Trail Reflections

50 Years of Hiking and Backpacking

Jim Kern
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plus more to be added...
A view of the park across Lake Pehoe.

torre del paine
chile
The Towers of Paine, close up.

A guanaco lets us get close.

Parker Thomson works his way up a granite rock pile toward Grey Glacier.
Grey Glacier is part of a glacier corridor that stretches for 150 km north and south. Refugio Grey looked inviting, but toward the end we were like horses headed for the barn. We kept moving.

The featured trail circumnavigates the Torres del Paine, granite spires that rise 2000 feet from the landscape.
Clouds swirl up the slopes, forming and dissolving. Kias, aggressive parrots, hover around the pass looking for anything they can steal, particularly food.

milford track
new zealand
The Milford Track in Fiordland National Park starts in the town of Te Anau. After paying fees, independent trampers board a boat for the 55 km run north on Lake Te Anau to the beginning of the trail.
Many hikers had told me that New Zealand’s Milford Track was “The world’s most beautiful hiking trail.” It was a place, they said, where the sky reached down to your boots, and the setting was made by nature not man.

Of course, I had to see for myself, and I brought along my oldest son, Jim. The trail we would hike threaded through Fiordland National Park, a three-million-acre wilderness on New Zealand’s South Island.

We wanted the best weather we could get for the hike. The 33-mile track opens in November at the beginning of their summer and closes in April. January through March is prime time. We reserved space for mid-February.

There are only two ways to hike the Milford Track. You can go as an independent tramper and bring your own sleeping bag, food, and cooking gear for over-nighting in basic huts. Or, for five times more money; you can go as a guided tramper with a guide, overnights in plush hotel-like huts with sheets on the beds, hot showers, and served meals with lunches packed. Either way, you must keep on schedule since beds are booked for just one night. Camping elsewhere is not permitted. We signed on as independent trampers.

Hiking on the Milford Track begins and ends at park headquarters in Te Anau, a picturesque community of 1,500, rimmed on one side by 5,000-foot mountains. After check-in at the appointed morning hour, a bus took us to Lake Te Anau where we boarded a powerboat for the ride to the lake’s north end and the trail-head.

After crossing a swinging bridge over the Clinton River, we walked the graded and well-marked trail that wove through tree-sized ferns growing out of thick cushions of green moss that upholstered the ground. By late afternoon we had followed the river for five miles to Clinton Forks Hut.

Each of the huts housed about forty hikers and had bunks, running water, and flush toilets. A hut manager answered questions and operated the place, but hikers are on their own to entertain and feed themselves. Groups
included hikers from Australia, Japan and England, as well as college kids from the U.S. and Israel. Jim and I boiled up freeze-dried dinners we’d brought from the States and oatmeal for breakfast. Just as we crawled into our sleeping bags, it started raining.

Fiordland National Park as well as much of the southwest coast of South Island gets up to 300 inches of rain a year. The heavy rain and cold are why the trail is closed during their winter months. But rain can add a spectacular dimension to the park, as we discovered. It must have rained hard and long much of the night because the hut manager said the river had risen so high that we couldn’t leave until around ten. He would let us know. So after breakfast, we sat around staring at the dripping forest and overcast sky.

Shortly after ten, the manager said we could start out for Mintaro Hut, our next overnight. In a few minutes we could see the problem. Parts of the trail were under water. At first we trekked through vegetation to avoid wet feet, but soon we were slogging through water up to our knees. The Clinton River had turned into a raging torrent. Yet all around us was a biological wonderland of rain forests and crystal-clear waterfalls. Rivulets and streams tumbled down sheer granite mountains.

At Mintaro Hut, we slept on the second floor where an open window let in cool air and late afternoon sunlight. As I was unrolling my sleeping bag, Jim whispered to turn around. There, perched motionless in the window opening, was a huge parrot. Unlike most parrots, his feathers were drab and his bill was big and sharply hooked. A bunkmate saw our surprise and said, “It’s a kea. They’re mischievous so don’t leave any food around. If you leave your valuables out, they will steal them.” There was lots of talk about keas that night, like how they destroyed hiking boots and vandalized rooms if they could sneak in a door. They were even known to strip cars bare, from upholstery and wiring to hub caps. Much worse, they were known to use their sharp beaks to peck out the eyes of sheep, and then eat the sheep itself.

The next morning brought crisp air and a cloudless, blue sky. So far the trail had been almost level, but soon we were climbing to 1,073-meter high Mackinnon Pass. Now we were looking down on gnarled tree limbs with oriental-looking twisted branches festooned with mosses, air plants and lichens. Wisps of clouds swirled above high-peaked mountains. One hiker described it as “superlative scenery gone crazy.”

The pass, where we stopped for a break, dropped off vertically on the north side for several hundred feet and then dropped steeply almost to the valley floor. We sat around enjoying the views and pulling our snacks from our packs to extend the stay. Waterfalls leapt from high cliffs. Keas glided through the mists and landed in the grass looking for handouts.

Following the trail, we hiked through a fairy-tale forest where moss-draped beech trees looked like towers of damp green velvet. At our trail lunch we could see far-off Sutherland Fall just below Lake Quill. Then we hiked down to Dumpling Hut for our last night.

On our last day, we walked 10 miles gradually downhill to catch the boat to Milford Sound at Sandfly Point. From there, a waiting bus took us back to Te Anau. One of the hikers summed up our experience with a toast, “To the land of a thousand waterfalls.”
On the third day we climbed from Mintaro Hut to Mackinnon Pass at 1073 m.

Then it’s off for Dumpling Hut, the last night on the trail and a final 18.6 km (11.6 miles) to Sandfly Point and another boat ride to Milford Sounds for a bus ride to Te Anau.
Trail Reflections
the Book
coming in 2012

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