the

[6] DOC – the Department of Conservation – is in charge of National and Forest Parks, and has heaps of out-of-the-way campsites that are very cheap and very picturesque. They're a highly recommended source of information on the outdoors.

back of a car, and sleeping where you park, you've got to get clean somehow. There was a tiring but enjoyable bush walk up the hills behind the village, and as the sun went down over Wellington and the lights began to twinkle, I felt, for the first time since leaving Auckland, really pleased to be on the road. Perhaps my cold was finally lifting with my mood.

Low Patch

Written: 27 November 1996

Greg (right) and Thomas celebrating on top of Rangitoto with a bottle of Queen Adelaide; my low patch was in no small part down to me missing my friends

When I wrote the following, I was feeling pretty low. This had obviously happened before, such as when I was having to wait around for ages in Melbourne for my car to be ready, or when I had to drop Queensland from my plans in when halfway from Perth to Darwin because I'd miscalculated of the amount of time I had left on my visa. Both of those times I had good reason to be pissed off – delay and disappointment, respectively – but this time I had no good reason at all, I just felt really miserable, and, to be honest, didn't really want to be travelling.

Needless to say my mood lifted eventually – chemical imbalances rarely fail to make a permanent mark on the endlessly interesting world of travel – but from when I left Lake Taupo back on 11th November to when I arrived in Dunedin on 3rd December, I was a miserable bastard, and it happens to all travellers at various stages. So read the following section with a pinch of salt, and apologies in advance, because when I whinge, I whinge. At least that part of me is still English.

Temporary Cynicism

Even cats don't fall on their feet this well, and they're genetically programmed to land right side up. Then why do I still feel a nagging doubt about this whole New Zealand thing? Last time I wrote, I edited my original transcript before transmission to remove all my little niggles about my current travels, putting them down to continuing flu, which isn't a good enough reason to commit negative vibes to permanent storage, but unless my current health status is still under par, there's something not quite firing on all cylinders in New Zealand.

To be honest, I think I'm just suffering from a bout of cynicism. Yes, the countryside's beautiful and yes, the travelling's easy, but I keep finding myself thinking, 'Not another bloody mountain,' and I haven't even reached the real McCoy yet. The people have been quite superb – of that there can be no doubt – but I think I must be suffering from what most travellers call the 'three month blues', except I've taken thirteen months to reach it, and I needed ill health to set it off. By all accounts the three month blues hit you when you're beginning to get used to the travelling life, when you cease to be amazed by everything just because it's new, and begin to change from being a tourist to being a traveller: at that stage you get a little homesick, and just wish everything was back to 'normal'. This doesn't fit what I'm feeling, but I can't find any other reason for my recurring desire to jack it all in and come home. It's not a strong enough feeling to actually make me book a flight to London, and a quick waltz around the nearest sunny bay brings me back to the reality of my situation, but there's no point in obstinately travelling for ages just because I said I would.

I wonder if it could be that I'm simply not as impressed by what I've seen as I thought I would: I can't make my mind up about New Zealand. One theory is that because the human environment here is quite English – the physical environment is too mountainous to be English, but it's more English than the Australian outback, that's for sure – I keep seeing a watered down version of home, a version with a very short modern history, an emerging culture in terms of music and art rather than the very established versions in the UK (though the emerging cultures are very strong here, to be fair), and – to me – a lack of cultural identity. Kiwis would disagree with me very strongly I'm sure, but I keep feeling this is a country of people from other countries, rather than a definite place with a definite identity. Any country where the sports presenters start talking about Arsenal beating Newcastle United without once mentioning the English football league by way of introduction doesn't feel that alien to a

Pom: in fact, if I wasn't English, I'd assume that New Zealand had its own football league, just one where games are always played in unseasonable weather…

And yet I know that if, say, I was offered a full-time job here – a totally hypothetical concept, before you fall off your chairs – I'd probably leap at the chance and hang around for a bit, because there's still a feeling that there's potential in them there hills. I think that it might be a simple case of overload: I've seen so many amazing views, done so amazing walks, lounged on so many amazing beaches and explored so many amazing cities, that one more bloody picture-postcard-pretty view is enough to drive me over the edge. The desire to have exhaust fumes blown in my face as another London bus chugs around a near-stationary Piccadilly Circus is quite strong…

But never mind; I am sure this melancholy will pass, if only because it feels more like a chemical imbalance than a genuine attitude problem, and as soon as I manage to shake the feeling of grogginess and aching limbs by doing a bit of healthy exercise – like going for a few days' walk – I'm sure the same person that managed to explore Western Australia will emerge. Besides, I've been living with unexplained bouts of being a miserable bastard for as long as I remember; it's just that they've been considerably less common since I hit the trail. I guess that's a good thing…

South Island

Down the Casino

Written: 2 December 1996

The turquoise spire of Christchurch Cathedral; the original stone one fell off in an earthquake

At 6pm I finally managed to get through to Graham, with whom I would be staying for a few days of work in Christchurch. He told me that if I could get to his house by 6.20, and I could play Blackjack, how would I like to go to the casino and help his local Rotary club spend NZ$3500 of someone else's money, all for charity? As if I needed asking: half an hour later we were heading off to the town's main den of iniquity.

The plot went like this. Each of the local Rotary clubs would put forward seven players, who would then play against each other; the winner from each club would then go through to the final, to play the winners from each other club, and the winner of that game could choose the charity to which the Rotary clubs would donate NZ$1000. That was to be the plan, but Graham's club had had a few last-minute cancellations; luckily, when I appeared, I was only too happy to fill the gap.

The alcohol was completely free all night, and there were plenty of sandwiches and little nibbles, so I was counting myself a winner before we even started. As for the Blackjack, it was a rather close thing: I hadn't played Blackjack for years, but the old skill was obviously still there, as by the last hand of the third shoe it was down to me, with NZ$2400, and a jovial bloke called Noel, with NZ$1900 (not bad, considering we started with NZ$500 each). In theory it's pretty hard to lose from that sort of position, but Noel was a real gambler, and with it being someone else's money he put his whole stash on, and it came through. So Noel went through, thankfully as he was the much better player and I was beginning to get far too drunk for another game, and we all settled round to support our man.

Halfway through the game we were a little concerned, because Noel, being the classic big gambler, was down to just one chip, a blue NZ$100 disc, and all the others had stacks of brown NZ$500 chips, and huge piles of green NZ$25 chips. Quite how Noel came through to win I'll never know, but it involved betting everything he had a number of times, and ending up with Blackjacks all over the place; meanwhile our support was getting louder and louder, and the beer just kept on flowing. Before we'd known it Noel had won, against all the odds.

So we had a drunken team photo for the local paper and got invited upstairs into the High Flyer room, where all the drinks and food continued to be free (so I drank champagne all night, ate oysters and generally fulfilling all the fantasies I'd developed while travelling on a budget). I vaguely remember having long, in-depth conversations with various important local figures, but by this stage I was well past the point of no return. It was quite an introduction to Christchurch.

Christchurch

Written: 3 December 1996

A number of people had told me that Christchurch is easily the most English settlement in New Zealand, and from the very first moment I could see their point: as I wandered through the beautiful botanic gardens, I found myself following the River Avon, surrounded on either side by Oxford and Cambridge Terraces.

The gardens themselves are a gardener's dream, with a water garden, a rose garden, a pinetum, a Primula garden, a daffodil woodland, a cherry collection, an herbaceous border, a fragrant garden, a conservatory complex, a New Zealand garden, a rock garden and more… they're certainly comprehensive. All this is surrounded by huge swathes of park, a smattering of art museums and some very posh schools, and right in the centre of town is Cathedral

Square, home to a beautiful gothic cathedral with a huge spire, the top of which is made of copper after the original stone one fell into the square during an earthquake.

It's a bit strange, seeing red telephone boxes, school children in blazers and boaters, people punting down the Avon, trees like weeping willows, oaks and sycamores, and street names that are almost entirely based on roads in England… but every now and then you look through the trees and spot a tussock-covered hill in the distance, something that wouldn't crop up in the sort of English countryside that would be home to a city like Christchurch.

Perhaps that's why Christchurch, beautiful though it is, doesn't quite convince; I kept thinking of a watercolour with too much water and not enough colour, or a theme park version of Little England, though perhaps without the tackiness. Perhaps actually living in one of the cities Christchurch is trying to be – Oxford – has spoilt me. But by all accounts the Japanese tourists lap it up, as you can tell by the group photo stand in the square, where busloads of Asians cram onto the platform to have their tour shot taken with the cathedral in the background. At least *that* part's an exact copy of Oxford…

Around Christchurch

I arrived in Christchurch after a long journey from Wellington, which consisted of a cold and rather rough ferry voyage across the Cook Strait to Picton; a dark arrival in the South Island at 2.30am; a restless night in the back of the car in a suitable rest area; the long and winding drive to Christchurch, down the east coast of the island strewn with rough volcanic rocks, odd weather, and bloody dangerous hairpin bends (which I took very slowly indeed); and finally my arrival at the home of the local Acorn dealer Graham and his wife Bev.

A Christchurch tram

Their hospitality was as wonderful as I'd come to expect from the Acorn dealership, and following a baptism by fire and a few days' work visiting local schools and writing case studies, the weekend arrived and Graham, Bev and I headed out to the Banks Peninsula, a strange hand-shaped peninsula sticking out of the east coast of New Zealand, just south of Christchurch. The main town, Akaroa, is just beautiful, with an azure harbour broken by fingers of deep green volcano jutting out from the hills. The town itself is as pretty a seaside town as you will find, with an interesting mix of French and English architecture: apparently the French inhabitants and English inhabitants didn't mix, and there was a self-imposed apartheid in the town, both socially and architecturally, something that has disappeared in all but the buildings. A leisurely lunch and a lazy walk down the sea front, and I was, for some reason, completely knackered, and after meeting Bev's parents who were holidaying in the family bungalow – a lovely couple, full of stories about New Zealand – we wound our way back home through a sudden rainstorm.

This struck me as odd, because I'd been told that Christchurch was one of the driest places in the South Island. In New Zealand the west side is very, very wet – the weather comes from the southwest over the sea, where the clouds pick up plenty of water, ready to dump it all on the west coast and the Southern Alps. This means that the east coast gets comparatively little rain, so where places like Milford and Taranaki on the west side get metres of rain every year, the likes of Christchurch and Napier get far less. Auckland, being on both the west and the east at the same time, gets an intriguing mixture of both, with one type of weather coming straight after the other. As a result, Christchurch weather is most enjoyable, which explains a lot about the lifestyle there… but it still rains. After all, this is New Zealand.

Dunedin

Written: 7 December 1996

On the way to Dunedin, I made an overnight stop at Waikouaiti – home to a beautiful little beach where I played my guitar and tried to play my harmonica, much to the delight of the local wildlife – and in the morning I headed south of Oamaru to the Moeraki Boulders.

The Moeraki Boulders are pretty weird. They're big, round balls of rock, which isn't so strange when you've seen the likes of the Devil's Marbles, but they're not in the middle of the

Australian outback, they're on a beach, and they're not formed by cooling and contracting rock splitting into cubes which then erode, as the Marbles were. No, the Moeraki Boulders were formed by accretion, a similar process to that which an oyster uses to create a pearl. Nobody knows how or why the Boulders were formed – except for the Maoris, of course, who have their own story of their creation – but they're a pretty odd sight, sitting there in the middle of the beach. It made a very pleasant stop *en route*, but I had to get to Dunedin for work.

Delightful Dunedin

The Moeraki boulders

When I arrived in Dunedin I met up with Mac, the local Acorn dealer, who turned out to be a real find. Mac is an ex-pat Englishman who, along with his delightful wife Gill, has spent his life in all sorts of interesting places, such as the Bahamas (where he was an air traffic controller), Australia and now New Zealand. They live in the countryside – and by the countryside I mean the middle of bloody nowhere, in a tiny village called Owaka, population about 380, some 120km southwest of Dunedin – in a beautiful house that is mostly self-built. They heat the house via radiator from a solid fuel range in the kitchen, which also doubles as an Aga-type cooker; they grew everything in their beautiful one-acre garden from seed, from trees to hedges to flowers; they brought up their three children in the country, against the problems of low income, harsh weather and a depressed job market; they're both qualified teachers, and are very well educated; and they're wonderful company.

I wax lyrical about Mac and Gill because they looked after me for my entire stay in Dunedin, putting me up in their idyllic home for all but one night. I spent three days working with Mac, visiting schools throughout the Central Otago region and writing articles about them; this entailed spending hours in the car with him, and the conversation never ran dry. Come Friday night we polished off a number of beers and a fair old amount of Wilson's whisky – distilled in Dunedin, no less – and talked well into the night. What a wonderful couple.

Dunedin Folk

For the only night that Mac and Gill couldn't put me up, I was offered a room in the Cable Court Hotel in Dunedin. As luck would have it the night I was there coincided with the hotel's Christmas party, to which all residents were, naturally, invited. So there was the marquee in the car park, with a stack of chilled beers as big as an alcoholic's wet dream, and a barbecue on the side, crammed with people from all sorts of places, as well as a large number of locals who knew the proprietors, and it was all free (even the room, as Mac's company was paying for my luxury accommodation).

I drunkenly nattered to all sorts of people, and made friends with a bunch of folk musicians who played round the pubs of Dunedin. Of course, as always seems to happen with folkies, they were heading off to a session later in the night, and they invited me along; with the amount of alcohol I had drunk, I had a rip-roaring time. I eventually got a lift back to the hotel with a guy named Dudley, who, it turned out, was from the same small village in Staffordshire as me. It's a small planet, this.

Yes, I had a delightful time in Dunedin, with its odd architecture and steep, hilly streets. I had an even more delightful time in Owaka, staying in the country, and by the time I left Owaka on Saturday afternoon, after exploring most of Central Otago in wonderful company, I drove off down the coastal road, heading west along the south coast of the South Island, with not a cloud in the sky. It felt good to be alive.

Southern Scenic Route (East)

Written: 10 December 1996

Tautuku Bay from Florence Hill

Leaving happy Dunedin behind I drove off down the coastal road, heading west along the south coast of the South Island, with not a cloud in the sky.

My first stop was a little walk to Purakaunui Falls, a gushing torrent of water, surrounded by forest that reminded me of the rainforest around Strahan in western Tasmania. As it was getting late, though, I drove straight to Papatowai, home to a beautiful little campsite and the prettiest little bay. That night I realised that I was well and truly back on the road again, with practically no work to do until Nelson, just before I was planning to leave the South Island.

On Sunday I followed the coast road for a bit more, in search of a number of little walks and lookouts on the way. This is one of the most pleasant aspects of driving through this sort of scenery: the large number of nature walks and tracks that only take a few minutes to walk, but that take you through scenery that you would think you'd have to travel to the end of the earth to see. The Tautuku Bay area was my first stop, with some beautiful views from Florence Hill over sweeping forest, reaching right up to the golden sands of a huge beach. This is native bush country, and slowly but surely the bush is advancing into the sea as more sand gets washed up onto the beaches.

Just down from Tautuku Bay, where I rather surprisingly found an obstacle course tucked away in the rainforest, is Lake Wilkie, an inland lake that's hemmed in by sand dunes. A pretty little boardwalk took me through the forest to the lake, which is apparently left over from the ice age. The bush is slowly reclaiming the lake, and there's an interesting collection of signs explaining the process. It's a serene place, with still brown waters and heaps of frogs that swim away as you approach, making the water shimmer as you walk along.

Porpoise and Curio Bay

It gets incredibly windy on the south coast of the South Island – you only have to look at the battered trees

My next port of call was so pretty I decided to stay the night, as I had a number of letters to write. Porpoise Bay is a beautiful half-moon bay with golden sands that stretch as far as the eye can see; here you can see Hobson's dolphins, a rare breed of dolphin playing in the surf, a wonderful sight as you take in the views and soak up the sun. But the most amazing thing about Porpoise Bay is that it backs onto Curio Bay, a different kettle of fish altogether. Curio Bay is rocky in the extreme, with a large shelf of what looks like savage, lumpy volcanic rock, bashed by the sea but exposed at low tide. This shelf is in fact a petrified forest, the remains of a 16 million year old forest that was covered in volcanic ash back in the Jurassic period and preserved, turning into hard rock in the process. It's a strange sight, walking along among these stumps of stone that look exactly like tree stumps – complete with rings in the trunk – except they're made of rock. There are trunks that have obviously fallen over and turned into rocky bark, and all sorts of little trees everywhere, sticking up out of the rock pools. Talk about surreal.

A strange sight on Porpoise Bay beach

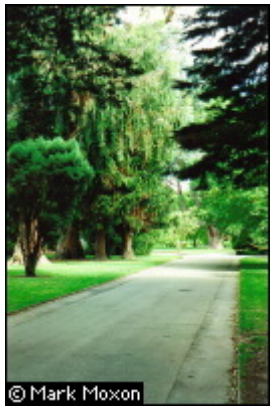
One of the biggest drawbacks, though, of camping by the sea in New Zealand is the dreaded sandfly. There were sandflies on the coast in Western Australia, but New Zealand has managed to elevate the sandfly to an art form: an art form with teeth. Wherever you go, especially in wet, coastal areas, there are swarms of tiny flies, each of which can give you a nip as nasty as a mosquito. I've invested in the recommended insect repellent, but if that doesn't work I may be reduced to taking the advice of a bushman I met in Monkey Mia: mix

70 per cent baby oil and 30 per cent Dettol, and smother yourself in it. You might smell awful, but the sandflies stay away[7]… as well as any other sentient beings, I shouldn't wonder.

On Monday I headed off from Curio Bay, only to find that my clutch wasn't working. For some reason it gave absolutely no resistance when I pressed my foot on it, and only bit in at the very fullest extension: by some quirk of fate, all my clutch fluid had run out overnight. Still, I wasn't going to sit around all day doing nothing and praying for a psychic mechanic to stop by, so I crunched my gears all the way to Slope Point, down some of the most confusing dirt roads I've ever encountered. At least, I *think* I found Slope Point, the southernmost point of the South Island, but I could have been anywhere, to be honest. Never mind: I would definitely have seen Slope Point at some stage, even if I didn't know it at the time, and it wasn't long before I managed to find a garage and some brake fluid, and all was solved. It demonstrated something, anyway: a year ago I wouldn't have even known that a clutch needed brake fluid, but after a year driving round strange countries, you soon pick up what goes on under the bonnet.

Christchurch

Written: 16 December 1996



The peaceful botanic gardens of Christchurch

The second time I visited Christchurch I was very kindly put up by another Acorn stalwart, Steve, and his lovely wife and Jenni, in their house out near the beach in northeast Christchurch. The whole stay was very pleasant, more so because of Steve and Jenni's kids, two-year-old Ellie and nine-month-old Benjy: Ellie took quite a shine to me, driving Steve and Jenni to distraction with her constant demands as to whether Mark could come too, whether Mark was up yet, did Mark want a biscuit, and so on. Mark was quite happy with the attention, to be honest: it appealed to the unrealised paternal side in me.

I stayed with Steve and Jenni for four days, fitting in such pleasantries as a game of golf with Steve and Simon (another Acorn nut and great company to boot); a Christmas tree buying session with Steve; a Christmas tree decorating session with Ellie; a tyre shopping trip to replace all my tyres, inspired by the rather sad flat I got soon after my arrival; a total of four interviews and articles, my final work until Nelson; a pizza and video session on Saturday night with Simon and some of his pals, which, after living the life of a traveller, was worryingly enjoyable; some very, very strong and very, very drinkable beer at Chats, a lovely little pub round the corner from Steve's house; and some final planning for Christmas and the rest of my time in the South Island.

Peel Forest

Written: 18 December 1996

The view from Allans Track

On Monday 16th I finally left Christchurch, promising to come back for some more of that wonderful Christchurch beer when crossing back over the Southern Alps via Arthur's Pass in late January.

My stop for the night was a rest area in Rakaia Gorge, a beautiful river valley with the towering Mt Hutt on the far side. The wind whistled down the gorge like a bloody great football crowd squeezing down a small alley, and it was a good job I was kipping in the car rather than a tent, or I'd have been blown to bits – it's amazing how nice and safe you feel in the back of a big old Toyota, whatever the weather. It was a very clear night, so I lay there looking at the moon and stars, thinking how pleasant it all was as

[7] In the Malaysian rainforest this would prove an invaluable piece of advice – it genuinely works. Though you *do* smell awful.

the trees bent over and bits of bush went hurtling down the valley. I soon noticed it when I got up for breakfast and my Coco Pops nearly got blown away, forcing me to retreat into the passenger seat for my chocolate fix (a treat to myself after eating porridge for a month).

Windy Tuesday morning saw Zed and I trundling up the road to Peel Forest Park, a delightful reserve on the foothills of the mountains, just north of Geraldine. Peel Forest is famous for its native bush, something that is pretty rare with the onslaught of farming and commercial forestry: until now the only forests I'd seen were the pine forests of the North Island and the towering kauri forests of Northland. Native bush is much more interesting: when you look at pine forests, they're a rather monochromatic green, but native bush is much more varied, and its texture feels far more organic. As for walking through it, it's like the rainforest meets the Big Trees, with the native podocarp trees (such as New Zealand's biggest tree, the kahikatea) towering above the rest of the forest, forming three distinct canopies: upper, middle and scrub.

The amazingly flat Canterbury plains as seen from Peel Forest

I went ballistic in Peel Forest, spending the whole day walking my legs down to the knees. Walks like the Allans, Fern and Kaikawaka Tracks; the lovely little waterfalls such as Emily Falls, Rata Falls and Acland Falls; the interesting nature walk of Dennistoun Bush… I loved 'em all. As for the big trees, they have to be seen to be believed; they reminded me of the crazy trees in the southwest of Western Australia, but these were different again. Disaster nearly fell when I drove off from one of the walks having left my trusty bush hat on the roof, but luckily it had blown into the middle of the road, so I was able to spot it and rescue it when I drove back in search of my trusty (and by now rather crusty) travelling companion. A close shave indeed…

That night all hell broke loose. If I'd thought Rakaia Gorge was windy, I was in for a surprise. Despite the fact that I'd pitched my tent behind a row of thick bushes the wind was chaotic, and after one of my guy ropes snapped and the main tent pole smacked me right on top of my head as I was trying to read my book, I abandoned the idea of sleeping under canvas, took the tent down and retreated to Zed. Thank goodness for my Corona: I wouldn't have been able to finish my chapter without him.

Twizel

Written: 19 December 1996

The azure lakes of the Southern Alps are coloured turquoise by 'rock flour'

After a good night's sleep in the immovable Zed, I drove to Twizel on Wednesday 18th. The journey itself was quite stunning: I've reached the mountains now, the real mountains, and it's quite breathtaking, these peaks glinting in the sun with their snowy summits and savage slopes. The first real sight on the way was Lake Tekapo, which suddenly appeared as I crested a hill, spread out in front of me. I was agape. In front of me was a stunningly turquoise lake, complete with a backdrop of mountains: and when I say turquoise, I mean turquoise, as if someone had put colouring in the water. The colour is down to rock flour – tiny particles of rock suspended in the glacial melt water – and it is quite the strangest sight in the world. The little town of Tekapo sits innocently on the end of Lake Tekapo, complete with the sweet little Church of the Good Shepherd whose view from the altar takes some beating, and which I managed to photograph when the busload of Asian tourists had finally buggered off. What a gorgeous place.

After following the tourist route that runs alongside a similarly turquoise canal (a part of the area's dam system) I arrived at Lake Pukaki. Lake Pukaki is stunning: I'd arrived at the south end, from where you can easily see Mt Cook, the highest peak in New Zealand and Australia combined, towering over the skyline. Well, it was a little clouded when I was there, so I didn't actually see Mt Cook itself, but all the other peaks were visible, and with the almost fluorescent lake, it proved a beautiful spot for lunch (complete with copious Kiwi fruit, the most

wondrous fruit that, now it's in season, only costs 95 cents per kilogram… which is a lot of Kiwi fruit).

The Church of the Good Shepherd is perched on the shores of Lake Tekapo

Lake Pukaki is at the end of the Tasman Glacier – Tekapo is also at the end of a glacier – which helps explain why there's so much rock flour in the water, but it also means the water is bloody cold. Apparently people swim here in the summer, but there's no accounting for the insane.

When I got to Twizel, a little town south of Lake Pukaki, I put my final film of article photos into the chemist, checked out the local DOC office, and booked into the lovely Ruataniwha motor camp, perched on the banks of another turquoise lake, Lake Ruataniwha. I downloaded my email, did my washing – ah, bliss! – and settled down to enjoy the beautiful sunshine and total lack of wind. I rounded off the day with a quick walk down to the shores of the lake just as the sun started to sink behind a set of rolling hills, picking out every little undulation on the hillsides. I was reminded of the mountains in the Pilbara, as Scott and I camped at their feet on the final day of our bushwalk, all those months ago.

The hills behind Twizel are reminiscent of the Australian northwest

And as I stood there, looking at the sun sinking slowly behind the hills, I thought of all the other sunsets I'd seen around Australia and New Zealand. The sun slipping down behind the dunes of Cleaverville Beach; the orange glow of the Perth skyline as the sun set behind Kings Park; Kata Tjuta coming alive with the dying beams of sunset; the barrier reef reflecting every ray at Cape Range; the deep red gorges of Karijini simulating sunset halfway through the afternoon; the humid and bloated sun dropping behind the wetlands of Kakadu; stripes and domes slowly fading as the moon rose over the Bungle Bungles; and now, the sun casting shadows through the pine forests overlooking turquoise Lake Ruataniwha. It's wonderful to kick back when the sun's setting and think of all the places where you've seen the same thing look so different. Therein lies the legacy of travel: memories.

Mt Cook

Written: 22 December 1996

Posing by the track to the Mueller Hut with growling Mt Sefton in the background

Thursday came with the rain. Until now the rain has been miserable but generally warm, but in the mountains it's cold, and when things get wet they don't dry. Driving to Mt Cook village was pleasant enough, but when I arrived the clouds had really gathered, spilling over the mountains and dribbling constant rain on the village. I'd been planning to pop up a couple of mountains and stay in some of the available DOC huts, but the weather pissed on that idea, so I did one quick walk up to the Red Tarns (a tarn being a mountain lake), and then hit the public shelter.

Public shelters are great in the wet, because everyone who isn't living in an expensive hotel hangs out there for shelter. For some reason the shelter was full of Australians, most of whom were staying at the campsite and had taken refuge from their leaky tents in the cold but dry shelter. There were three mad bastards from Melbourne who were planning an assault on the Copland Pass, one of the toughest walks in the area; Ben and Mira, a lovely couple from Perth who were cycling round New Zealand; Grenville, the mountaineer from another planet who obviously wanted to die before he got old; and a Swede who'd decided to join the Copland Pass team, despite his obvious lack of gear and training. It was all good entertainment as the rain drove down – by all accounts the weather in New Zealand is

particularly miserable this year, with spring arriving very late (if at all). If I hear the word ‘unseasonable’ once more, I’ll break down.

Never mind; I spent a couple of days just hanging round in the shelters, sticking it out and sleeping in an increasingly condensed car, and to be honest it was fun with the camaraderie bred of being stuck together with others while the elements do their worst. The snow poured down on the mountains while the rain poured down on us, and the NZ$1.60 pies we got from the pub tasted like heaven after all those camping rice dishes.

Looking up the Hooker Glacier, with Mt Cook in cloud in the background

Then there were the keas. Keas are New Zealand mountain parrots, a highly intelligent and endangered species. It’s easy to understand why they’re so endangered, because they’re the ornithological equivalent of juvenile delinquents; leave any food around, and the keas will steal it; leave the seats on your bicycle overnight, and the keas will have torn them to shreds by the morning; stay in the public shelter overnight, and the keas will wake you up in the middle of the night by dropping stones on the tin roof and letting them clatter down the corrugations. There are even stories of keas locking trampers in their huts, having watched how humans push the bolts shut. One wonders if the kea is endangered because no matter how much you like birds, you end up wanting to kill the little buggers every time they fly in for a squawk. It’s great fun, as long as it’s not *your* kit that’s being ravaged.

The Hooker Glacier

The morning of Saturday 21st started in exactly the same way as the previous two days with despondent skies and constant rain, but by lunchtime there were signs that the sky might clear, so Ben, Mira and I decided to hedge our bets and go off on a short walk up the Hooker Glacier, the one that leads to the foot of Mt Cook. How to describe the views? When the clouds cleared, there was this beast of a mountain, reaching up to an almost-perfect pyramid peak, snow-capped and icing-sugar white. The tranquillity, only broken by the huge glacial river that you cross on two swing bridges, has to be experienced; these mountains have been here a lot longer than any of us, and they’re quite content just to sit there, minding their own business, like old men on a park bench staring at the world passing by.

The snowy peak of Mt Sefton looms over the campsite in Mt Cook village

It’s worth introducing the mountains, even though it’s hard to really understand these peaks without actually seeing them firsthand. Mt Cook is the biggest, of course. It sits at the northern end of the Hooker Glacier, with three main peaks; the one you can see from Mt Cook village is a lovely pyramid shape, but the highest peak is just behind it, which you can only see by viewing the mountain from a different angle. On the western side of the glacier (that’s the left as you look at Mt Cook) is Mt Sefton, with the Footstool just to the right of it; Mt Sefton is very snowy and icy, and there are regular booms as the snow avalanches off the slopes. This is, of course, happening all the time throughout these mountains, but Mt Cook is much further away than Sefton, so you only really get to hear Sefton’s grumbling. Further to the left of Sefton are the Sealy Ranges, with peaks Mt Ollivier, Mt Kitchener, and a host of others, and the Mt Cook campsite is at the base of the Sealy Ranges. Finally, to the east of the glacier (the right) is Mt Wakefield, the first peak in a range that stretches all along the glacier’s east side, right up to Mt Cook, and further east still is the Tasman Glacier.

Looking down into the Hooker Glacier from the Mueller Hut, with Mt Cook in cloud at the top left

Back to the Hooker Glacier, though. Glaciers are huge ‘rivers’ of ice that slowly move downhill, carving out valleys and leaving behind rock debris known as the moraine. The Hooker Glacier is a beast indeed, and walking up to it involves following the valley that it has

carved over the years – mainly in the Ice Age when it stretched a hell of a lot further than it now does – until you reach the terminal lake, formed by the melt-waters of the glacier. Cold isn't the word; terminal lakes aren't exactly swimming pools, which is made rather obvious as the icebergs float past. Ben and I scooted up along the moraine shores of the lake, almost to the strangely blue glacial wall, but it was pretty hairy scrambling along slopes that could collapse at any moment, so after some exploration we headed back to camp to watch the sun set over the mountains.

The sunset was another to add to the ever-growing list of memorable day-ends. The orange glow of an iridescent snow peak with clouds swirling round the ranges, moving at breakneck speeds in the savage crosswinds at that altitude, is as unique as any sight you'll see. Mt Cook is 3754m (12,315 ft) high, some 2992m (9815 ft) above the town; that's big in anyone's book. The view from the hills around the campsite was just perfect, and we spent the night celebrating the break in the weather with the group who were planning to head off on the Copland route in the morning, while Ben and I made our own little plan.

The Mueller Hut

Sunday arrived to clear skies and savage winds. The heavy snowfalls on the mountains were most noticeable on Sefton and the Sealys, but Ben and I were determined; we were going to climb the 1006m (3300 ft) from the campsite to the Mueller Hut, right on top of the Sealy ridge. We packed our backpacks – well, I did, as Ben wanted to travel light, and only took a daypack of clothes and a bit of food – and we set off on the track to the Sealy Tarns, a pleasant set of lakes about halfway up the mountainside and well below the snowline.

Ben leaning into the wind outside the beautifully placed Mueller Hut

Meanwhile we had a serious climb to tackle. The snow had long since obliterated all signs of a track, and we had to make up our route, not so easy as the hut is just over the top of the range and is therefore invisible until you're almost on top of it. The route we chose was straight up to where we believed the hut was, skirting a precarious-looking snow slide and avoiding most of the drifts. The wind was strong, the snow freezing, and I was glad of the ski pants and gloves I'd borrowed as I climbed a near-vertical snowy moraine on all fours, a full pack on my back. In retrospect we must have been slightly mad; one false step or one slip, both of which were very possible on the very loose stones and rocks we were clambering up, and it was a fall down a few hundred feet into goodness only knows what. To be honest we were both more than a little spooked by the whole thing, but the sight of the dunny roof after hours of sweaty climbing made it all worthwhile, and it wasn't long before we'd made it to the hut.

One of the wonderful things about tramping in New Zealand – or, indeed, mountaineering, which is more what the trip to the Mueller Hut turned out to be, the way we'd gone – is the large number of huts dotted around the National Parks. Australia doesn't have such a proliferation of huts, which enable you to do long walks without worrying about where to stay, and it's one of the reasons New Zealand is such a walker's paradise. The Mueller Hut, one of the more popular huts in the Mt Cook area, is a cosy little building, sleeping 12 people and containing a kitchen and fuel and water supplies.

Mueller Glacier from the peak of Mt Ollivier

It also has what has been described as the best alpine view in the world, looking over the whole Hooker Glacier on one side, with stunning views of Mt Cook and Mt Sefton, and the Mueller Glacier on the other. It's pretty impossible to get across the sheer power of being up in a serious mountain range; it's a little like trying to explain to a teetotaller what it feels like to be drunk. In some ways the sight was just as moving as that of Uluru, because these mountains aren't just lumps of rock and ice, they're awesome enough to be almost religiously powerful. It's small wonder that the Maoris regard Mt Cook – which they call Aoraki, or 'Cloud Piercer' – as a sacred place; I spent a lot of the early evening up at Mueller sitting in the freezing wind and just soaking up the whole environment (after having made a snowman, of course).

The whole Mueller experience was pure excellence. The other people in the hut – eight in all, including myself and Ben, Nick and Caroline from Kent, Peter and Steve from New Zealand, Paul from Australia and Martin from Denmark – were great company, and we played cards after dark as the wind howled and shook the hut, making it sound like the inside of a combustion engine. The wind has to be felt to be believed, constantly gusting and at times blowing so hard you simply can't walk into it, and have to dig your feet into the snow to avoid being blown over; it also never let up, all night. Still, the bunks were cosy enough, if you ignored the frosting breath and shaking walls, and soon enough we all woke up, on top of the world, on the morning of Monday 23rd.

Imagine waking up to such a view; this isn't a pleasant little alpine village ski resort-type view, it's savage, elemental stuff, and it's pretty invigorating. Wanting to extend our stay as long as possible, Ben and I climbed up nearby Mt Ollivier, the peak of which is at 6288 ft, battling against evil winds from hell and sleet being blown in our faces. Luckily the snow had melted quite a lot since our ascent the day before so we made the summit without incident, and the astounding views of the Mueller Glacier were well worth the frozen hands and feet. Unfortunately, by the time we got back to the hut and had made a cup of tea, it was time to get back down to the campsite.

Being blown about on top of Mt Ollivier, with Mt Cook behind me on the right

Climbing a mountain is one thing, but getting down is quite another. The whole point of climbing safely is *not* to fall down, but when you're trying to walk down a slope that's steeper than 45° and it's covered in a good foot of snow (and often more) it's challenging keeping your balance. After skirting the ridge to avoid the rocks we'd originally followed up, we started to make our descent down a huge snow channel… and that's when we really discovered how to have fun on a mountain. It all began with Ben slipping over and sliding down the slope on his butt, only managing to stop at the bottom by digging in his heels. I tried the same thing, but seeing as I was carrying a big pack with all our possessions in it, I just sank into the snow and didn't manage a slide. Instead I just ran straight down the mountainside, taking huge moon steps through the snow, trying to stay ahead of the mini-avalanche that Ben's slide had started. Before you could say 'sheeeit!' we were halfway down to the snow line, covering the same distance that had taken us a good hour to climb in about 30 seconds.

Still, the best buzz came when I found a huge snow slide that was still hard enough for me to go down with a pack on, and I slid down on my behind, discovering that you could steer by clenching the relevant buttock; flying by the seat of your pants, I suppose you could call it. It's one thing sledging down a snowy hill, but throwing yourself down a mountain with a heavy pack for added momentum gets my vote every time. It certainly cut our descent time down, and we were down in the campsite after about two-and-a-half hours of sliding and tramping, compared to a day's walk to get up.

Hotels and Christmas

Not surprisingly we spent the afternoon cleaning up (my first shower in five days, which made it practically orgasmic) and generally relaxing. We then popped into The Hermitage, the very posh hotel in Mt Cook (over NZ$200 a night) and soaked up the atmosphere, the firelight and the piano playing[8] while our washing dried, and then it was back to the camp for some well-earned rest. It was also pleasant to reflect that the weather had turned sour again, and we'd made it through the whole experience in the nick of time; damn, my car felt nice and warm that night.

My bring-your-own snowman posing in the snow of the Southern Alps

[8] An interesting observation. The piano man, suited up and playing the sort of seamless popular-tune piano medleys that you always here in hotels – guaranteed to offend no one and to bring a smile to the lips of any ancient and loaded widows in the room, in other words – had just one book from which he played his pretty little ditties. The name of the book? *101 Great Songs for Buskers*…

Christmas Eve came on a high-pressure front, bringing with it the best weather I've yet seen in New Zealand. By lunchtime there wasn't a cloud in the sky, making Mt Cook shine like a huge beacon, and the three of us popped into town, stocked up on genuine Christmas fayre (as the retail trade likes to call it) and packed our packs. No way were we going to spend the Festive Season in the campground, where the wardens had earned the nicknames of Mr and Mrs Himmler (with their friendly neighbours Mr and Mrs Goebbels); nope, we were going bush for Santa's visit. The place: Ball Shelter, some 16km from Mount Cook village, up the huge Tasman Glacier. Ball Shelter sleeps about six, has very few amenities, and has stunning views of The Minarets, a pretty little multiple-peak mountain that's heavily covered in snow; it's not a bad spot for Crimbo, if you ask me.

DOC, the beloved Department of Conservation, weren't quite so festive spirited, though. The staff at the Mt Cook office were completely off-hand and told us the walk up the Tasman Glacier to Ball Shelter was boring and that the views weren't any good, which was an interesting approach. In the event they were quite, quite wrong.

A Glacial Christmas

Written: 25 December 1996

The Minarets on Christmas Eve, with the Tasman Glacier in the foreground

Christmas Eve came on a high-pressure front, bringing with it the best weather I'd yet seen in New Zealand. By lunchtime there wasn't a cloud in the sky, making Mt Cook shine like a huge beacon, and the three of us popped into town, stocked up on genuine Christmas fayre (as the retail trade likes to call it) and stuffed our packs to the brim. No way were we going to spend the festive season in the campground; instead we were going to Ball Shelter, some 16km from Mt Cook village, up the huge Tasman Glacier. Ball Shelter sleeps about six, has very few amenities, and has stunning views of the Minarets, a pretty little multiple-peak mountain that's heavily covered in snow; it's not a bad spot for Christmas.

The trek to Ball Shelter, over 9km of rocky paths from the ice-face of the Tasman Glacier (the 'terminal', as it's known), was very pleasant as we followed a small valley, surrounded by steep, rocky slopes on both sides (where avalanches frequently happen in winter). However, what we didn't realise was that this valley was running up the west side of the Tasman Glacier, so when the track finally went over the top of the little valley wall, there was the glacier laid out in front of us.

Ben and Mira at the door to Ball Shelter

Breathtaking isn't the word; the glacier is about 3km wide, carving out this huge valley through the mountains under a covering of evil-looking moraine. It's a lunar landscape, but one with watery potholes everywhere, gurgling and cracking as the whole mass slowly grinds down towards the terminal lake. The hut is precariously balanced on the side of the glacier, so that about 20 feet from the front door is a long, vertical, 150m drop into the depths of the glacier; it's some view.

So there we were, the three of us, in the middle of nowhere, with not a cloud in the sky as the sun slowly slipped behind the craggy peaks. After lighting a fire and doing as little as possible after the long haul, we started to cook; but this was not just any meal, this was our Christmas meal. The menu was as follows, all created on a camping stove in the middle of absolutely nowhere:

Entrée
Asparagus spears in butter and black pepper
Main dish
Pan-fried loins of lamb
Petit pois

Carrots
Creamed potatoes
Dessert
Christmas pudding and fresh cream
Coffee
With mince pies
Beverages
Delegat's Cabernet Merlot 1995
Guinness Extra Stout
Black Mac
Speight's Distinction Ale

Christmas Eve sunset over the Minarets

It was without a doubt the best meal I'd had on the road for some time, and the views made the front room at Mt Cook village's famous Hermitage Hotel look pretty poor. The clear skies and twinkling stars, the pastel-coloured afterglow on the peaks as a full moon rose over the Minarets; it takes a lot to beat that sort of vista. It was the perfect place for Santa to fly across the sky in his sleigh…

Waking up on Christmas morning to total peace is, if your family is anything like mine, novel. Looking down at the Tasman Glacier, still gurgling away, made quite a change from looking through the mists of a hangover, and before long the kettle was boiling and Christmas breakfast was on the go, consisting of:

Breakfast
Pan-fried chipolatas with sweet chilli sauce
Haricot beans in tomato sauce
Scrambled eggs
Focaccia
Real Ceylon tea

Laden down by packs and full stomachs, we sauntered back to the car park, had some lunch, and drove back into the village to recover. After a shady incident involving an exploding stove in the public shelter, we showered and went up to the Hermitage for a lazy afternoon staring at Mt Cook, Mt Sefton and the cloudless sky. And so ended an excellent and unusual Christmas.

Queenstown

Written: 26 December 1997

Queenstown is perched on the edge of picturesque Lake Wakatipu

On Boxing Day, after spending the night in the Blue Lake public shelter with Ben and Mira – no Himmlers or camp fees, but then again, no right to be there either – I said my goodbyes and started south through the Lindis Pass towards Queenstown, making a lunch stop on the way at the historic Kawarau Suspension Bridge, a lovely little bridge across a deep gorge in the mountains. Well, it would have been lovely, but it's near Queenstown, the tourist centre of the South Island, and so, of course, Kawarau is now a bungee bridge, and being right on the main highway, it's a popular stop for busloads of tourists. Still, it was interesting to see my first bungee bridge, a small one at 43m high (the biggest, Skippers Canyon Bridge, is 69m high, and is also near Queenstown) but at NZ$130 a jump I decided to stick to watching.

As for Queenstown, I only visited it quickly to do some very expensive shopping and go for a quick wander: I was going to be coming back in January, so figured I'd explore it properly then. My first impressions were of a beautiful little town on the edge of Lake

Wakatipu, with mountains sloping all around and loads of interesting and trendy shops and cafes, full of beautiful people, posers and backpackers who were only after one thing: a laugh. I'd been warned that Queenstown is the Costa of the South Island, but I was beginning to get immune to tourists now, after such a long time avoiding whatever they do, so I bought what I had to buy and moved on.

Lake Ponderings

Written: 28 December 1996

Relaxing at Henry Creek; actually, I am happy here, despite the slight sneer

The one thing I really miss – and I mean *really* miss – when I'm travelling through this world is my music. There are, of course, plenty of other things I miss as well, such as family, friends, pints and regular income… but that's about all I can think of, to be honest, and I'm surviving without the pints and regular income perfectly well. Music, however, is a really painful vacuum.

There I am, watching another sunset over a Fiordland lake, and everything's perfect except for the soundtrack. Sure, the gentle lapping waves are beautiful, the chirping birds are probably rare and the complete lack of human intrusion is pleasant, but nothing would beat a bit of Pink Floyd to go down with the sun. Or I'm sitting in the middle of a busy New Zealand town – yes, there are some, believe it or not – and the riff from a Led Zeppelin track pumps through my head, making me want to start playing my air-guitar right there in the street. Driving requires all sorts of mood music, from vicious metal riffs to cool, ambient vibes, depending on the type of journey and the speed of the car, and although I have a few tapes that I'm playing to death, I really, really miss being able to take CDs from my collection at home, and play them.

I've just finished reading a book about U2, something I picked up in Invercargill from the second-hand book shop for a few dollars: it appealed to me, despite being nearly ten years out of date, because I have fond memories of seeing U2 live at Wembley Stadium on their Zooropa tour. I was dumbstruck then – it was a powerful event – and reading this book really brought it all home, how much the idea of carving out a career in something like music has always appealed to me. I'm definitely over the 'I wanna be a rock star' stage – I have neither the talent nor the confidence, unfortunately – but whereas my ideal job as a teenager was to be a computer magazine editor, a job I realised well before I expected I would, I now look at the perfect job as something more artistic, whether it's writing, music or something I haven't discovered yet.

I've often given thought to what I will do when I return, and the possibilities are intriguing: work for a technology company; go back into journalism; go back to university and studying a course that I actually care about this time; or move into an area which is totally new to me, like media or music. There's little use in planning anything at this stage, but whatever the future holds, the present is pretty damn rosy. Oscar Wilde once wrote, 'A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?' and the same can be said about Fiordland, the huge area of wilderness in the southwest of the South Island (except Fiordland and cigarettes couldn't be more different from each other). According to the guidebooks it's the highlight of most people's trip to New Zealand, and it's certainly been my highlight, though probably for different reasons to the madding crowd. I've been tramping myself into oblivion, sometimes quite literally. Perhaps my next career aspiration will be to be a professional walker?

Kepler Track

Written: 1 January 1997

The little town of Te Anau is home to the Kepler Track and Fiordland National Park headquarters, and stocking up for the Kepler was pretty easy, as it's one of the more molly-coddled walks in the country, with huge, luxurious huts, gas cookers, plenty of beds and a very high standard of track. I was going to take four days over the walk – about as long as

you can take, but I wasn't in a hurry – so I sorted out all my tramping gear, bought what I needed, and, after exploring Te Anau and its various points of interest, I headed up the road to the first DOC campsite I came to – Ten Mile Bush – and camped. I never really got to see Ten Mile Bush because it was dark when I arrived, but when I woke up and saw that it was little more than a normal rest area, I popped up to the next one, Henry Creek, and spent Saturday 28th unwinding and packing in preparation for the walk.

Henry Creek was a divine stop. Te Anau town is on the southernmost tip of Lake Te Anau, and up the eastern side of the lake are quite a few DOC campsites, all primitive, but all situated in beautiful scenery. Crashing out on the lakeside, sunbathing and swimming, reading and sleeping… it's a hard life, and the perfect preparation for a long walk.

This warning sign in Te Anau is spot on; keas really are delinquents

The weather was excellent, which surprised me as Fiordland is renowned for its serious rain (Milford Sound, for example, gets between 7m and 9m of rain per year, depending on which book you read, but whatever the figure, that's a hell of a lot of rain), and by the time I had to leave early on Sunday morning for Te Anau, I was about as ready for the tramp as I was going to get.

I'd chosen the 67km Kepler Track as a gentle introduction to real tramping; the Mueller Hut and Ball Shelter were both 'real' tramps, but neither required carrying serious provisions (although we managed to pack a fair bit in for Christmas, of course). The Kepler is one of the eight Great Walks, which are slightly more expensive than other walks (or much more expensive in the case of the Milford and Routeburn) but which are reckoned to be the classic Kiwi walks. Of course, all this is marketing claptrap, and it's a way of focussing tourists on those tracks that DOC has put money into maintaining, but they're all well worth doing in some way.

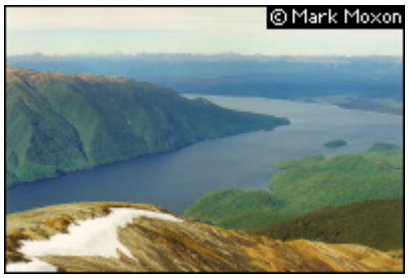
Across the lake is Te Anau, the pretty Fiordland town where the round trip of the Kepler Track starts and finishes

The Kepler Track

The Kepler Track is a round trip, beginning and ending just down the road from Te Anau, so I parked in the car park and set off early on Sunday, pack bulging and muscles as yet pleasantly ache-free. Day 1 took me from Te Anau to Mt Luxmore Hut, climbing up the mountain along 14.1km of track. To be honest I found the rainforest rather tedious after a while, but during a stop for lunch at the limestone bluffs about two-thirds up Luxmore, I fell into conversation with another tramper, Jo from Sydney, and we fell in step – even though her's were shorter than mine – and the rest of the day flew by.

Mt Luxmore Hut

We arrived at the hut in early afternoon after breaking through the bush-line to wonderful views that made the long, slow climb worthwhile; we picked out our bunks, and decided to explore the area. The first stop, the Luxmore Cave, was well worth it; the cave is just a big slit in the ground, down which you can crawl with a torch, and before long Jo and I were stuck in pitch darkness, with only a couple of Maglites to guide us.



South Fiord from Mt Luxmore

That's when I remembered the guide on the tour I had take in the Bungle Bungles, who had taken us into one of the Bungle caves, turned off his torch, and made us stand there for about five minutes, while our eyes got used to the gloom. Slightly spooked, we did the same in Luxmore, and sure enough we could see all sorts of strange shapes and shadows from the tiny amount of light seeping in through the cracks; Jo had never experienced it before, and was suitably impressed.

To round off the day and expend our excess energy we decided to hoof up Mt Luxmore itself, as the weather was clear and the views would be stunning. We were right; there, 1471m above sea level, the views over Lake Te Anau to the northeast, towards Mt Aspiring in the north, over Fiordland to the west and to the south, are awe-inspiring. The climb also helped to build up an appetite; pasta, tuna, tomato purée, cayenne pepper and mixed herbs never tasted so good.

Into the Bush

Day 2 was a gorgeous trek through the mountaintops, made all the more beautiful by the continuing good weather. After 18.6km and a seriously steep descent through more rainforest – but this time a rainforest filled with babbling brooks, squawking birds and wonderful waterfalls – I arrived at the next hut, Iris Burn, in time for lunch. This points out one of the delights of easy tracks like the Kepler; the scheduled time for a day's walk is normally five to six hours, but as with most DOC times, I ended up doing them in about three to four hours, so even with a lie in I'd make it to the next hut for lunch, leaving ample time for exploration.

Wild keas in the bush on the Kepler Track

Iris Burn sits in the big glacial valley through which the Iris Burn River flows, and just down from the hut is a powerful waterfall that's created a clear swimming hole that would be perfect if the water wasn't so bloody cold; I went in up to my knees before realising that I couldn't feel my toes any more. The ferocious sandflies were also a bit too hungry for my taste, so I headed back to the hut, where the night culminated in a search for a kiwi, led by the hut warden's husband, but without success; we did, however, get to see lots of glow worms lighting up the forest canopy like the night sky.

Day 3 awoke to cloud covering the mountaintops, which just goes to show what luck I'd had in deciding when to do the track. Ahead of me by a day was a huge group who had met another huge group coming the other way, which meant there had been 76 people in the Iris Burn Hut the night before I arrived; and if I'd been a day later I'd have missed all the views on the mountain path. The 17.2km track from Iris Burn to Motarau Hut was, however, low level, so before long I was tucked up in Motarau Hut on the edges of Lake Manapouri, watching the world go by from under sandfly-proof clothes.

That night, being New Year's Eve, I cracked open the 250ml bottle of port I'd been lugging for the last 50km (how's that for dedication?), and the other English speakers followed suit with a bottle of gin and tonic, a bottle of bourbon and a small bottle of champagne to complete the makeshift bar. We made it through to midnight, when we went out on the verandah and sang 'Auld Lang Syne' at the tops of our voices, much to the bemusement of the Germans in the hut who were seeing 1997 in with some comparatively colourless celebrations of their own.

Lake Manapouri

Day 4, New Year's Day, entailed a rather uneventful 17.1km walk through more forest, before I arrived at the car. The Kepler Track had been pleasant, but it only served to whet my appetite; I now had to find the next challenge.

Hollyford-Pyke Route

Written: 9 January 1997

Not wasting a great deal of time after finishing the Kepler Track, I got back on the road and headed up the Milford Road, past Lake Te Anau, to Gunn's Camp at Hollyford. I'd decided on my next plan: to conquer the Hollyford Track. The Hollyford Track is a step up from the Kepler Track, being a 56km track from the road end to the sea… and another 56km back again. The track is much harder and the return distance considerable, but I was feeling pretty confident after the Kepler, and not at all tired, so the Hollyford it was. I'd already stocked up with ten

days' worth of food just in case, so after a night at Gunn's camp, I headed for the start of the track.

The warning sign at the start of the Pyke Route… and they're absolutely right

You might be wondering what a tramper has to carry on his or her back; well, for a long walk like the Hollyford, it's a hell of a lot. For a start, this is Fiordland, so you need clothes for all types of weather, from boiling sun to freezing hail, so the clothes take up a fair amount of weight, with waterproof tops and bottoms, long trousers, shorts, T-shirts, sweatshirts, plenty of socks, swimming trunks… and more. Then there's the food for ten days (always take a spare day or two, just in case you get stranded), which in my case included 1kg of muesli, powdered milk, 40 Ryvita, cheese, meat paste, seven packets of rice, four tins of tuna, tomato paste, spices, coffee, sugar… need I elaborate? Throw in my Trangia cooker and half a litre of meths, and it's getting heavier. Add in a sleeping bag and inflatable pillow, a toiletries/first aid bag, things like torches, candles, compass, map, book and so on, and you have your survival pack for over a week.

I could hardly lift the bugger as I set off for the track, but it gets lighter as you go on, and you get fitter, which can't be a bad thing.

Dawn mist rising off the Hollyford River near the start of the Hollyford Track

The rain started straight away. Still, I couldn't moan, seeing as I'd had four days of glorious weather on the Kepler, so my first day, tramping to the Alabaster Hut on Lake Alabaster, wasn't that thrilling; I couldn't see anything of the Hollyford Valley that I was walking down, and the promised mountains weren't anywhere to be seen. Still, the motley collection of people I found in the hut soon dispelled thoughts of the rain; if the Kepler had been full of rather predictable traveller-types, the Hollyford was full of New Zealanders from all walks of life. From the six Tararua Tramping Club members to the two mad adventurers who had braved insane terrain to get there from Queenstown, the conversation flowed as freely as the water down the panes.

I met a guy called Rick who had the same sort of plan as me – nine days to go to the end of the track and back – and a family from Timaru who provided their own little soap opera in family politics for us all to enjoy, with an ancient but tough-as-old-boots mother taking her three late-twenties kids on the track, as well as two tag-along American friends who were well out of their depth. The Hollyford, being constructed as a one-way track, ensured that I'd end up with most of these people every night (except the Tararuas who were heading south); this seemed a reasonable prospect, as long as nobody snored. Luckily nobody did.

Tempting Tracks

Perfect reflections in the southern end of tranquil Lake Alabaster

One of the stories the Tararuas told was of the Pyke Loop. The Hollyford is a one-way track, but there is a continuation of the track up the coast and back down the Pyke river, coming out at the Alabaster Hut again; if you imagine the whole loop as a Y-shape, then the Hollyford Track goes from the bottom of the Y to the top of the left fork, and the Pyke Loop crosses the top of the Y and back down to the stem. Although this loop track sounds ideal, making the only repeated section of the walk the last day from Alabaster to the road end, it's not really a sensible option; it's classed as a route rather than a track, which means it's hardly marked, it's not maintained, and if it rains you're in serious trouble, with flooding rivers, big swamps and only two huts on the entire 60km stretch.

When I'd first looked at the walk details for the Hollyford I'd briefly entertained the idea of doing the Pyke Loop, only to read that the walk was only suitable for experienced, well-equipped parties, so I'd stuck to the Hollyford. Half of the Tararua group had just returned from the Pyke Loop, and with mud up to your waist, fast-flowing rivers and seriously thick

scrub lacerating your legs, it sounded like the Hollyford was the better bet. Still, the Pyke would have been interesting to see if I'd been with a group.

Wild scenery along the Hollyford River, just south of Lake McKerrow

The second day took me through forest bog and along the first section of the cutely named Demon Trail, up the eastern shore of the north-south Lake McKerrow (the left branch of the Y, if you like). The rain had mercifully stopped, producing some interesting views in the morning over Lake Alabaster, with wispy clouds hanging round the tops – 'hogs backs' as Rick said the clouds were called – but the track was pretty nasty, coming complete with big mud puddles to negotiate, and heaps of moss-covered boulders that were even slimier than a Kiwi politician. It didn't take too long, though, and was a pretty little walk, and by lunchtime I'd arrived at the Demon Trail Hut, where I found a beautiful little beach and washed all my clothes. By now the sun had truly come out, and apart from the sandflies, who were epic all the way along the track, it was bliss. I also met more people – Phil, Tash and Steve from Christchurch – and before long we were all yarning the evening away. Too late we all discovered that Phil's snoring was about as loud as a human being's can be, but after a day's tramping it takes considerable noise to keep you awake, and besides, I'd packed my earplugs. There were some tired looking buggers the next morning, though…

Hokuri Hut peeping out of the Hollyford forest

Day 3, Saturday 4th, consisted of the rest of the Demon Trail to Hokuri Hut, almost at the northern tip of Lake McKerrow, and apart from a couple of breaks in the bush, it was mainly tricky and slippery track, undulating along the lakeside, but totally enclosed by thick forest. Hokuri Hut was a welcome sight, and here I met Bill and Gary, who had just come from a trip anti-clockwise round the Pyke Loop. They looked in a real state, with scratched legs, raw elbows, and some serious stories. Gary kept on going south, but Bill stayed the night and kept us all entertained with tales of places like Lake Wilmot and the Black Swamp, both evil spots by the sound of it. That's when I caught the glint in Rick's eye.

Gary, you see, had got the wrong end of the stick. I'd told him that I'd have loved to try the Pyke, but I wasn't equipped, and besides, I was on my own, but when Gary had bumped into Rick on the Demon Trail, he'd told him that if he wanted to do the Pyke, he should talk to this guy with a beard in Hokuri Hut; me, in other words. So Rick told me this, and we laughed and dismissed it out of hand, but as Bill unfolded his story of a living hell, we started looking at each other in that 'whaddya reckon' way. And so was born the germ of an idea that grew, and by the time we went to bed we were considering the Pyke Loop, against all common sense. It all depended on the weather, and we could get a weather report from the Lodge at Martins Bay the next day (the Lodge being the private hut for guided walkers, where they have luxuries like radios and food).

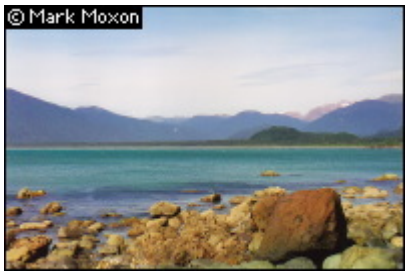
Teaming Up

Heading east from Martins Bay

So on day 4 Rick and I set off together on the track to Martins Bay, which marks the end of the Hollyford Track. The track was pretty lovely, walking along the beach on northern Lake McKerrow before ducking into more bush and arriving at the Lodge, where we asked for the weather report. It said it would be fine for at least a couple of days – no Fiordland weather report can be relied upon beyond a couple of days – so we were committed (and should have been committed, frankly); the Pyke Loop it was. We pushed on to the Martins Bay Hut, along a glorious beach, and stopped for lunch there, at the end of the Hollyford. Suddenly Martins Bay had changed from the end of the track to the beginning of the Hard Part… and the butterflies were there in my stomach. Without a doubt we were entering dangerous territory where people had died, territory where you can't afford to give up,

because if you give up, you get stranded, and if you get stranded, you either get rescued, or you get discovered weeks later. We'd both told DOC of our intentions, as one always should, but they wouldn't be searching until a day or so after we were supposed to return, and then they'd still have to find us. It was a sobering thought.

We pushed through to Big Bay that afternoon, crossing the top of the Y. It was instantly obvious that the type of walking had changed; there were no more lovely tracks, just little worn routes with the odd marker. The walk, though, instantly became much more interesting; the path from Martins Bay to Big Bay was mainly along the coast, passing a truly stinking seal colony, amazing rock sculptures, and always ahead of us, these huge mountains such as Mt McKenzie, with snowy tops and large barren areas, where nothing grows at all.



Wild and beautiful Big Bay

Big Bay itself lived up to its name, and the long slog along the beach was painful after such a distance, but with views like this, it's amazing how you forget your aching feet and straining shoulders. The hut, right at the northern end of the bay, wasn't one of the most delightful I've ever seen, but we didn't care and, apart from one other person (who turned out to be a boring sod from Te Anau[9] so we left him to his own devices) we were totally alone in one of the most isolated spots in New Zealand. It was quite wonderful.

Big Bay might have been isolated, but there was one surprise in store. People tend to leave their excess food in huts, just in case a needy traveller turns up, and among the bags of milk powder and sugar was a packet of blackcurrant Vitafresh, a cordial powder that makes dodgy creek water taste palatable. And there, emblazoned across the packet that dated back to 1995, was a competition; 'Win an Acorn Home Computer' it proclaimed, along with the logo and a picture of an ancient Acorn machine. Of all the places to find a bit of advertising from the company who were effectively paying my way round New Zealand…

Into the Wilderness

On day 5, Monday 6th, we got up at 5am to make an early start, mainly because we wanted all the time we could get. The next hut, Olivine, was too far away for a normal day's walk, and most people camp out halfway along the loop, but having no tents we had to try for the hut, or stay out in a homemade bivvy (which was quite a feasible proposition, just not as nice as a hut). Bill's party had taken 14 hours to get from Olivine to Big Bay, so we set off with some idea of what lay ahead, but it all looked so easy on the map. If only we'd known.

To tackle the Pyke Valley you need to get up early, but the Kiwi bush is beautiful and rewarding at 6am

The track started off with a reasonably simple trudge through thick forest – in which we managed to get lost, rather worryingly – and across a swing bridge, and then we struck out due east, heading towards the Pyke River.

After about 10km of bashing through the bush we reached the Pyke, and here the fun started. After crossing the river, which was quite braided at this point and only just above knee deep, we hit the track, only to find it went through flax quagmire, not the most pleasant walking in the world. After wading through knee-deep water, by which time our boots were well and truly soaked, we decided that walking in the river itself might be a good idea, seeing as it hadn't been raining that much recently.

This turned out to be a good idea. While the track passed through goodness only knows what, we simply stuck to the river, crossing it in a zigzag fashion and sticking to the insides of corners where there was plenty of silt to walk on.

[9] Southlanders – people who live in Southland, which includes places like Invercargill and Te Anau, but not Dunedin – have a weird accent. The area was settled by the Scottish, and as a result the locals have a very distinctive 'r' sound, derived from the rolling r's of the Scots. These days it makes Southlanders sound like people from Devon, but they tend to speak very slowly and have an odd habit of repeating themselves. All this tends to make Southlanders sound incredibly simple, which is a shame, as they're actually the salt of the earth. What a pity we had to be stuck in a hut with the only one who lived up to his accent…

The added bonus of river-hopping was the astounding view as we waltzed through the deep blue water (which was pretty damn cold, but refreshing nonetheless after the bush); looking down the valley we could see the Skippers Range rising up ahead on the right, the Little Red Hill Range on the left, with occasional glimpses of the mighty Darran Range in the distance. It seemed that the stories of a living hell had to be wrong; this was beautiful tramping.

The remote Pyke Valley is an untouched wilderness of cloud-topped mountains and temperate rainforest

Before long we reached Lake Wilmot, where we stopped for a late lunch. The lake was pure beauty, and apart from some confusion with regard to the map – the one I was using was a 1988 revision, since which the whole area has been flooded a large number of times, changing the area considerably – we'd managed really well. After lunch, full of Ryvita and confidence, we picked up the track along the east shore of the lake, making great progress to the southern end of the lake by about 3pm. And that's when things started to go wrong.

We lost the track pretty quickly, which wasn't so hard as we'd been following our noses, there being no markers at all along the lake track. The problem was that we'd seen two different versions of the route on various maps; the one on mine said to go straight on after the lake, sticking to the east side of the valley, but the more modern map had shown a different track, crossing along the southern shore of the lake to the western side of the valley, and following the river down (which flows out of the southwestern tip of the lake).

The placid waters of Lake Wilmot

We tossed a mental coin, and headed along the lake shore to the river, reasoning that having come this far down the river, we could probably continue to follow the river down. Whoops.

When a river flows out of a lake, it's going fast and deep. As we reached the southwestern tip of the lake, it became painfully obvious that we weren't going to be able to follow the river any more, even if we stuck to the banks, so we decided to try to follow the river bank a few metres in from the water, through the bush.

Crossing the Barrier River

This was when it really began to fall apart; I have never experienced the likes of hardcore Kiwi river-flat bush, and I hope I never do again. Imagine the thickest thicket, and double it; our progress was by inches, there was no respite, and the only tracks we found were made by deer. It's not just a case of slow progress either; by far the worst aspect of bush bashing is the pain involved, and here we discovered the source of Gary and Bill's bloodied legs – the scourge of the bush bastards.

Going Nowhere Slowly

It took us about an hour of bush bashing to realise that it was hopeless; we were getting nowhere, and were in considerable pain to boot. We turned right around, smashed our way back to the lake – what a gorgeous sight after that hell! – and threaded back to the southeastern corner of the lake, where we nursed our pride and tried to save the day by finding the track. The relief when we found the first marker deep in the considerably easier bush was huge, and we followed the markers through beech forest until we hit the Barrier River; we constantly lost the track, but after the bush bashing exercise we were determined to keep to the path now that we had one, and if we lost the markers we'd turn back and try again. Cries of 'marker!' from whoever was leading were like manna from heaven.

Sunset over the Pyke River from the comfort of the Olivine Hut

The Barrier River posed no problems, being only knee deep, and the next stage was relatively easy, passing through the river flats where Davey Gunn, a legendary figure in the area and original proprietor of Gunn's Camp, used to run his cattle. After crossing the Diorite Stream, from which we could see the beautiful waterfalls tumbling off the Little Red Hill Range near the Diorite source, we hit more bush, the last stretch to the hut. If only it was that simple; the track wound round and round, going on for ever, and we kept finding areas that had been completely washed out. What do you do when a track disappears into the river? You get inventive, but when the sun's already ducked below the mountains and the hut has got to be close, it's soul destroying.

Rick on the cage bridge

How we made it, I don't know; I was on autopilot as my legs followed the rutted track, even though I couldn't see the ground through the bush. I now understand what it's like to have a huge beer belly, when your feet become old friends you never see any more, but eventually we got to the Olivine River, where a strange contraption awaited us: a cage bridge. This involved getting into a cage, one at a time, and winding your way over the river, a painful

and tiring experience after the 14.5 hours we'd been walking… but at last we could see the hut, and boy, it looked cosy. That night we slept like the dead, after cooking a hasty meal and passing on all our tips onto the two Kiwi women in the hut who were doing the Pyke the other way around. We got plenty of tips off them for the ensuing trip back to Alabaster, but most of it went over our heads, and when we woke up late on day 6, life was beginning to return to normal after the nightmare of the day before.

Well-earned Rest

The rest day is a long-honoured and essential tramping tradition. Back in the Pilbara, Scott and I spent a wonderful day on the George River, massaging ourselves in the fast-flowing rapids, slowly getting our aching bodies back into shape for the return run, and it gives you time to reflect on where you are and how you got there. After all, tramping isn't so much a destination, as a journey – indeed, quite often the destination is the same car that you left from – and the rest day is when you can sit down and enjoy the complete solitude and total lack of the human world that you can only get by walking miles into the wilderness.

Arriving at the north end of Lake Alabaster after hours in the bush

I spent most of the day writing letters, talking with Rick about the hardships we'd suffered to get to where we were, and counting my scars. It felt good to know that the worst of the trip was over – the journey to Alabaster sounded easy in comparison – and we spent the day revelling in the knowledge that we'd managed to conquer the Pyke Loop. If only I'd known what lay in store for the next day as I watched the stars appear in the clear night sky; it's not over until the fat lady sings, and she hadn't even turned up yet…

Day 7, Wednesday 8th, saw an early start of 6am, and more beautiful weather, with strong sunlight and a gentle breeze to take the sting out of the ultraviolet. On paper the route looked pretty easy; follow the river for no more than about 10km, before hitting the northern tip of Lake Alabaster, from where it was plain sailing if you just walked in the lake, according to the Kiwis. How could we go wrong? One word: washout.

Rick trekking along the rocky shore of Lake Alabaster, knee deep in cold water

We lost the track relatively early on, when we came upon a dry river that crossed our path. We crossed that easily enough, but soon after we hit the bush again, we realised we hadn't seen a marker for a while. Never mind, we thought, we'd stick to the river bank, where we assumed the path would have been if the river hadn't washed the markers away. That was our mistake; the track actually headed inland, but we missed it, and the rest, as they say, is history. Bush bashing our way through reasonably thick bush – not as thick as

around Lake Wilmot, but thick enough – we eventually came out at the river again, rather lost, but heading in the right sort of direction. That's where Rick decided he needed to get out of the grass.

Poor old Rick; he suffered badly from hay fever, and we'd walked through a field full of pollen-heavy grass almost first thing in the morning. He'd gone in front, and had looked like he'd got an exhaust pipe fitted, the way he stirred up the pollen from the grass heads, and now he was swelling up all over in a fearsome rash.

Looking south down Lake Alabaster

He needed a break from the bush, and there was the river, all shallow and silted, so we decided to walk down the river again. It had been such a success before, so why not again? It all went swimmingly for about 3km, and that's when we tried to cross the river back to the eastern bank, but by this time it wasn't such a friendly, shallow trickle, it had got its act together.

It's vital to take river crossings very seriously. The biggest cause of death in areas like the Pyke is drowning – indeed, Davey Gunn drowned in the Hollyford, and he would have known the dangers better than anyone – and as we tried to cross the river, now waist deep, it became increasingly obvious that if one of us was to lose his foothold, we'd be swept away. We aborted the attempt, and after a couple of further tries, we realised we would have to tramp back to our original crossing place, and resume the bush bashing.

Sunset over Lake Alabaster

The whole river episode had been a waste of time and effort, but we looked at it philosophically; braver and more stupid trampers might have pushed on and tried the crossing, and they might have drowned. We, on the other hand, were suffering, but very much alive[10].

The Black Swamp

One good thing about the river escapade, though, was that it enabled us to pinpoint out position on the map; we were just north of a river that flowed across the track, and we reasoned that if we could get to the river, we could walk up and down it relatively unhindered and find the markers. We soon found the river, and Rick headed west towards the Pyke, while I headed east.

I must have walked for a good half a kilometre through waist-deep, brown water, not seeing or caring what lay in the muddy creek; I was just glad that this wasn't northern Australia, or I'd have been chomped up by a crocodile in no time at all. By the time I returned, soaked to the skin with boots full of goodness knows what, I discovered that Rick had found the track, and had been calling me for ages. That's another nasty aspect of the bush; it eats all sound. However, we were so glad to have found the track again, I didn't care.

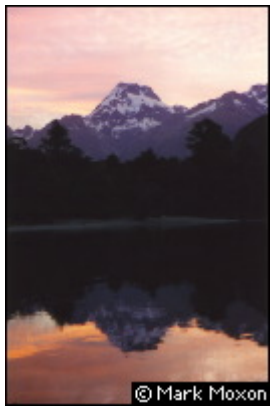
Knee-deep in the oozing goo of the Black Swamp

Actually, finding the track turned out to be a mixed blessing. The next obstacle was the one with the most emotive name on the map: the Black Swamp. We'd heard stories about the Black Swamp, and every one of them proved correct. It stank of rotting vegetation; it was, indeed, a very black, swampy area, dotted with odd tussocks of vegetation with strange grassy growths appearing out of the top; and it was waist deep in gooey, quicksand-like mud, as both Rick and I found out as we waded through it. We had started out by trying to hop from clump to clump, but this turned out to be pretty hopeless with the combination of heavy backpack and unstable vegetation, and by the end of the swamp, which can only have been

[10] It's a serious point, this. I later read in the paper about a German who died on the Tasman Glacier when he fell off a moraine wall while taking a photograph; I'd spent Christmas Eve on the Tasman Glacier, and I'd climbed plenty of moraine… it makes you wonder.

about 200m wide, we were filthy, soaked, and, frankly, having a ball. When you're already muddy, you might as well wallow in it.

After the Black Swamp we miraculously managed to keep to the markers, despite large numbers of washouts. I had decided to wear my waterproof over-trousers to keep out the hook grass, as my legs were too sore to cope otherwise, and progress was generally good, although the bush we bashed through was monotonous, dark and pretty soul destroying. As we emerged onto the beach at the northern tip of Lake Alabaster, I sank onto the ground and just collapsed into lunch; we'd taken the best part of seven hours to get from the hut to the lake, a very long time for such a short distance.



Mt Madeline from Alabaster Hut

The view, though, was like no other. It was quite dreamy sitting at the end of the lake and looking south towards Mt Madeline and the Darran Mountains (the highest peaks in the region), especially after the darkness of the bush. From here on the walk was as near to perfect as you can get; we skirted the eastern shore of the lake, walking in the water which only came up to our knees, and making full use of the beaches when they arrived. The map reading was pretty easy too, as the western shore had a number of obvious features, and the relief of being able to gauge our progress after the numbing frustration of the bush was huge. We arrived at the Alabaster Hut just in time for tea, and for a wonderfully warm swim in the sun-heated lake.

On our last night the sunset had to be seen to be believed. There were pinks and violets and purples and reds, all reflecting off a huge lake, with the strangest cloud formations making the sky look like a poster from the late sixties. It was no coincidence that we slept bloody well that night, and the next day the tramp out to the car was blissfully easy, with well-formed tracks, no mud and no bloody hook grass; it wasn't long before I'd met up with Zed – a welcome sight, I can tell you – dropped Rick off at his bus stop, and hopped into a gorgeously hot shower back at Gunn's Camp, probably one of the most pleasurable moments of a long tramp. After eight days in the bush – one less than originally planned, but far more challenging and rewarding than originally planned, too – even the rugged and rustic charm of Gunn's Camp, with its fire-fuelled hot water system and friendly sandfly population, was civilised. That night I slept the sleep of the just.

Rick and me at the end of the track

Bush Bastards

Written: 6 January 1997

The New Zealand bush is wild, and the bush on the Pyke Route is no exception; it has some incredibly unfriendly plants growing unhindered. To start with there are the familiar forest friends like waist-high thistles and huge clumps of stinging nettles, but these are benign compared to the real challenges.

Rick lost in the undergrowth on the Pyke

The first bush bastard – there's no other word – is Hook Grass, an innocent-looking little grass with brown seeds stored in clumps at the end of the stalks. That's not a problem, but Hook Grass has a clever little method of spreading its seeds; each seed has a little hook on it which attaches itself to any hairy beast that brushes past it, enabling the seeds to stick to the animal and fall off at a later date, thus spreading themselves around. This is mighty clever, but human leg hairs just aren't as hardcore as deer hairs, and Hook Grass turns from a normal weed into a painful way of depilating your legs. Imagine walking through fields of grass that pulls your leg hairs out constantly, and you can imagine how much I hate Hook Grass; next time I either shave my legs, or I invest in gaiters.

The next bush bastard is Bush Lawyer. I don't know how it got its name, but Bush Lawyer rips you up and draws plenty of blood, which could be a clue. After the walk I was covered in Bush Lawyer scars that looked like claw gouges, and every one of them hurt like hell when it happened. Bush Lawyer looks lovely, like a small-leafed ivy, and it climbs in much the same way – everywhere, in other words. The only problem is that Bush Lawyer is covered in extremely sharp thorns that all point one way, away from the end of the stem. This means that if some Lawyer is hanging down and you walk into it, it lodges its thorns in your skin and as you walk away it rips into you like a plough ripping into a field. By the time you notice it, it's too late, as it's never just one strand; it comes with friends that will be stuck on your pack, in your clothes and everywhere else. Turning around or struggling makes it worse; the only solution is to slowly remove each bit, wincing as you go, and trying to avoid sudden movements. Having two people helps, if only because the first person can warn the other person not to follow. Bush Lawyer is the ultimate bush bastard.

Then there's the unnamed grass with big thick blades that act like paper. By this I don't mean you can write on it, add a stamp and send a pretty postcard home; I mean the blades cut you like paper. You're walking along, and suddenly you find that blood is pouring down between your fingers, having suffered a slash across three fingers. It might not hurt yet, but it will do in about a minute. And it'll hurt for about three days, like buggery, because the blades are smothered in a mild poison that irritates like hell.

Spot the marker…

On top of all these friendly little plants are the usual challenges of hacking through forests, like creeper that hangs across your path, catching your pack, stringing itself round your neck, and tripping you up. Or the countless fallen trees with slippery moss smothering the trunks that turn out to be rotten as you put your foot right through the bark. Or the sharp sticks everywhere that you can't see because there's so much foliage between you and the ground, but which spike your legs, causing plenty of gashes and cuts. Or even the ubiquitous bushes that don't scratch as such, but slowly grind down your skin until it's red raw and incredibly sore.

Never underestimate the wild bush; it hurts. But we keep coming back…

Milford

Written: 10 January 1997

The next day, stiff and stretching, I struck camp and hopped into Zed, heading off to Milford Sound. Milford is the centre for tourism in Fiordland, with its stunning fiord and huge cliffs rising almost vertically out of the water, up to heights of nearly 1700m: it's quite a sight. The drive to Milford is spectacular enough, with a dangerously winding road that's home to millions of breakneck tour coaches, and the Homer Tunnel, which blasts its way through the mountains to get to the sea, is probably the scariest tunnel I've ever driven through. Barely wide enough to accommodate two cars side by side, it's pitch black, leaks frightening amounts of water, and the road surface is dodgy to say the least. Add the slope of the tunnel – sloping down towards the Milford end at a hell of a rate – and it's enough to give anyone the heebie-jeebies, especially when you meet four oncoming tour buses, as I did on my return. It's incredible it isn't permanently blocked by accidents…

Bowen Falls, Milford

However, the sight when you come out of the Homer Tunnel has to be seen to be believed. Sheer walls shoot up into the clouds on either side of you, waterfalls cascading down all over the place, and tucked right down at the end of this huge glacial valley is Milford Sound, a beautiful body of water with huge peaks and rugged wilderness that seems to defy gravity. Unfortunately all this is too much of a lure for the tourists, and Milford township consists of very little except the usual tourist traps – hotels, restaurants, lots of parking space and very little else – and I hadn't seen so many tour buses since Uluru. Add in the noisy and smoky ferries that cart heaps of sightseers up and down the Sound and you get something

that isn't exactly serene, but a short walk to Bowen Falls, a spectacular waterfall down the slopes, soon avoids the bustle, and the magnificence of Mitre Peak, the 1695m mountain that rises right out of the sea, are well worthwhile.

Then there's the wildlife, which is mostly underwater, made pretty unique by the fact that Milford's huge annual rainfall – between 7m and 9m a year – creates a 3-4m layer of fresh water that floats on top of the sound (as fresh water is lighter than salt water), and the peaty stain of the fresh water makes the top 40m of the fiord much darker than normal. This means that some very strange animals and plants live in Milford Sound, some that otherwise wouldn't live that near the surface, and despite the shocking tourism and the 'been there, taken the photo' attitude of most visitors, Milford deserves its place in the guidebooks. Just don't expect to be alone.

Southern Scenic Route (West)

Written: 11 January 1997

On the way down the Milford Road back to Te Anau, I stopped off at a place called the Chasm to see some seriously weird water-sculpted rock formations – water, in case you haven't guessed, plays an important part in Fiordland's ecology – and eventually arrived in Te Anau, reported my return to DOC and decided to change my plans. With an extra day in hand I thought it might be fun to complete the Southern Scenic Route from Te Anau to Invercargill, seeing as I'd already done the eastern half from Dunedin to Invercargill. Leaflet in hand, I filled up the car and set off… only to find that the weather, which had been incredibly good since I'd started the Kepler, decided to do its stuff. The Southern Scenic Route turned into the Southern Drizzle Drive, but about halfway through I found a place that didn't depend on a wonderful view, so I stopped to admire the Clifden Suspension Bridge.

The signpost at Bluff

And here I spent the night, right by a beautiful bridge, built in 1898 and preserved in an historic reserve. Yes, it might be pretty modern to your average Pommy, but it felt historic in the same way that Iron Bridge Gorge and the Clifden Suspension Bridge do, and as I listened to the radio, rain gently dribbling down, I felt rather lucky. A cyclone – Cyclone Dorina – had hit Auckland, ripping roofs of houses in Whangarei, gusting at 90km/h, blowing down power lines, causing floods and generally spoiling people's holidays, and here I was in supposedly the wettest area of the country – and one of the wettest places in the world, in fact – with only a light splattering of rain. It was ironic, I thought.

Unfortunately the drizzle continued the next day along with the Southern Scenic Route, so it wasn't long before I had reached Invercargill, having driven through similar coastal scenery as on the eastern arm of the Route: trees growing at desperate angles, farmland that must be a bugger to maintain, and beaches that look innocent until the rip tide carries you off into the Tasman Sea. It was rugged, but attractive, unlike Invercargill.

Clifden Suspension Bridge

I know that cities aren't best viewed in the rain, but Invercargill was just as depressing in the storm as it had been in the strong sunlight. On the other hand it is a city, which means it has supermarkets, so I visited a Pack 'n' Save and stocked up with a couple of weeks' worth of food before setting off due south to Bluff. I'd not had time to visit Bluff, the southernmost town in the South Island, on my previous visit, which was a shame: in the rain the visibility was pretty crap, and although I walked round the bluff to the lookout point where the signs helpfully pointed out all the little islands to the south – such as Stewart Island, a famous tramping spot – I couldn't see a thing, and just succeeded in getting soaked. But hey! I've been to Bluff, the Kiwi equivalent to Land's End, and all I have to do now is visit Cape Reinga on the northern tip of Northland and I'll have travelled the island from tip to toe (especially as I've also been to Slope Point, the southernmost tip of the South Island). Trivia is a wonderful companion for obsessives like me…

Queenstown

Written: 13 January 1997

After visiting Bluff I took advantage of the lack of distractions in Southland to head north to Queenstown. My plans to camp in a dirt cheap DOC campsite at 12 Mile Creek were dashed when I discovered a bikers' rally there for the weekend, so after pussyfooting about – something I tend to do when my plans get scuppered – I checked into a rather posh caravan park right in the town at the princely sum of NZ$10 per night, the most expensive place I'd yet camped in New Zealand. Still, Queenstown is regarded as one of the most expensive places in the country, so I decided to treat myself, and despite the fact that in the dining room I heard every language except English, making it rather hard to believe I was in New Zealand, I enjoyed the pampering and the real meat I'd bought for my supper, my first meat of the year after eating nothing but dried rice while tramping.

Sunday 12th saw a slight clearing of the rain, so I popped up Queenstown Hill after lunch for stunning views of the Remarkables, the mountains round Queenstown, and Lake Wakatipu, on which Queenstown sits. It's a lovely place… or, to be more accurate, it's a lovely setting, as Queenstown is just another modern town, albeit somewhat more interesting than most, with its quaint tourist-friendly centre, Ye Real Olde English Pubbe and Real Old Kiwi Pub (both of which are stunningly new) and shops that close at 11pm (even on a Sunday). It's a tourist Mecca, but as one of my hobbies is watching the world go by, I found it fascinating, even though it stirred up some strange emotions. As I wandered past the restaurants, seeing people munching away and socialising over bottles of wine, or past the pubs, hearing beery laughter waft out with the smell of pies and pints, I remembered the time when I used to spend a lot of my time in pubs and restaurants, in the days when I had an income and before I started budgeting in earnest. I missed it, to be honest; home cooking's fine, but I missed the social aspect of everyone going down the pub and hitting the curry house afterwards. There is a positive side to living on a budget, though: you really appreciate going out when you do, and as for eating someone else's cooking, it's quite divine.

But despite the odd pang for a rich, western lifestyle, Queenstown was great place to relax while waiting for the weather to roll away.

Routeburn-Greenstone Track

Written: 17 January 1997

The next bout of activity I'd planned was the Routeburn Track, which starts just north of Glenorchy (itself to the northwest of Queenstown) and takes you to a point called the Divide on the Milford Road. There I planned to pick up the Greenstone Track, taking me back towards Glenorchy, but ending some 25km of dusty road and a good day's walk from the start of the Routeburn (and my car). 'Never mind, I'll cross that bridge when I come to it,' I thought.

Scenery near the start of the Routeburn

The Routeburn is interesting; before I did it I had doubts about whether it was going to be worth the effort. After the Hollyford-Pyke it looked like plain sailing, with only one extra challenge; with the huts being NZ$28 a night (it's one of the Great Walks all right) I'd opted to camp for only NZ$9 a night, but that, of course, added over 2kg of tent to my already back-straining pack. The problem with the Routeburn is that it's a bit of a surrogate for the Milford, which means it's a real tourist track; some 10,000 people a year tramp the Routeburn, and most of them aren't Kiwis.

I figured I'd just have to bite the bullet and put up with masses of tourists, and although there were plenty of people on the track, the fact that I was camping meant I never had any real problems. Sure, there were some crowded spots, such as the Harris Saddle Shelter, but no self-respecting tourist is going to worry about saving NZ$19 a night for the privilege of lugging a tent around, so the campsites were pretty empty, and actually I rather enjoyed the tourist-watching.

In the end the Routeburn turned out to be a real highlight, with less crowding than on the Kepler. The track itself is incredible; from east to west you climb steadily up until you reach the Harris Saddle, and then you wind your way down to the Divide, and almost all the way along you're above the bush-line, and witness to some incredible views. It's a more immediate walk than the Kepler; with the Kepler you're above the mountains, which gives great vistas, but on the Routeburn you're really inside the mountain range, with huge peaks rising right beside the track, making you feel very small indeed. I loved it, and it turned out to be the most spectacular walk yet (apart from the Mueller Hut, but that's definitely a special case).

The rugged beauty of Lake Harris

Trekking the Routeburn

Day 1 was an easy couple of hours wander to Routeburn Flats, a lovely river flat where the sandflies weren't too bad (nowhere's really bad after the Hollyford!) and the views were wonderful. The weather, in an atypical display of sympathy, had cleared to sunny and hot, and the skies just got clearer and clearer as the walk went on, something to be appreciated when you're high enough to be right inside most clouds.

Routeburn scenery

Day 2 saw the most spectacular landscape, though, heading up onto the Harris Saddle, home to the beautiful Lake Harris and some of the most inspiring peaks you'll ever see. It's a bit pointless going on about how impressive the views are, because it's only possible to understand when you've actually *been* there, but the climb over the saddle made the whole track worthwhile, and the short climb up to Conical Hill and back really gave me the feeling of being on top of the world.

All this is a different type of walking to the Hollyford-Pyke; there it was river valleys, bush and bog, none of which tend to crop up on mountaintops. The Routeburn is an alpine track, and the two types became instantly apparent from Conical Hill, from where I could see right down the Hollyford Valley to Martins Bay, quite a sight when you've already spent a week or so hacking your way up the valley that's spread before you. Skirting back down the western side of the range, I could see Gunn's Camp, the Hollyford Road and all sorts of familiar sights, brought to life by my previous tramp. It felt like coming home…

Beautiful Lake Harris sits just below the mountains of the Harris Saddle

The night at Mackenzie Camp was a delight, with the views towards Emily Peak especially beautiful as it reflected in Lake Mackenzie. The campsite was rather pitiful and, as with Routeburn Flats, incredibly cold and dewy, but at least it kept my milk mixture cold for my morning muesli, and meant that when I woke up, I had absolutely no desire to lie in and enjoy the perishing morning mist. Stalking down towards the Divide on day 3 I made good time to Lake Howden, from where a track led up to Key Summit, home to more great views, especially of Lake Marian, and a nature trail. And that was the Routeburn… now for the Greenstone.

Lake Howden, where the Routeburn meets the Greenstone

Back on the Greenstone

The Greenstone, while undoubtedly a lovely walk, simply bored me. The reason? It was another leafy, forested valley walk, and I'd had quite a lot of that on the Kepler and Hollyford Tracks. The solution? I hoofed it and walked all the way to the last hut, Sly Burn, in the one day, on top of the 11km or so from the last part of the Routeburn and the side trip up Key

Summit, and the views were wonderful most of the way (even though it was a bloody river valley). I ached, my feet throbbed, but I made it to find there was one spare bed in the hut – mine! – and a freezing swimming hole down the river bank. I almost felt human after yet another rice dish, and fell asleep on the soft, warm mattress the second I hit it.

The Greenstone Valley

The last day went beyond pain. The last couple of hours to the road end were sheer agony as I had some kind of muscle strain in my left ankle, and by the time I reached the road end, I needed a rest. Quite how I was going to manage the next 25km along the road to my car, I didn't know, but then the gods smiled on me. My first attempt at a hitch, and I had a ride from a Japanese tramper who was heading to the Routeburn to drop off his car – nice one! As we bombed down the dirt road towards the car park, I realised just how far it would have been, and I thanked my stars that I wasn't going to be left stranded… and sure enough, after a short drive there was good old Zed, in one piece and looking like home to me.

Stark scenery at Glenorchy, where Lake Wakatipu signals the end of the track

Before long I was showering, beard-trimming and clothes-washing in the Glenorchy Motor Camp, feeling that happy and healthy glow you get when another tramp is consigned to memory. It's amazing, returning from days in the wilderness, how acute your senses become. Without everyday chemicals, smells, culinary delights and washing routines to clog the senses, you really notice things that you normally don't spot, like people's perfume, from ladies' cologne to men's after-shave and deodorant; it hits you in the face when you walk in the door. The same happens on the track when you pass some day walkers, and it makes you really appreciate how much we pamper our bodies in everyday life. Then there are the good old taste buds; that Snickers bar and bag of crisps is never going to taste as good as just after a long tramp. Modern day noises, like car horns and telephones, all sound out of place, and real bedding feels like God's gift to the Insomniacs. If you want to appreciate life's little luxuries, opt out of them for a week and go bush.

And so ended the major tramping for a while, after a total of 278km on the map over 16 days (over 17km, or nearly 11 miles, per day). I'd never been this fit, this full of stamina, or this glad to sink back into the driver's seat and enjoy the world through a car window. I was even tempted to pamper myself a little more, after all that bloody rice and pasta…

West Coast (South Island)

Written: 21 January 1997

Mighty Franz Josef Glacier dwarfs its visitors in the foreground

That night after finishing the Routeburn-Greenstone Track I pampered myself with a couple of cold beers in the local pub, chatting away to a fellow tramper I'd met in the caravan park, Tim, who was full of stories of grizzly bears in North America and the desolation of Alaska. The next day, Friday 17th, was pretty desolate too, as I headed off to Wanaka over the highest road in New Zealand, 1121m above sea level at the highest point. Unfortunately it's also one of the most corrugated and disastrously steep roads I've ever driven on, so the stunning views and pretty little settlement of Cardrona were less memorable than the struggle to avoid falling off the cliffs… still, it was a worthy detour, and got me in the mood for a little driving.

I shot through Wanaka, another picturesque town on another glacial lake, and kept driving over the Haast Pass to the wild west coast, stopping off at various stunning sights such as Knight's Point (with its beautiful views up and down the rugged coast to places like Arnott Point) and the glacial lakes of the interior. There were loads of waterfalls and forest

walks along the way, but after the Fiordland tramps, the last thing I wanted was more bloody rainforest and falling water, so I just drove and drove until I found a little DOC campsite at Lake Paringa, another picturesque glacial lake (complete with the usual sandflies and masses of forest). It was pretty and wild, but, to be honest, wearing a little thin after the overdose I'd had in the wilderness. And that's where the glaciers came in.

Fox Glacier

On Saturday 18th I put my foot down and headed north to Fox Glacier, a tiny tourist settlement at the end of – you guessed it – the Fox Glacier. The weather was miserable, so I booked into the local caravan park, set up my tent in the howling rain, and drove off to have a look at the glacier.

Fox Glacier winding its way down from the Southern Alps

I managed the walk up to the glacier terminal – a very big affair that differed from the Hooker and Tasman Glaciers by having no terminal lake, meaning you could get right up to the ice wall – but the weather was truly dismal, so I headed back to the relative comfort of the campsite.

Steps cut into the face of Franz Josef Glacier for tourists to climb

As I was walking towards the communal kitchen, I thought I recognised the Jim Morrison haircut sitting by the window. Then I recognised the jacket. Then the person… and who should be sitting in the kitchen but Ben and Mira, with whom I'd gone climbing in Mt Cook. The irony was that here we were again, looking at Mt Cook and not being able to see it as the weather was so dismal, but this time we were looking from the other side: Fox Glacier is another glacier that flows from the Mt Cook range. We nattered the night away, making friends in the way people do when it's raining and there's precious else to do.

The next day the weather cleared, as it tends to do on the coast (changeable isn't the word for the weather I've been enjoying), so we made the most of it to go to Lake Matheson, a beautiful lake that reflects a view of the Southern Alps that has to be seen to be believed. It wasn't perfect weather, but it was breathtaking, and when we got back to the campsite I took most of Ben and Mira's bike bags (to make their bikes lighter) and arranged to meet them in the next town, Franz Josef. Meanwhile I did a quick walk up to a view of Fox Glacier, to the site of an old chalet where you could see right up the glacier to its starting point in the mountains, quite a stunning view. And then it was back in the car to drive to Franz Josef.

Franz Josef Glacier and Okarito

Ben and Mira had made excellent time without their baggage weighing down their bikes, and we walked all round the Franz Josef Glacier together, soaking up the sun, and later we walked to the Tatare Tunnels, a collection of strange man-made tunnels into the mountains that are half full with water, and are about as spooky as Tunnel Creek (though considerably less so with Ben and Mira tagging along). Before long we'd headed off to a little settlement called Okarito right on the west coast, where we set up camp and made a quick dash to the top of the Okarito Trig Point.

The pancake rocks at Punakaiki

Okarito is amazing. It's a tiny little village right on the edge of the wild Tasman Sea, and it's real frontier stuff. There's a beautiful lagoon right next to the village, home to some extremely rare bird life, and the view from the Trig Point is probably as good as it gets. You can see all along the coast, and right into the Southern Alps range as it spreads out in front of you. Mt Cook and Mt Tasman are huge peaks on the horizon, with the other peaks of the area, like the Minarets, clearly visible in the distance.

We caught it as the sun was going down, and I've never seen anything like it. Okarito is the home town of Keri Hulme, author of *The Bone People*, and it's easy to see how such a setting can bring out the artist in you. That night we drank a couple of beers that Ben bought in thanks for me carting their stuff around – hardly difficult, I must say – and in the morning we were truly sad to leave, them on bicycle and me by car. I thought I'd never see Ben and Mira again[11], but I really wished I would.

Another outcrop of pancake rock

Yet again I was in a driving mood, probably not that surprising after the amount of foot travel I've been doing. I drove straight up to Greymouth, and after a quick lunch stop I drove north to Punakaiki, home of the eccentric Pancake Rocks, a coastal formation that defies belief. The rocks are made up of layers that make them look like piles of pancakes, and if it wasn't for the immense popularity and accessibility of the area – and hence the huge numbers of tourists – it would be truly magnificent. Instead it's a wee bit commercial, but well worth the visit.

Arthur's Pass

Written: 23 January 1997

From Punakaiki I'd been planning to continue north, but the weather decided that it was going to be miserable, so I turned round, went back to Greymouth and turned inland towards Arthur's Pass, along the road back over the Alps to Christchurch. After a night in a rest area, I arrived in Arthur's Pass to surprisingly beautiful weather, and made the most of it to scoot up Avalanche Peak, a fairly steep track up to the top of a mountain with wonderful views over the pass and surrounding mountains, and well worth the effort in good weather. My timing was impeccable: as I sat at the top, chatting to a couple I met there, the clouds rolled in, and the visibility changed from tens of kilometres to tens of feet. It just goes to show that carrying all those spare clothes, even on the shortest tramp, is a good idea, because I went up in T-shirt and shorts and came down in trackie bottoms, three layers and my Gore-Tex top, and I *still* felt bloody freezing…

The view over Arthur's Pass from the path up to Avalanche Peak

It stayed cold and miserable for the rest of the day, so I hung out in the public shelter and met plenty of interesting and chatty people (public shelters obviously being *the* place to be in shitty weather) and that evening, when the skies cleared temporarily, I managed to do the Arthur's Pass Historic Walk, a short jaunt round a number of plaques that describe the history of the place.

The driving wind only convinced me to head back indoors, and after putting up the tent (you can camp at the Arthur's Pass public shelter quite legally) we yarned the night away while the wind whistled around the eaves.

Wednesday 22nd saw no change in the weather, but a group of five of us battled up the walk to Temple Basin, a pointless exercise seeing as the views were non-existent and the rain freezing. However, one good thing did come from the morning jaunt: it made us than happy to stay in the relatively pleasant shelter, and the rest of the day passed into history in the same way that my first few days in Mt Cook National Park had. Never mind: I'd been incredibly lucky with the weather so far in the South Island, so I couldn't really moan.

Mt Rolleston from Avalanche Peak

Thursday continued the rainy tradition, and I aborted my plans to visit Craigieburn Forest Park on the way to Christchurch and just drove straight to the east coast, where the

[11] I was wrong – I'd bump into them again in Nelson.

weather was hot, clear and a big relief after the storms of the Alps, and proved a typically English subject for conversation as I tried to dry out the contents of the car.

Christchurch

Written: 28 January 1997

There are plenty of sayings peppering the English language that concern themselves with jealousy and bemoaning your unhappy lot – 'the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence' is probably the most classic idiom – but in New Zealand I felt I'd found a way of slipping through the fence whenever I fancied: if my grass wasn't green enough, I found some that was, and visited it. It was obviously a luxury of being free of the constraints of job, mortgage and attachments, but that doesn't make it any less valid.

It struck me when I arrived in Christchurch for the third time – after exploring most of the South Island – just how different life in civilisation and the wilderness can be. I might have thought Glenorchy, Queenstown and Te Anau were bustling metropolises when I came back from days of tramping, but Christchurch, the biggest city in the South Island, brought home the little things in life that I'd previously taken for granted. Playing golf with Simon and Steve was so different; eating roast chicken and potatoes was a taste sensation; drinking ridiculous amounts of beer and cider and dancing the night away was something I used to do at least once a week, but which seemed the pinnacle of debauched luxury after the abstemious nature of living on a budget. Yes, Christchurch was pure western luxury, and I overdosed on it. That's what I mean by being able to cross the fence: people working in offices look out on green fields and wish they were there, and people out in the wilderness dream of hot showers, decent food and beer on tap. In New Zealand I was lucky enough to be able to hop between the two lifestyles at the drop of a hat.

Yet again Christchurch life turned into a succession of golf, drinking, junk food, comfortable beds and, worryingly, karaoke, and if it hadn't been for my car being broken into, I'd have found it hard to leave. The shock of losing my hiking boots, guitar, harmonica, empty backpack, torch, knife and radio to a casual car thief gave me a real urge to climb a mountain[12], so after Steve kindly leant me his spare backpack, I headed north, aiming in the general direction of Nelson, a step closer to the volcanoes of the North Island.

Nelson

Written: 31 January 1997

The strange rock formations just off Whakariki Beach

On Tuesday I drove to Nelson via the Lewis Pass, a beautiful afternoon's drive through stunning mountain scenery with the sun beating down from a clear blue sky. That night I stayed with Mike, the local Acorn dealer, and the next day I visited a couple of schools to the west of Nelson, up in Golden Bay. Talk about a paradise: Golden Bay is well-named, and it's worth the steep and bendy drive just to see those beautiful beaches stretching into the sunset, backed by tree-covered mountains and valleys. On the way to Pakawau, right at the north end of the Nelson region, I visited the Pupu Springs where clear, cold water pours out of the ground in such quantities that it moves rocks, and after setting up the tent in Pakawau I drove north up a dirt road to the stunning and wild Whakariki Beach, one of the northernmost points of the South Island. I can think of far worse ways of spending a Wednesday afternoon.

That night, back at Pakawau, I got into a conversation with a bloke in one of the cabins, and he ended up inviting me in for a coffee. Robin was a Kiwi who had lived in England for 12 years, and he was spending time away from it all in Pakawau while waiting for a court case to come up: his business had collapsed and he was out on bail for some kind of fraud charge, and both him and his cat Floyd were excellent company despite the circumstances. Robin

[12] Climbing a mountain is a great way to relieve stress. All you have to do is find one…

even fed me, and offered me one of the beds in the other room (the cabins had two rooms, and he was on his own): it was quite a luxury after a roll-mat on grass.

Pakawau Beach

The next day Robin drove me to a place called Bainham; as he lived in Nelson and had spent quite a lot of time exploring the area, he knew all the interesting places to visit. In Bainham the landscape is beautiful and the rivers have carved deep gorges through the mountains, and one of these gorges is home to a bungee jump and huge swing, so once again I got to see someone leaping into the unknown with only an elastic band for comfort. Our final visit was to the Devil's Boots, strange rock formations that look like a giant's boots sticking out of the earth, and then it was time to say goodbye, hop into Zed, and head off back to Nelson to visit more schools.

And just to rub in the fact that New Zealand is a small place, in Nelson I bumped into my Christmas buddies Ben and Mira for the third time. It had been bizarre enough bumping into them in Fox Glacier was one thing, but seeing them in the street in Nelson – and not even the main street – was truly freaky. They just laughed when they saw me: they'd already bumped into a couple of other people they knew, even though they'd only just arrived, and they'd been wondering if I was still in the South Island. It's a small place, the South Island…

North Island

Catchpool Valley

Written: 3 February 1997

The view of distant Wellington from the Catchpool Valley's Butcher Track

After finishing my business in Nelson – five articles in all, not bad for a couple of days' work in paradise – I drove to Picton and hopped on the late-night ferry to Wellington. The only problem with late-night ferries is arriving in a place when most self-respecting citizens are in bed, but 'No problem', I thought, 'I'll just hit a DOC campsite', and indeed there was a very convenient camp just 50km from Wellington at Catchpool Valley in the Rimutaka Forest Park. How on earth I managed to pick the only DOC campsite in the country that has gates that close at dusk, I don't know, so after discovering in the pitch black of night that I was stuck in the middle of nowhere, I drove around, found a pleasant little secluded spot, and gratefully fell asleep in the back of Zed, thanking my lucky stars I'd bought a station wagon.

The Rimutaka Forest Park stretches along the Rimutaka Range, to the east of Wellington, and is home to plenty of pine forest, some pretty little valleys, and, of course, the weekend tourists from the city. That didn't cause any grief, as it was rather pleasant to see all the happy (and unhappy) families enjoying the sun, picnicking away in what they thought was the wilderness, but it brought something home to me. City dwellers, wherever they are, can sometimes come across as quite antisocial compared to country folk, and despite my best smiles and g'days, the vast majority of people looked at the floor, metaphorically shuffling their feet as I passed them on the walking tracks. It seems that New Zealand has a similar but inverse problem to England, in that the further north you go, the more accidentally antisocial the people get (in England it's traditionally the other way around, with the Southerners being less inclined to talk to strangers).

The two tracks I did in the Catchpool Valley were short and sweet, though predictably tame after the South Island. The Orongorongo Track, one of the most popular walks in New Zealand according to the blurb, was reasonable but uninspiring: it's popular because of its ease and its proximity to Wellington rather than its amazing scenery, no doubt. The Butcher Track, on the other hand, took me to the top of the hills, resulting in a beautiful view over Wellington harbour, far more impressive than the view from the hills above Eastbourne. In the background I could see the South Island, and on top of the hill I found a peaceful pine canopy where the pine needles were comfortable enough for a Sunday afternoon snooze, a notable consequence of a few days' drinking in Christchurch and Nelson reducing my tramping stamina by a fair amount; you can't have your cake and eat it, I guess.

Taranaki

Written: 9 February 1997

The perfect cone of Mt Taranaki

My plan was to do the Around the Mountain Circuit (AMC) at Taranaki, with a trip up to the top of Mt Taranaki itself if possible. Mt Taranaki was named Mt Egmont by Captain Cook after the bloke who sponsored his mission, but the Maori went to court to try to get the name changed to Taranaki, their name for the mountain, and in an astounding case of trying to please everyone the court ruled that both names were valid. As a result, on all the maps you see 'Mt Egmont or Mt Taranaki' printed by the peak, but whatever you call it – and I prefer Taranaki, because it seems more appropriate –

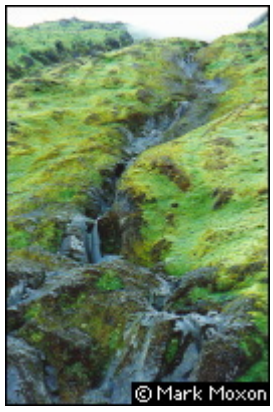
it's a stunner.

Egmont National Park – at least that name hasn't changed – is almost circular, and encloses Mt Taranaki at its centre, and it's fair to say that the mountain dominates the entire area. Taranaki is an almost perfect volcanic cone, with a beautiful snowy peak and, from a distance, only one blemish on its slopes, that of Fanthams Peak, another little cone. It's hard to describe how immense the mountain is, but when I woke up on the morning of my trek, having slept in the back of Zed at the National Park's headquarters, there it was; the day before had been totally overcast and I hadn't seen a thing, but Thursday started off as clear as a bell, and it wasn't long before I was stomping off on the track, my pack filled to the brim, and my old faithful boots on my feet.

The AMC is a swine, no doubt about it. It might look all innocent on the map, but it goes up and down more times than the New Zealand dollar's exchange rate; volcanoes have huge lava flows, so the mountain is a bit like your hand if you put your fingertips on the table with your palm facing down, and walking round it means climbing and descending every day. It's a beautiful track, though, and when the weather is clear, you can see for miles. That's when the weather is clear, though…

Rain, Rain, Go Away

Day 1 started well, as did most of the days, but it soon got back into the swing of clouding over and starting to rain. I'd decided to follow the higher alpine route for the views (as opposed to the route through the forest), and after getting up the aptly named Puffer – a bloody steep track that I thought would never end – I clambered around the mountain to Dawson Falls heading for Lake Dive, and that's when the cloud kicked it. I could see it approaching from the west, in a big thick rolling mass, and before ten minutes was up I was surrounded by cloud, with a visibility of about 20 metres and a temperature drop from boiling down to bloody cold; yes, the weather comes in pretty damn quickly on the coast, especially on the mountains.



Lava gorges scar the sides of Mt Taranaki

Still, the rain kept off until I reached the hut at Lake Dive, and then it decided to kick right in. Luckily the hut I was in had a stove with heaps of wood, and it wasn't long before I had a roaring fire going, slowly drying out my sodden clothes. When I arrived at the hut I was alone, quite a rarity on a popular walk like the AMC, but soon I had company in the shape of Jacek (pronounced 'Yatsik'), a Kiwi who had come over from Poland with his family when he was 11, back in the bad old days of martial law and Solidarity. He was very interesting company, and we decided to walk together for the rest of the trip, especially as the weather had made the track a little more slippery than normal, and a broken ankle is a bit of a bummer if you're on your own.

Friday saw us scramble over the alpine route to Waiaua Gorge, and again the visibility was pretty crappy, although we got a good view of the volcano in the morning before the clouds came in. Saturday was much the same, wandering around through alpine scrub and rainforest to Holly Hut. The track was probably the most physically demanding track I'd yet done, with climbs and descents of about 1000m every day, and by the time we reached the huts we were totally knackered, even more so than on the Pyke Loop; I find I can walk for miles and miles on the flat, but put a hill in front of me, and watch me squirm.

Mt Taranaki from Waiaua Gorge, with Fanthams Peak visible on the right

Saturday evening was fun, though, with a large Kiwi family taking up half the hut and entertaining us with tramping stories and wee drams of whisky, the generous sorts. The Christmas pud and custard they gave us went down a treat, too; needless to say the family was only on a one-night trip, something that was more and more apparent as they unpacked sausages, potatoes, vegetables, bottles of wine and all the other delights that you take for granted in the outside world, but which suddenly become perishable and heavy on the track.

To the Top!

The summit of Mt Taranaki, as seen from two-thirds of the way up

Sunday morning was very cloudy, but Jacek and I got up at 6am to try to get to the base of the summit track nice and early. Luckily the cloud was mainly round the northern side of the mountain, where we started, and as we came round to the northeastern side (where the AMC begins) the sky cleared slightly, showing a huge billowing mass of cloud pouring off the mountain towards the north; as with the Southern Alps, winds come in from the west and get forced upwards by the mountain where they condense into rain clouds, but slowly the cloud cleared from the peak until it was clear, and that's when I decided to go up. Jacek's knee was playing up, so we said our goodbyes and I started the long haul up to the 2518m (8261 ft) peak, complete with my pack and my trusty old boots.

The top of Mt Taranaki is buffeted by freezing winds, creating some very odd but very beautiful cloud patterns

There were two major problems, though. The most pressing, and the most painful, was that my trusty old boots were, by now, my crusty old boots; the soles were so thin it was like walking in crepe paper sandals, and with volcanic rock being the sharp stuff it is, I felt every stone, wearing out my feet far more quickly than in my old leather toughies that had been stolen in Christchurch. The second problem was that however I tried to adjust my pack, it was truly uncomfortable; I'd also had my own pack stolen in Christchurch and was borrowing one off a friend for a few weeks. The four-day walk with the shoes from hell and the backpack that didn't fit, along with a 45° scree slope and the serious climb to the top of Taranaki, really took it out of me. I got to the top but it hurt, it really hurt; however the view was stunning, not because I could see for miles, but because a low layer of cloud was covering the country as far as the eye could see, and from the height of the summit I could see above the clouds, just like in an aeroplane. Mt Ruapehu, the highest peak in the North Island, was a cloudy hump in the distance, and the summit itself was quite stunning, and well worth the strains in my knees and back.

Strange lava shapes like these 'organ pipes' crop up throughout Taranaki

Climbing volcanoes is an art, though. You might look at a volcano and think it's just a case of plodding up a 45° rock face until you topple into the crater, but however solid the thing might look from a distance, it's more like a pile of sand than a mountain. Imagine walking up a massive heap of gravel, and you'll be close to what climbing a volcano is like, and with a full pack it's a case of three steps forward, two back. The best part, though, is coming down; on the snowy slopes at the peak I simply skied down on my shoes, with the backpack giving enough weight to push me down, and on the scree I moonwalked down in half the time it took me to get up. I paid for it with aching knees, but with a kilometre of volcano to slide down, it was quite an experience.

Coming back to civilisation in the form of Dennis and Heather's hospitality – Dennis being the local Acorn dealer in New Plymouth, and Heather being his wife – was pure luxury, especially as Dennis had stocked his fridge full of beers in preparation (it seems I was getting a reputation for turning up at the dealers and demonstrating exactly what a bottomless appetite looks like). The next three days travelling round schools in the Taranaki area was comparatively relaxing, driving right round the mountain on the Monday and heading up the coast on Tuesday, with one local school slipped in on Wednesday morning. I can think of worse ways to earn NZ$500, and by the time I left New Plymouth I'd gorged out on barbecues, brews and excellent company.

Tongariro

Written: 15 February 1997

Mt Ngauruhoe, a younger volcanic cone on the side of Tongariro

On Wednesday 12th, with my work done in Taranaki, I drove to Whakapapa Village, the main town in Tongariro National Park in the centre of the North Island. On the way I passed through sleepy Raurimu, where only the Saturday before a loony had gone crazy with a gun and blown a bunch of innocent people away. It was such a tiny little place, easy to miss in the blink of an eye, which just goes to show that in this day and age, it's always the quiet ones that go off at the deep end…

Tongariro is the oldest National Park in New Zealand, having been donated to the government by the local Maori chief when he realised that it would otherwise be taken by force. It proved a sensible move – National Parks are protected, after all – and it means that the most amazing area in the North Island has been relatively untouched by man. I arrived in cloud – is it my fate always to arrive in places with amazing mountains when they're hidden? – and camped at the local campsite, only to discover that my tent had gone slightly mouldy and stank something rotten. Never mind; I've slept in worse places than a rancid tent.

Posing in front of Mt Ngauruhoe

Thursday 13th was a glorious day, a bit of a bonus seeing as that morning I set off on the Tongariro Northern Circuit, a three-day tramp through the volcano-ridden northern half of the park. I can safely say that I have never experienced anything like the might of Mts Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu (pronounced 'Tong-a-reer-oh', 'Nara-hoe-wee' and 'Roo-a-pay-hoo') and I doubt I ever will[13]. Unless you've been to a volcanic area, only the photographs can really show what the place is like, but I'll have a go at describing it. Yet again a place in New Zealand goes beyond mere vocabulary…

The volcanoes of Tongariro are totally different to Taranaki. Taranaki is bush-clad until the tree line, and after that it's tussock and, finally, rock and snow; it's a classic dormant volcano, having last erupted about 200 years ago. In Tongariro the eruptions are pretty regular – Ruapehu last erupted in June 1996 and smoke still pours out every now and then – and the area is desolate; if you want to know what it's like on the moon, come to Tongariro. I walked through areas where the ground was steaming with sulphuric clouds; places where the ground wasn't visible through the huge clouds of steam rising from subterranean pools of boiling acid; spots where clear, cold water erupted out of the ground to form oases in the desert; craters so big you could hold rock concerts in them; and lakes whose fluorescence put the glacial waters of the Southern Alps to shame. It was another stunning walk, different in its attraction from the mountain walks, bush bashes and river valleys I've been on so far.

The Circuit

Perched on the ridge leading down from Mts Tongariro and Ngauruhoe are the aptly-named Emerald Lakes

The walk took me clockwise round the circuit, staying for two nights in huts. I went round Tongariro and Ngauruhoe – Ngauruhoe being a younger, parasitic cone on the side of Tongariro, but looking more impressive due to its size – and along the flanks of Ruapehu, and throughout the weather was cloudless. I started off at Whakapapa, home to the famous Tongariro Chateau, a disgustingly huge and decadent snow hotel that apparently was used to house mental patients in the war (and looks like it did), and headed northeast through tussock and occasional clumps of forest. The first two hours of track were eroded, slippy and, to be honest, a

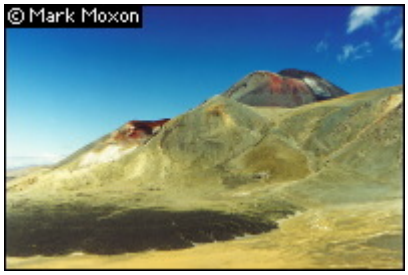
[13] Oh yes I would: Gunung Rinjani.

pain, but on arrival at the Mangatepopo Hut things started to hot up, quite literally. After a quick side trip to the Soda Springs, one of the few waterfalls in the area, it was time to climb.

The path winds right past the Emerald Lakes

Climbing up towards the towering mass of Tongariro and Ngauruhoe was extremely hot and bothersome, especially as my legs hadn't recovered from the ascent of Taranaki, but it was worth every bit of sweat. I gave the side trip to the top of Ngauruhoe a miss – an hour's clambering up scree was something I didn't fancy after the previous tramp – but round the corner from the volcanic cone was something even more amazing: the South Crater. Imagine a huge crater, surrounded by mountains, big enough to fit a football stadium in, with the path cutting right across the middle, and that's what the South Crater looked like, a huge, flat-bottomed bowl on the top on the world. Climbing up the side of the crater gave great views of the surrounding moonscape, and at the top was yet another surprise, the Red Crater.

The Red Crater is to Mars what the South Crater is to the moon; it's red, steaming and pretty damn big, and where the South Crater is flat and round, the Red Crater is more like a chasm in the earth, full of strange shapes and colours. As you climb round the edge of the crater, the ground starts to steam with foul sulphurous fumes that smell just like rotten eggs, and just as you think it can't get any more amazing, the Emerald Lakes come into view down in the next valley. The Emerald Lakes are pure turquoise, with yellow edges, and although you wouldn't want to go swimming in them, they're awesome to look at, contrasting with the barren landscape all around.



The central crater of Tongariro

It was on this steaming peak that I met my first tramping companion, Delia from Sydney (though originally from Sweden, an emigrant at four years old). We nattered and walked on together, heading for the Blue Lake – not surprisingly, a blue lake – across Central Crater (another flat one) and on to the Ketetahi Hut, our stop for the night. On the way we made a useful trade; Delia gave me a polarising filter for my camera that she no longer needed, and she got my dubbin (not much use to me without leather boots) and some of my leaflets from the South Island that I no longer needed. I'd been meaning to get a polarising filter since I saw Scott of the Pilbara use one to bring out the blues in the sky, and it proved excellent timing; Tongariro through a polarising filter is something to behold.

Ketetahi Hut is just up the hill from the Ketetahi Springs, a pit of boiling water that throws steam up into the sky that you can see for miles around. Delia and I went to visit the springs, which are technically on private land but nobody seemed to be watching, and I got my first taste of thermal activity; New Zealand is on the junction of two tectonic plates, and in the centre of the North Island are plenty of boiling pools, thermal resorts and so on. Ketetahi Springs, though, was free of tourists, which makes it somewhat unique.

In the Shadow of Ruapehu

Mt Ruapehu and the Lower Tama Lake

On day 2 we picked up another tramper – Monika from Munich – and stomped our way through the moonscape of the eastern side of the park, eventually passing through Oturere Hut and on to Waihohonu Hut. On the way the views of Ruapehu were impressive, to say the least, and when we reached our destination, we dropped our packs and wandered off to the Ohinepango Springs, where gallons of water pours out of the rock every second, creating a pretty little river in the wilderness. The girls swam, but in a typical show of male cowardice I stayed on dry land, seeing as my hand had gone numb with cold when I'd filled up my water bottles from the spring. And that night the silhouette of Ruapehu beside a clear sunset was a real sight to behold…

Day 3 saw us walking back to Whakapapa, passing the gushing Taranaki Falls and arriving back at Whakapapa after a reasonably long but relatively easy trudge; the carrot for the donkey on those last long kilometres was the thought of a 1.5 litre bottle of Coke that I had stashed in the depths of Zed. I gave Delia a lift to National Park, the nearest village to the park after Whakapapa, and after giving a lift to two hitchers to the Ketetahi road end, I drove to Taupo, where I dropped Monika off at a hostel and found myself a place to camp.

Taranaki Falls

That night I redeemed two vouchers I'd got from the petrol station for two McDonald's cheeseburgers, and got a further NZ$2 fish and chips that I ate on the lake shore. After pasta for the last three days, it was probably the best junk food I'd ever had, ranking up there with the Big Macs in Christchurch. Sometimes it's good to be bad, especially when you've earned it…

Taupo

Written: 17 February 1997

'Unseasonable rain' they called it on my first visit to Taupo, as I prepared to head off for my first explorations of New Zealand. The news reader said, 'There have been strong gales throughout the North Island, ripping roofs off buildings and bringing trees down on power lines. The worst area hit is between Taupo and Rotorua, but the whole of the north can expect very heavy rain and serious wind.' I didn't need to be told: when you're trying to get to sleep in the back of a Toyota Corona parked precariously close to the edge of Lake Taupo, you know when there's a bloody great storm chucking down more water than you've ever seen, and threatening to blow your car on its side. I swear that there was so much water in the air that the fishes in the lake didn't know which side of the horizon they were supposed to be. Yes, as I've said before, New Zealand is wet, but it seems a whole lot wetter when you're outside.

The thermal creations of Orakei Korako are other-worldy, to say the least

But on my second visit – after returning from the South Island – Taupo proved an interesting stop, as it was the first real experience I'd had of hardcore tourism since I'd last been in the North Island: the South Island is relatively untouched by tourism, apart from Queenstown, I suppose. The caravan park I was in was full of backpackers and tourists, and I had the same sinking feeling that I felt when I finally hit the Stuart Highway after six months exploring Western Australia. As I tried to fall asleep in my tent, the sound of Saturday drinking and pumping music made me realise how far I was from the Kiwi Experience[14] type of travelling. I wasn't at all sorry.

The aptly-named Diamond Geyser at Orakei Korako

On Sunday I decided to explore the thermal areas of the centre before heading east to Napier for more school visits. My destination was Orakei Korako, apparently the most impressive thermal area, and I think the hype is probably right. Gushing geysers, boiling mud pools, beautiful caves, amazing multi-coloured lakes: I can't describe the

[14] The Kiwi Experience – and its cousin the Oz Experience – is my idea of a living hell, and one of the reasons I got on so well with Delia in Tongariro was that her opinions on the Kiwi Experience tallied with mine. The Experience is a bus ticket you can buy, and you can jump on and off the bus as many times as you like, as long as you follow the route on the ticket. The buses have commentary and follow the main tourists routes, but the problem is the people: the Kiwi Experience is full of young drinkers, sex-obsessed teenagers and people whose idea of a good time is getting pissed at night and sleeping it off on the bus. No thanks: I've managed to stay away from those dickheads by avoiding hostels, and if there's one justification for spending huge amounts of cash on the likes of Zed and Oz, it's to avoid the 18-30 mentality of the Experiences. There: spleen vented, even if it makes me sound like a bitter old git.

sights, so I won't even try. Even the photographs can't do justice to the stench, the atmosphere and the noises of nature at its most hell-like. After Orakei Korako I popped in to the Craters of the Moon conservation area just north of Taupo, home to yet more impressive boiling mud craters, and after breathing in fumes of goodness only knows what, I drove east to Napier.

Mahia Beach

Written: 18 February 1997

Sunset over Mahia Beach

The east coast is dry and hot, just like the east coast of the South Island, for the same climactic reasons. As I drove up the coast the sun blasted down, making the incredibly winding road almost pleasant, even though it was pretty hard to look at anything with right-angle bends every few metres and serious drops on either side of the road.

In fact, all I remember of driving north from Napier to Mahia is the hot sun and the excellent company of a couple of hitchhikers whom I took to Wairoa, where we hung around by the river and had lunch while they gleefully told me of the natural marijuana growing all round this area.

The trippy skies of Mahia

My original plan had been to drive all around the East Cape, the landmass that juts east out of the North Island, but seeing the nature of the road and how long it was taking to get anywhere, I decided to hang around on the beach instead. The two hitchers recommended Mahia Beach on a little peninsula that juts south from the northern end of Hawke Bay, and realising that local knowledge is better than any number of guidebooks, I struck south for Mahia. The hitchers were right: Mahia Beach is a little paradise.

It's also one of the few places on the east coast where you get a sunset across the sea: because the peninsula juts south and Mahia Beach is on the western side of the peninsula, the sun sets into the sea, which is always a bonus. As I sat on the beach staring at the strange cloud formations that make New Zealand's sky so unique, I felt completely at ease, the sort of feeling that you can only get when everything goes right. I might not have explored the East Cape, but it all turned out well anyway.

Coromandel

Written: 23 February 1997

The Coromandel peninsula is a beautiful place for a bit of sailing

From Hamilton I drove to visit the Acorn the dealer in Thames. Gwynne and his wife Alice live with their son Tobin in a beautiful house in tiny Thames, a little town tucked away at the southern end of the Coromandel Peninsula, not a million miles from Auckland. If my previous dealer experiences had been great, this was simply wonderful. Alice's dad owns a yacht – one he built himself from scratch, no less – and we spent the weekend out in the Hauraki Gulf, exploring, swimming and fishing.

The Hauraki Gulf is between Auckland and Coromandel, and is home to Rangitoto, Motutapu and all the other islands I'd come across in my time in Auckland. Although we were far enough away from Auckland for it not to be visible, it almost felt like I was home, an interesting feeling seeing as I'd only spent six weeks in Auckland thus far. The eastern coast of the Hauraki Gulf consists of the north-south

Coromandel Peninsula, and off the coast of the peninsula are loads of pretty little islands, totally untouched for the most part.

The sailing was fun enough on its own, but add in the beautiful bays where we dropped anchor and went swimming, the bush on Green Island that we hacked our way through to reach a huge breeding colony of gannets, possibly the smelliest experience of my life, and the snorkelling around the rocks, and it suddenly felt like a tropical holiday, the sort that people class as a once-in-a-lifetime event.

The view from the top of Green Island

On the Saturday afternoon we fished, and unlike my usual experiences with rod and line, I couldn't fail: as soon as my line went in, I'd get another snapper, and before long we had enough to complement the chicken we'd got for dinner. On the way to our sheltered harbour where we were going to spend the night, a school of dolphins joined the boat and swam in our wake, veering off like fighter jets to explore, and swimming back up to the front of the boat without seeming to move a muscle. Not since Monkey Mia had I seen dolphins this close, and you could have sworn they turned on their sides to purposely look up at us as we hung over the stern.

The snapper were quite superb. I hadn't tasted fish this fresh since my kayaking trip to Rangitoto, and the captain's batter was the product of an experienced chef. As we settled down for the night, the full moon came out, the already calm sea flattened out totally, and I slept the sleep of the extremely knackered. Fresh air in the bush is one thing, but a fresh sea breeze really brings on the sleep. I didn't even notice the chattering of the sea shrimp as the they banged into the boat in their hundreds, or the clanking of the steel hawsers against the mast: it was the best sleep I'd had in ages.

Coromandel sunset

Sea Morning

Waking up in a harbour, on a boat, is quite an experience. As your eyes open, you notice a slight swaying, and it took me some time to work out where the hell I was, even though I'd spent almost every night in a different place in my travels. Then the smell of the sea wafts into the cabin, the sounds of merry breakfasting carry gently across the boat, and the next thing you know it's time to eat, shake the sleepy dust out of your eyes, and get moving. The sea air through the hair as the boat picks up the wind is probably the best way to wake up in the morning: it even beats coffee.

Fresh snapper from the sea

Before long we had dropped anchor off a reasonably sized island just off the coast, and Gwynne and I hooned up the island's biggest hill for a gorgeous view along the coast. However, the weather had turned from beautiful to humid and pregnant with potential, and after fishing for sprats on the beach with a net – with no success, defeating our plans to fish for big game – we finished off our existing bait (catching nothing, surprising after the night before) and headed back for lunch in to Coromandel, a rather cosmopolitan seaside village that has more to do with expensive boats than serious fishing, but which still manages to ooze charm.

Smelly gannet nests on Green Island

We were lucky, because as soon as we'd finished lunch, the heavens opened. I'd been through plenty of storms where the water fell down in vertical shards of rain before, but this storm had attitude. Thames isn't a terribly wet area, and normally has pretty good weather,

but the build up of humidity had been particularly unpleasant, and I thought the storm would wash away the atmosphere. Wrong.

Earlier in the month, when I was enjoying the most delightful weather in Fiordland (an unusual piece of luck given Fiordland's huge rainfall) the Coromandel area was being battered by a cyclone. In my distant position I hadn't realised how serious the storm had been, but the combination of torrential rain, heavy winds and very high tide had conspired to wash out most of the road from Thames to Coromandel, and seeing the Coromandel rain sloshing down from the sky and right into my leaky car brought home the eternal truth about Kiwi weather: when it decides to be moody, it makes PMS look like a mild headache.

Still, what a small price to pay for wonderful company in a wonderful place…

Northland

Written: 1 March 1997

From Whangarei I drove north to Matauri Bay, home to an extremely picturesque primary school, and the best views from a principal's office in the country, and possibly the world. It's also the resting place of the *Rainbow Warrior*: after being blown up in Auckland, the ship was laid to rest off Matauri Bay, a fitting place for it. The interview went very well, and I had the honour of having a full *haka* performed for me by the school children: a *haka* is what the All Blacks perform before playing rugby, and the version I witnessed went on for about five minutes. *Hakas* are performed for honoured guests and very important people, and it gave me quite a buzz to see this classroom of Maori kids getting really into it. Soon after I was back on the road, with the sun still shining, and I drove back to Kerikeri and pitched camp, ready to visit the Acorn dealer in the morning.

The unavoidable Cape Reinga signpost

That was where I saw the advert. The woman from the caravan park waved it in front of my face like a page from *Paradise Lost*, and moaned about how nice it would be to take a year off and go travelling, and how hot it was, and it was probably a dirty old man anyway looking for some young girls, and that'll be NZ$8 for the campsite please. I went back later and had a look at the advert, and there it was: a good idea. 'Boat looking for crew to cruise to Tahiti, and then around the Pacific islands for a year. Only NZ$15 a day, including food. Ring Rob…' So I did. The next day I went to Paihia to see the boat and meet Rob, and he said he would make a decision in a few weeks, and I should keep in touch. And that was that… until later anyway.

Meanwhile, I had more exploring to do, and by late afternoon I was driving up the northernmost tip of Northland, heading for Cape Reinga, the tip of the North Island. Just in case I thought I was going to get away with visiting one of New Zealand's extremities in fine weather, it started to chuck it down, and when I got to the campsite, I pitched the tent and sat in the car, typing up my articles while the rain pounded down.

I couldn't see the Cape Reinga lighthouse until I stubbed my toe on it…

I sometimes wonder why I bother to go to places when it's raining. The next day the fog had come to join the party, and when I drove the 3km to the cape itself, I couldn't see the famed meeting point of the Pacific Ocean and the Tasman Sea, I couldn't see the lighthouse until I bumped into it, and the signpost that declared how far London, Tokyo, Bluff and all the other metropolises of the world were from Cape Reinga, simply pointed into grey mist. But I can now say that I've been to the north of the North Island and the south of the South Island, and that's why I do these things. The map on which I've been drawing my route in thick black felt tip wouldn't be complete without a trip to the tip, so drenched as I was, I felt pretty pleased with myself.

Submarine Car

Written: 1 March 1997

I was thoroughly pleased now that I was coming to the end of my road trip round New Zealand: it had been a total success. That is, I felt pleased until I reached a river some 22km north of Whangarei. In a move that didn't prove too popular with the local traffic, the river had decided that the best place to flow was right over the main highway, and I came across a huge queue, waiting to cross this flowing torrent with help from the local farmers.

I got a little nervous and remembered the last time I'd had to brave it and cross deep water: a ford in Australia, somewhere in the Kimberley, where I just had to go for it with nobody around to help. In a petrol engine, if water gets into the engine it'll stall it, and the water level was well above my headlights. Still, nobody got anywhere by staying on the bank, and the best way to get into the sea is to jump, so I jumped.

Posing with Zed when I bought him; neither the shirt nor the car would remain clean over the coming months

Before I go on, I should perhaps mention something I did to the car just after I bought him. Zed, bless him, was a bit old, and his seals weren't quite what they used to be, so when it rained, the foot wells tended to get a bit waterlogged. Now I'd got a few things soaked in the storm that had hit Lake Taupo when I first left Auckland, so I'd investigated and found these rubber plugs that I could take out, opening up a hole in each foot well so the water could drain out. After all, water doesn't go uphill, does it, so it couldn't get *into* the car, could it?

Of course, Zed had no problem with the crossing. Sailing across the river, behind a tractor that was breaking the bow wave for me, he managed the crossing without faltering. There was, however, a rising tide within the car, and as I kept accelerating gently, muddy river water poured into the foot wells, oozing over my ankles and threatening to soak all my possessions. Luckily I'd worn my old tramping boots so I was able to keep a reasonable grip on the pedals, and before long we'd reached the other side and the holes in the car were doing what they were supposed to do: draining, not filling.

The view through Zed's windscreen as the foot wells slowly filled up with water

When I arrived in Whangarei I noticed a tidemark along the side where the river had washed away four months of accumulated dirt. It guilt-tripped me into cleaning the old bugger, the first time I'd done it manually. Underneath it all, Zed was a surprisingly white colour…

Whangarei

Written: 2 March 1997

I mention Whangarei because it was the first place I visited outside Auckland. On Friday 11th I headed north in a hired car for two hours, stopping only to avoid a lorry that had managed to overturn and block both lanes of traffic: the roads in New Zealand twist and turn wickedly, and are never level, with hills, mountains, valleys and forests in the way, making me extremely glad that I'd aborted the crazy idea of cycling round New Zealand before it had even got off the ground. I don't know if the rugged terrain is the excuse for the appalling quality of New Zealand driving, but it can't help.

The view of Whangarei from Parakaki

I was visiting Whangarei on business, to help on a stand at a small education show with a newly appointed Acorn dealer, who needed help in getting to know the products and how to sell them. I met up with him at the show, managed to lock myself out of my car (NZ$25 later, I

had the keys in my hand and felt a right wally), and met up with Sue and Mel, a lovely couple who looked after me and put me up in their house for the weekend (Sue's brother being the marketing manager at Acorn). The show was very quiet, but it was a pleasant weekend, and it all helped to fill the coffers. I also got to see what all the fuss is about: although the drive I did was far from scenic in relative terms, it was so luscious and green that I knew driving round New Zealand would be a wonderful experience.

The highlight of the weekend, though, was the election. I turned up in Australia just as the election was kicking in there, and a year later I arrived in New Zealand to find myself in the middle of party political broadcasts, election promises, and a fair splattering of confusion. The confusion was mainly because this election was the first MMP election (proportional representation to you and me), unlike previous elections, which had been run just like elections in the UK. MMP means everyone has two votes – one for the local MP, and another one for the party you'd like to see running the country – and most people I spoke to got quite confused when explaining the new system to a foreigner. None of this mattered, though, as Sue and Mel had some friends round on the Saturday night for an election party, so we all drank far too much wine, had a ball, and watched the results roll in (quite a fun experience when you know nothing about the personalities involved). I learned a hell of a lot about Kiwi politics as well as a lot about New Zealand, not least from a wonderful Dutch couple who had emigrated years ago, and had really lapped up the lifestyle[15].

In the end the election ended up with no party having a clear majority, which meant the politics would keep on going while someone tried to form a coalition government. It all seemed a bit silly, really, especially as the chances were high that the party that got the most votes, the National party, wouldn't get into power because the third party (New Zealand First, a party lead by an MP who defected from National) held the balance of power, and almost definitely wouldn't want to form a coalition with National. Ah well, that's politics.

Rotary in Whangarei

My second visit to Whangarei was months later as I completed my trip round New Zealand – at least, in terms of returning to the starting point. I shot straight through Auckland to Whangarei, coming across the first real rush hour for months. Whangarei was hot and humid, but seeing Peter and his family again was worth the effort (I'd met Peter, the local dealer, on my previous visit). I discovered that mixing Kahlua and milk is delicious (and called a 'brown cow' by middle-aged Kiwis, though their children just look at them in despair when they tell you that), and after visiting schools with Peter all day, I was invited to a meeting of the Whangarei North Rotary Club. Now that was an interesting experience.

I've never really understood Rotary, simply because I've never really thought about it: I suppose I assumed that Rotary was another of these funny little clubs with quaint customs and a no-women policy. Of course, I was wrong on some counts – women can be Rotarians, as long as the members don't black-ball them, and the only clothing I could see was the chairman's chain of office – but at the end of the day there was plenty of formality and stuff.

All the more credit, then, to Peter and his Rotary friends, who were nothing if not interesting, friendly, and above all, laid-back. I suppose enjoying a Rotary meeting means that not only have you turned into your parents, you're doing a better job at being middle-aged than they are, but there's not many Pommy tourists who can say they've not only been involved in a Rotary club flutter down Christchurch casino and won, but they've also been to a meeting as an official guest. That's one more interesting and pleasant social experience to chalk up on the blackboard of life…

Kiwi Trivia

Written: 2 March 1997

Some interesting oddities I noted about New Zealand, written during six months' exploring this wonderful country…

[15] And the sense of humour. I must thank Hank, the male half of the couple, for my first taste of Kiwi humour:

Two paedophiles on the beach, one says to the other: 'Hey! Get out of my sun!'

Well, I laughed.

Nice Names

This is ridiculous. I've just been glancing through my AA map of New Zealand, and up on the east coast of the North Island, not a million miles south of Hastings, is a mountain. It's not a very big mountain at only 305m (Mt Cook is 3754m, by comparison), but what it lacks in height it more than makes up in its name. And what's the name of this mountain? It is, of course, the easy-to-remember Mt Taumatawhakatangihangakoauauotamateapokaiwhenua-kitanatahu: it almost deserves a visit just for a photo of the signposts. I bet the map makers are pleased it's on the east coast, so they can put its name stretching out into the Pacific…

Add in the pronunciation of place names in New Zealand, and it can make navigation quite a challenge. In the Maori language, 'wh' is pronounced 'f', and all vowels are long, so Whangarei is pronounced 'Farn-gar-ray', to rhyme with 'way'. At least, that's the theory. Even people in Whangarei pronounce it differently depending on the phases of the moon: I heard 'Wangaray', 'Wan-garry', 'Fan-garry', 'Fongorray'… you name it, nobody seems to know where the hell they live. However any European-named places that contain 'wh' are pronounced in the European manner, and the Whanganui River spoils the party by being a Maori name that's pronounced 'Won-gan-ooey'.

Whatipu Beach, near Auckland, is pronounced 'Fatty-poo', much to the delight of juveniles everywhere

Prepare to be confused…

Drinking Laws

Another interesting aspect of New Zealand is the law on drinking. The legal drinking age is 20, but if you're married and you're in the pub with your spouse, you can drink at 18; in other words, if you don't have your spouse with you, you have to be 20 to drink, but without you can drink at 18. Don't ask me why, but I'm surprised the country isn't full of kids getting married simply so they could get slaughtered at the same time as most other country's kids can. Or perhaps it is, and I'm already too old to spot them…

Driving

While driving you notice odd little things about a country, and here's my summary of New Zealand's road system:

- The age for driving in this country is 15 – yes, 15 – which might help to explain why Kiwi drivers are lethal. I'd have been a terrible driver at 15 too.
- Then there's the left-turn rule. Driving in New Zealand is easy if you're used to driving on the left, except for one seriously strange law. If you're driving along and want to turn left into a side street, you have to give way to anybody turning into the road from your right. This makes crossroads somewhat exciting, and as the rule was only introduced relatively recently – in the seventies, I think – there are plenty of drivers out there who don't understand the rule themselves. It all makes for a bit of a gamble: if you're turning right and it's your right of way, are you going to exercise it if the vehicle turning left from the opposite direction is a huge truck? I think not…
- Kiwi drivers are some of the worst drivers in the western world. They overtake on blind corners, they regard indicators as optional extras, and, possibly worst of all, they all regard themselves as the worst drivers in the world while thinking that London drivers are courteous and safe. Weird! Perhaps one of the reasons that Kiwi drivers are so bad is that…
- …there are roadworks just about bloody everywhere. The marketing brains have got involved in the act, too, and the signs preceding the piles of monster trucks and bitumen machines proclaim things like 'Pavement rehabilitation' instead of 'Fixing a buggered road', making it all sound terribly pleasant. The fact that Kiwi workmen leave loads of gravel on the road when they reseal it, which shoots up into your windscreen and scratches your paintwork, is by the by. Another interesting difference with Kiwi roadworks is the large number of women on the team: there's normally at least one per set of roadworks, which you wouldn't see in the UK, and to the single-too-long traveller, it's a pleasant sight. My pet theory? Kiwis have too many

distractions on the road, especially in dangerous areas like roadworks. This produces crashes…

- …which produce crosses. Whenever someone dies on the road, the local council erects a small white cross at the crash site, one for every fatality. They also do this in Australia, the idea being that you see the crosses and it reminds you of your own mortality, and you drive more carefully. In my experience, people tend to think, 'Wow! A wipe-out crash! I bet *I* don't slide if I take this corner at break-neck speed…'

Lead Syringes

One interesting aspect of driving round New Zealand is that you can't buy leaded petrol anywhere in New Zealand; this worried me to start with, because the car I bought didn't run on unleaded. It's no problem, though: instead you buy lead additive from the garage too, which comes in a little syringe for NZ$1 (one syringe per 20 litres of petrol). These syringes are commonly known as 'squirts', so you should ask the man to fill it up with premium, and 'add a couple of squirts' – as most petrol stations have attendants, it's all taken care of. So it seems that in New Zealand you can have little squirts in the driving seat as well as the petrol tank: small wonder the road death toll is so high.

North vs South

Compared to the South Island, the North Island looks like a plucked chicken. Where the South Island has acres of untouched wilderness where the trees are random, ancient and indigenous and the bush bastards flourish, the North Island's forests are planted in lines, they're mostly made up of pine trees, and they're farmed. It's the hills that have recently been farmed and are now covered in stunted baby trees that look like plucked chickens, with rows and rows of orderly blobs where there should be chaos. That's just one reason the North Island feels more developed: as one of the guys at my Auckland hostel said, wherever you are in the South Island, you feel isolated, and he was right. In the North Island, you feel almost cosmopolitan in comparison, even in the bush.

The same is true in the wilderness. National Parks like Tongariro and Egmont feel much more developed than the likes of Fiordland or Mt Aspiring, mainly because there are more tourists, more tracks, and less totally unexplored regions. Tongariro is the oldest National Park in New Zealand, and as a result it feels a little exploited: Fiordland is too inhospitable to be westernised, with its weather, sandflies and ruggedness. I know which one I'd prefer to travel in… but then again, I also know which one I'd rather live in. It's horses for courses, of course.

Learning to Dive

Written: 27 March 1997

Glen showing off our catch in the Hen and Chicken Islands

Perhaps the biggest affirmation of my dedication to the cause of crossing the Pacific in a 36 ft sloop was that I took advantage of the delay in our departure to enrol on a diving course at the local dive shop. As with all retail areas I don't fully understand, the first visit to the shop was slightly worrying, with rows of strange underwater clothes hanging from racks, daring me to browse as if I knew what the hell they were. Luck was on my side, though, as we had a girl staying on board – Susie from Liverpool, who would end up trying to get enough money together to come on the trip, but without success – who had qualified in Australia as a Dive Master, and before long I'd booked four days of diving tuition, the end result hopefully being a PADI Open Water certification.

But there was a logical step to overcome first, a phobia if you like. Man can't breathe underwater: at least, this one couldn't, and every time I'd tried to snorkel, I'd manage two breaths with my face in the drink before the reflexes kicked me back up into the atmosphere, coughing and panicking. It's not logical to inhale underwater, and I couldn't seem to get round it.

As I sank into the swimming pool with my instructor Glen and nobody else around – it being the off-season, I was lucky enough to have one-on-one tuition – the phobia came back to me. Don't breathe. It's silly. Gas, gas, quick boys, and shit there's chlorine in my gullet, the chest is tightening, this isn't logical, get up, *get up!* But the regulator – the mouthpiece from a scuba tank – isn't a snorkel, and intellectually I knew that water can't get into it unless you take it out of your mouth, so where logic was giving me breathing problems with a snorkel, logic saved the day with scuba. Breathe, you bastard, and prove to yourself that this phobia's just that, and that it's going the same way as the phobias about moths, dark caves and French milk…

And it happened. One breath. A slight gag, and the sight of Glen's encouragement reduced the chest tightening, and another breath. A third. Panic, and standing up in the four-feet water brought relief, but then it was back down soon for some more. Ten minutes later, and we're still down, and it strikes me that I'm breathing underwater. Astounding.

After the pool sessions in the first two days, my first ever dive in the sea was at the Poor Knights Islands, a marine reserve that is home to New Zealand's finest diving, bar none: it's quite an introduction to diving, with bizarre fish everywhere, manta rays oscillating along the sea floor, and enough distractions to keep my mind off the insanity of my situation. I had two dives at the Knights and, on the final day, two dives at the Hen and Chicken Islands, where Glen caught six crayfish (two each, as I had a diving buddy called Lisa from Whangarei). That night I ripped into crayfish claw, reflecting that I'd managed to get round another phobia and could now breathe underwater. Who would have thought it?

THE END

Further Reading

This story is continued in another of my books, *Paradise Has Teeth: Travels in French Polynesia* (also available for free from **www.moxon.net**). If you enjoyed this book, you might like to know that there's a whole series of free books like this available from **www.moxon.net**, covering 16 countries and five continents:

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- *Snaking Patterns of Sand: Travels in Morocco*
- *Snow on the Sun Loungers: Travels in Cyprus*
- *The Head and the Heart: Travels in Senegal*
- *A Million Mosquitoes Can't Be Wrong: Travels in the Gambia*
- *The Lapping of the Dunes: Travels in Mali*
- *A Town Full of Nothing to Do: Travels in Burkina Faso*
- *The Road to Jesus: Travels in Ghana*

If you know someone who might like any of my books, please pass them on; I make no money from this, but I do enjoy the thought of people reading my books and recommending them to their friends. If you've enjoyed reading my writing (or even if you haven't) I'd be delighted if you could sign my Guestbook at **www.moxon.net** – after all, it's the feedback that makes it all worthwhile.

Happy travels!

Mark Moxon, September 2004
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