

TRAVEL



The long traverse along the exposed Hollyford face gave us spectacular views of the Darran Mountains and the Hollyford Valley.

'Proud to call this place my home'

As the 48-bed hut was fully-booked, there was scramble for the good bunks — ground level and in close proximity to the ablution block. Being newbies, we didn't score too well on the first night, but made a note to send a fleet-footed, bunk-booker ahead of the main party the next day.

After ferreting out our one set of dry "evening clothes" from the bottom of our packs and having a freshen-up with ice-cold mountain water, we set about preparing dinner.

The hut was abuzz with rosy-cheeked trampers boiling billies, swapping animated yarns about the day's tramp and using ingenious means to suspend wet gear around the blazing pot belly fire.

Being our first night, we had fresh meat — thinly-sliced steak with Surprise peas and instant mashed potato accompanied by a small glass of rough red from a wine bladder carried in by the strongest of our men. The meal was absolutely delicious, all the more so for the huge effort required to lug it uphill for five hours.

The sense of camaraderie was infectious and soon the Israeli, German, Dutch, French, Canadian, Australian, British and Kiwi (very much the minority) trampers were playing cards, giving each other history, geography and language lessons, sharing photos and addresses and having a jolly fine time.

A highlight of every evening was the address by the resident DoC ranger, the official purpose of which was to talk about hut rules, track protocols, safety and the all-important

weather for the next day. But once that was out of the way, it became clear these chaps were accomplished entertainers — the hut was their stage and we, their captive but eager audience. Dressed in full DoC regalia and looking like a caricature of a scout master, one fellow was a cross between John Cleese and Dudley Moore and had us in hysterics with his anecdotes of such escapades as possums invading sleeping bags in the dark of night.

As we headed to our cold, dark bunkroom for the night, I glanced up the hill where the

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lights of the lodge were still twinkling and well-dressed, mainly Japanese folk were enjoying a night cap. I felt oddly smug and contented rather than envious — it took me by surprise!

I snuggled into my cosy featherdown sleeping bag, slept soundly along with my 47 bunk-mates and awoke with the dawn to find the storm had passed but gale-force winds were forecast on the Harris Saddle. The ranger said no one was allowed to leave the hut until mid-morning when the winds abated.

The long, steep trek to the saddle is an experience I could happily repeat. The overnight downpour left the landscape glistening and turned the Routeburn Falls into a fury of white cascading foam. As we climbed above the

bush line across wetlands and tussocks dotted with delicate alpine flowers, skirting the bluffs above the ink-blue Lake Harris, we left the Mt Aspiring National Park and crossed into the Fiordland National Park.

By the time we reached the saddle summit for a late lunch, the wind had died completely, the sun beamed down on us from a cloudless sky and we were blessed with a breath-taking panorama of the snow-capped Darran Mountains towering above the deep, dark Hollyford Valley with the shimmer of the Tasman Sea far beyond. I felt an overwhelming sense of pride as a Kiwi to call this magnificent place my home, humility to be in the presence of such wondrous natural beauty . . . and a secret sense of extraordinary satisfaction deep down, at having summited-with-pack.

The long traverse along the exposed Hollyford face gave us spectacular views of the massive Mt Tutoko with its hanging glaciers, the highest of Fiordland's many peaks at 2723 metres, before we began a steep downward trek to Lake Mackenzie Hut through an enchanted forest, heavy with iridescent green moss and trees twisted into tortured humanesque forms.

The sun was setting by the time we reached the hut but our young Israeli friends, honouring their pledge to swim in every lake they came across on their many tramps around New Zealand, plunged into the snow-melt waters of Lake Mackenzie and even swam to a small island no doubt to show us just how tough soldiers in the Israeli army really are.



Night life at Lake Howden Hut with wet sleeping bags strung above the pot belly fire.



The stunning Lake Harris.

Having consumed all our fresh food, it was down to the dehydrated fare for the next two nights which I found perfectly adequate but the men were not so happy. However, a tot of whisky cheered them up no end!

Next day, the track took us through the ribbon wood "Orchard" and past thundering waterfalls, including the Earland Falls that cascaded from a cliff face far above us to the valley floor below.

Late afternoon, it began to rain as only Fiordland knows how and trampers arriving at Lake Howden Hut off the Greenstone and Caples tracks were seriously drenched.

Even their sleeping bags were sodden which made us realise just how blessed we were to have made it to the hut yet again before the heavens opened.

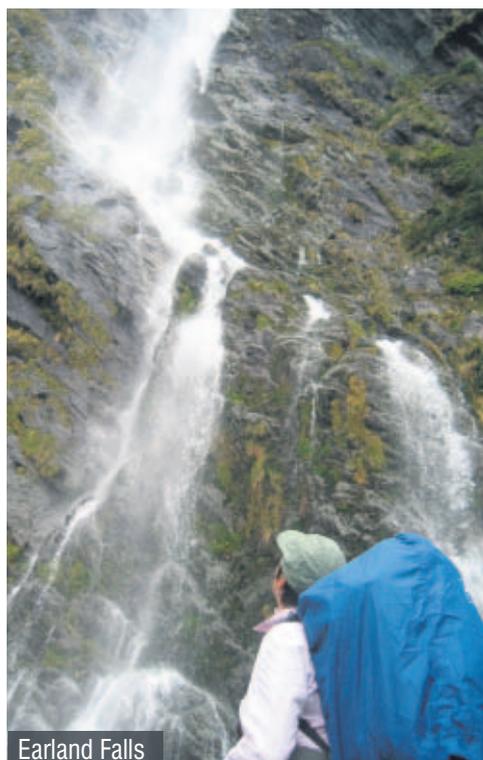
Trampers caught on the Hollyford face that day had to be rescued when they became disorientated in the thick mist and driving rain.

On our last day, we tramped in steady rain in full wet weather gear under the thick cover of silver beech forest so we escaped saturation. We missed the allegedly fabulous views of Lake Marian from Key Summit . . . but that gave me just the excuse I was looking for to tramp it again from the other direction.

At track's end, the sense of achievement was too much for me to contain. Fully converted to doing it the hard way, I went on bended knee and apologised contritely to the rest of the team for having ever entertained wussy thoughts of hot showers, feather pillows, fine food and sherpas.

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