

COPLAND PASS, NEW ZEALAND

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It was the beginning of December 1992 and we were nearing the end of our travel in the South Island of New Zealand. For the most part, we had enjoyed incredible weather, with high pressure sitting over the Chatham Islands, but it was now beginning to break up with fronts coming in over the west coast.

We decided to finish our tramping in New Zealand with a crossing of the Copland Pass, the main divide from east to west of the Southern Alps at a height of 2148m. The pass is graded Extremely Challenging in the guide books. Although not technically difficult, it is prone to severe weather changes, and has caught many people unawares. There are grisly tales of groups caught for days in the Silver Barrel Emergency Shelter just below the pass, and it has claimed a few lives. At the Department of Conservation Centre in Mount Cook Village, where you register your intentions, they are inclined to be off-putting about the route. The tramp starts here and follows the Hooker Valley up to the glacier lake and then picks its way over moraines above the true right bank of the Hooker River. The Hooker Hut is perched high above the river, its days numbered with the constant erosion of the glacier banks. It is also reputedly haunted, and this, combined with the thought of the hut sliding down into the icy wastes of the Hooker Glacier, does not make for a good night's sleep. The route continues up the Copland Ridge behind the hut, a loose, shale scramble which again is so eroded that the actual approach changes often as rock slides down and alters the access. It is very exposed at times, although with tremendous views over to Mount Cook and the other Southern Alps. Farther up the ridge at 1029m is the Silver Barrel. Dramatically perched, it is an emergency shelter made of corrugated iron, equipped with a couple of bunks, blankets and a radio. From here the route is in snow for a farther 150m to the top at 2148m. An access gully from the top leads to broad snow flanks which in turn lead to the head of the Copland Valley. From here it is 6-7 hours' walk to the Douglas Rock Hut and a farther two days' walk out through the rain forest, via Welcome Flats Hut and hot springs, to the SH6 road on the west coast.

We had already sampled some of New Zealand's excellent tramping routes. In the North Island we had walked round Mount Egmont for four days and then climbed to the top (2516m) in fair weather and perfect snow conditions. In the South Island we had spent five glorious days on the Abel Tasman tramp, walking along sand and through bush, camping by empty beaches and scrambling on curious rock structures eroded by wind and sea. We followed this with four days on the Routeburn, a "Classic World Walk", which had recently been opened after snow had blocked the Harris Saddle (2516m) and which included inspiring high level walking above the Alfred Valley with extensive views over to the Darren mountain range and out to Martin's Bay.

In the West Matukituki Valley we set out to have a go at the North West Ridge of Mount Aspiring, the Matterhorn of the South, but for once the weather was against us with freezing levels higher than Aspiring itself. However, we had adventures getting on to French Ridge and exploring the approaches to the mountain in soft snow and mist.

Leaving Hanukkah and the West Matukituki Valley we caught a bus to Mount Cook Village, while our surplus luggage was sent on another bus to Franz Joseph where we hoped to be reunited in four days. On arrival we had a brief look at the famous Hermitage Hotel, surrounded by Japanese tourists posing for photographs, obtained a weather forecast from the Information Centre and set off in the afternoon sun up the Hooker Valley. We met day trippers coming back from strolls along the Hooker River but soon left them behind as we approached the terminal lake. From there we headed uphill on the moraine, crossing numerous glacier streams, avalanche paths and gullies, then traversed around scree slopes below the Hayter and Stewart Glaciers. We were pleased to reach the Hooker Hut in two hours and forty minutes from the village, our first sub-guide book time (3-4 hours). We shared the hut with three others from Britain, two who had just come up for the walk and the other who planned to go up to the top of the pass and down the same way. That evening we reconnoitred the following morning's route and caught tantalising glimpses of Mount Cook between the showers.

We rose at 3.40 after not much sleep – a combination of nerves about the forthcoming route and the noise of the wind which had been gusting round the hut for most of the night. Fortunately, there had been no sign of the ghost. We set off an hour later, making our way up the scree, feeling sluggish in the early morning and with the weight of our packs, looking enviously at David who had only a small day-sack for his return trip. We, by contrast, were lugging sleeping bags, food, spare clothes, ice axes, crampons, big boots, harnesses, rope and other climbing paraphernalia, as well as first aid kit, stove, pans, plates, mugs, wash kit, torches, bivvy bags, hats, gloves, snow goggles, sandfly repellent, sun cream etc. We scrambled to the top of the first rock boulder, descended the fixed wire to the scree and traversed across the gully and over rock-strewn snow. Higher up on the scree we gained the route to the ridge and were rather disconcerted to find it so loose. Odd cairns marked the way and the steep drops on either side were dramatic. We picked our way carefully upwards but enjoyed the fine situation, with extensive views down to the cloud-smothered valleys and across to the myriad of Alpine peaks glinting in the early-morning sun.

After three hours we reached the Silver Barrel Shelter and met David on his way down again. We stopped to put on crampons and sun cream and continued up a 35° snow slope, reaching the top of the pass forty minutes later at 9a.m. It looked very threatening over to the west and we moved as quickly as we could in the soft snow to find an easy way down the other side. We descended a short gully on to broad snow slopes and made it down the first few hundred

feet before we were engulfed in cloud as we headed in to the murk of the dark Copland Valley. The going was fast down the snow-filled rock basins until we reached the end of the snow where, with relief, we could take off our big boots to follow the river down into the valley. There was no sign of the Douglas Rock Hut from the head of the valley and the only clue the route description gave, was that it was situated five minutes after entering the bush. The walk became interminable through tussocky grass in the drizzle, up and down rock beds, over streams, avalanche gullies, scree and loose boulders, stumbling through scrub and bush which had obviously grown since the guide was written. Eventually, five hours after leaving the Divide we reached the cosy Douglas Rock Hut and could finally rest. We were somewhat disturbed to learn from the occupants that two walkers had been over the Copland Pass the day before in only jeans and trainers. Their description in the hut book read: "Quite difficult and wet, but possible." Foolhardy would have been a better description, especially as the National Park staff strongly recommend that parties should have crampons and at least one rope, plus the necessary mountaineering experience.

The next day we continued along the Copland Valley to the Welcome Flats. The path was a bit of an assault course, starting with the very bouncy wire bridge over Tekano Creek. These bridges are made of three lengths of cable, one to walk on and the other two at shoulder height to hold on to. It felt frighteningly like being a trapeze artist. We then had to scramble – aided by a chain – over tree trunks covered with chicken wire, slippery boulders, avoid dubious looking moss-covered trees suspended over streams and be extremely careful on the mossy rocks which made up the path. The Welcome Flats Hut must be one of the most palatial in New Zealand. With room enough for 50, it has a huge sleeping area upstairs which looks down on to the cooking/eating area, a commodious vestibule for hanging wet clothing, large coal stove, a balcony upstairs and a verandah below. However, it is the nearby hot spring which makes the place. The source pool is dark and bubbling, and the other three pools green and steaming, surrounded by orange mud. As no one else was about we stripped off, then discovered that we were not alone after all. A swarm of hungry sandflies surrounded us and we had to quickly submerge in the hottest pool. We wiggled our hands and toes in the soft green mud at the bottom, felt the aches and tensions of the crossing disappear, and appreciated the often quoted New Zealand saying "relax and enjoy", while we soaked, surrounded by bush and mountains.

The final day's walk out to the west coast has a guide book time of six hours, and wanders in and out of the rain forest, crossing numerous streams. It looked at its best – green, lush and dripping, but we too were soon sodden from all the wet vegetation. The streams were well flooded from a night of heavy rain and we used footbridges to cross six of the seven creeks, fording only Rough Creek, the last, since by then we were so wet that a soaking made no difference. It was a testing path with every step having to be carefully trod on

slippery rocks and tree roots, hard going with our heavy packs. We had the compensation of magnificent views of three waterfalls cascading from the Sierra Range, and of the Copland River, grey and swirling, racing downstream. There was no respite, flood detours taking us up steep forest banks and huge boulders, through mud and streams until we at last reached the car park and shelter on SH6 where we emptied our boots, changed into dry clothes and waited for the bus to take us to Franz Joseph.

New Zealand is a great place for tramping. It has the most wonderful scenery and a well-organised system of huts, ranging from Grade 3 basic bothies to Grade 1 hostels, complete with running water and cooking facilities. For further information see the Lonely Planet series, "Tramping in New Zealand", by Jim du Fresne.



Loch Lee from the old churchyard