

New Zealand at Last

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We spent three days backpacking on the famous Routeburn Trek, experienced an exhilarating morning boogie boarding through a gorge with class three and four rapids, enjoyed a perfect day on a boat ride through the fjords on Doubtful Sound, and then started the Milford Trek. Our whole lives, we've been intrigued with the Milford Trek, one of most famous hikes/tramps in the world. It is remote, unspoiled, rugged and beautiful.

In order to be a part of the trek, we had to make reservations a year in advance. Only 40 people per day are allowed to access the 35-mile scenic trail with three huts spaced a day's walk apart. We rode a park service bus for 30 minutes to the middle of nowhere and then took a 45 minute park boat across a huge lake surrounded by snow capped mountains, fjords and waterfalls.

Two rangers met us and made us put our shoes in a bacterial solution to get rid of any foreign germs, carefully protecting this pristine environment. We walked through the alpine rainforest, which was like walking through a giant terrarium. Hundred-year old trees were growing on huge rocks, both entirely covered with moss. It was a botanist's dream. We had never seen so many varieties of ferns, plants, mosses and huge trees.

The trail is an engineering marvel. It was first carved in the mountainside in the late 1800s to ac-

cess Milford Sound. It took 60 years to dig a tunnel through the mountain to Milford Sound to allow car access. There are rainforests, raging rivers, fjords, huge snow-capped mountains, glaciers and too many waterfalls to count along the trail.

We were worried about the heavy rainfall predicted for the day we were to hike across the high alpine pass that always gets extreme weather. The ranger told us to embrace the rain and accept the fact that we *will* get wet because this area averages almost an inch a day of rain. With an improved attitude, we faced the cold wind and rain, and the experience of flowing rivers, fog and new waterfalls was magical.

Each night, we met up at the next hut with the same 40 people. We all shared a large bunkroom for sleeping and equipped with gas burners for cooking. There was no electricity or hot water, but it was great fun to meet everyone and enjoy the positive energy. (The ranger warned us not to leave our boots outside because the wekas, large non-flying birds, would steal them.) Many of our fellow trappers fixed gourmet meals as they lugged pots, pans, spices and fresh food in their packs for four days. We tried to keep our backpacks light by bringing only a sleeping bag, change of clothes, raingear, GORP, granola bars and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Yep, we were starving by the last day! Only three or four of us took a bath during the four days, and it was in the glacier-

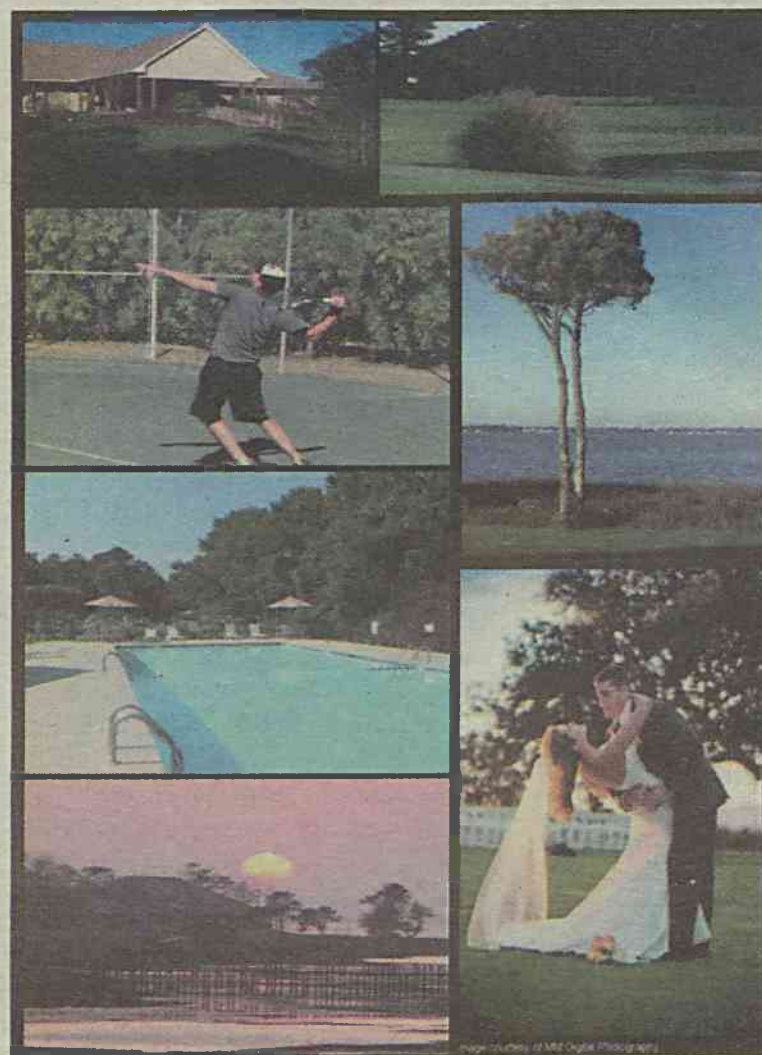
fed river that was freezing but refreshing.

One of the many interesting people on the trek had hiked the Milford Trek in 1966, the first year it had opened for Freedom Walkers. That's what we were called since we had no guide and were doing the hike on our own.

The end of the trail was Sandfly Point, aptly named by all the bites we got. A park boat took us across the head of Milford Sound, where we rode a bus for the two-hour magnificent drive through the mountains and tunnel. Soon after exiting the tunnel, we noticed a trail that led up to uninhabitable terrain. The bus driver told us this is where Edmund Hillary trained before climbing Mt. Everest. We slept on it and then drove back to hike to the saddle of the big mountains where we had amazing views of the Milford Sound.

That night, we stayed in an old miner's camp with no telephone service and no electricity. The shower was heated by a homemade coal fire under the water tank, and the refrigerator was a basket in a mountain stream. From there, we drove up the rugged West Coast to the Abel Tasman National Park to hike another of New Zealand's famous Great Walks.

Everywhere you turn in this part of New Zealand, there is spectacular scenery. The people, the culture and the lifestyle were impressive. New Zealand far exceeded our high expectations.



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