

TRAVEL

Roughing it



Justine and Chris Tyerman on the Harris Saddle with the Darran Mountains behind.



Lake Mackenzie with Emily Peak in the background.



The long steep trek up to the Harris Saddle.



The Route Burn draining Lake Harris tumbles over tussock lands to the waterfall below.

Justine Tyerman writes about her 'conversion' on the Routeburn Track . . .

I grizzled for months about the prospect of tramping the Routeburn Track the hard way — lugging a hefty pack laden with food, water, clothes and a sleeping bag up steep mountains to huts with no hot water, no showers and shared bunkrooms!

After all, the tramp was my idea, and it was being hijacked by a bunch of purists who were determined to convert me to their cause. It was somehow nobler to forgo comfy lodges with chefs, fine wines, electricity, showers and soft beds and pillows, not to mention guides and sherpas, in favour of “roughing it” — waiting in line to boil your dehydrated dinner in a pot over a gas ring and eating (from the same pot you cook in) with 30 to 40 other unwashed souls in wooden huts with only pot-belly stoves for heating and miners’ headlights for lighting when the solar power goes off at 9pm.

My long-cherished notion of hiking the track with no more of an encumbrance than a light-weight day-pack and relaxing in the evening in clean, dry clothes after a hot shower,

sharing a glass of Central Otago pinot noir with fascinating foreigners as fabulous aromas emanated from the lodge kitchen looked doomed as one-by-one, our group was seduced by the “let’s rough-it” mantra.

What is it about Kiwis that smelly, wet, cold, uncomfortable, hungry and sleep-deprived are superior qualities to clean, dry, warm, comfy, well-fed and rested?

As we bused from Wanaka to the Glenorchy end of the track, I gloomily studied the profile on the DoC brochure which looked to me like a series of vertical cliffs. Seeking to cheer me up, one of our team said contestants in the annual Routeburn Classic run the track in a matter of hours so surely I could manage to walk or crawl it in three days. Yeah, right!

I stuck on my bravest face and tried to ignore the sense of foreboding as I laced up my boots and struggled into my pack (if you get those two in the wrong order, you are in big strife already), grasped my trusty tramping stick and began the first few steps of our three-day, 32

kilometre trek.

We had studied the weather stats and prayed notoriously wet Fiordland would bless us with three fine days especially while crossing the Main Divide at the 1255-metre Harris Saddle.

The first few hours of the track were unbelievably beautiful and a good confidence booster for me — a gentle but steady climb in warm, dappled sunlight on a wide track through a forest of palest green-leafed beech trees with the crystalline Route Burn stream babbling conversationally alongside us. Crossing two very swingy, swing bridges added to the adventure and brought out the silly boy in the men, of course.

By the time we downed packs on a sunny mossy bank by a deep turquoise pool for our first high-energy snack stop two hours later, there were glimmerings that maybe I could do this. We had already met a variety of other trampers from all corners of the globe and there was an unspoken kinship among us as we discovered we were heading for the same hut.

The next phase was significantly steeper and more challenging but by now, I had begun to bond with my pack and boots. Furthermore, with every step up the narrow, rocky track, the landscape unfolded to reveal stunning views of waterfalls, lakes, rivers, alpine peaks and valleys. The one-foot-after-the-other advice of my tramping mate was proving its worth and by mid-afternoon, we were high above the valley floor where our bus had deposited us that morning . . . and I had not uttered a single grumble.

We reached the Routeburn Falls Hut just as the weather — true to forecast — suddenly turned unbelievably wild, torrential rain turning the silver-grey rockface towering above the hut into a 10-metre wide waterfall within minutes. The wind gusts were so strong every so often, the waterfall was blown back uphill creating a bizarre spectacle.