

# TREK THE TRACK

**THERE ARE TWO** rules of travel that I abide by. One, all calories consumed offshore don't count. Two, foreign currency does not look like mine so spend it as though it is someone else's.

It is the first that sees me arrive at Queenstown airport in New Zealand's South Island carrying two boxes of fresh Krispy Kreme doughnuts. I am in survival mode. Three days of trekking through prehistoric wilderness in the rugged Fjordlands of Hollyford Valley await me and I have come prepared.

I have been readying myself for weeks, a gruelling schedule of daily walks up and down the urban hills of Sydney, latte in hand. Walking has always been something I do to get to my car so some basic training was definitely called for. Wearing in one's brand new Ecco trekking boots, I am

**Get your trekking boots on. Pristine natural beauty awaits just a hop across the Tasman on New Zealand's historic Hollyford Track.** By Rachael Oakes-Ash

told, is a process that will be appreciated down the track (pun intended).

## HOORAY FOR HOLLYFORD

The Hollyford Track is set in the Hollyford Valley, part of the World Heritage-listed Fjordland National Park. Carved out by mammoth long lost glaciers, today the valley is one of the only places in the world where temperate rainforest and glaciers collide. As a result, the diversity of vegetation, wildlife and weather is vast. Our trek will take us from the Upper Hollyford River past waterfalls, lakes and

ranges to Martins Bay on the west coast.

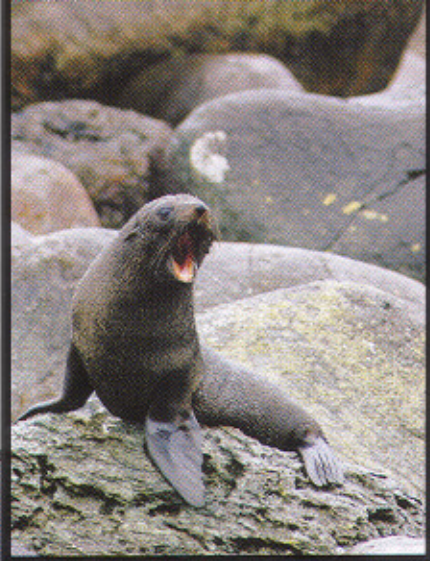
The valley was first explored by European adventurers in the 1860s. Gold miners and settlers followed, but the isolation of this valley meant they either deserted or died. I am hoping the same won't be said of me. Scottish descendant, Davey Gunn, settled in the valley in 1926 and was the first to take guided tours in the early 1930s. A complete madman, Davey is a legend in these parts for such feats as sewing his torn scrotum back together with nylon; rowing the 16 kilometres of Lake McKerrow then trekking up the river single-handed in under 20 hours to save victims of a plane crash in 1936; and predicting his own death on horseback in the hands of the river.

Our own guide, Bard, has a touch of the Davey madman about him. Bard in Celtic means storyteller. Our Bard is a great storyteller, he also has a hat fetish – sporting a rainbow-coloured crochet number pulled down low over his head. Despite his awe-inspiring stature (he's over six foot) and lumberjack gait, the fashion statement works.

## MAKING ACQUAINTANCES

We meet him in the early hours of the morning on the private bus from Queenstown on day one. The group is small. Seven in total, eight including Bard. All men, which makes me Snow White, though they don't take kindly to the dwarf reference. There's Perky, a fifty-year-old advertising guru from Wellington who needs some time out; Chirpy, a sole traveller from Sydney who works in PR and is celebrating his quarter-century while on the trek; Limpy, an Australian banker who hasn't worn in his trek boots; Smiley, the Australian banker's partner in crime; Oldie, the wise senior citizen trumper from New Zealand who could carry us all without breaking a sweat; and Alcy, my mate from Queenstown.

We start at the museum of Murray Gunn (Davey's 80-year-old son) at the source of the valley. The mad gene must run in the Gunn family. Once Murray painted the word 'horse' on one side of his stallions



and 'cow' on the other so they wouldn't be mistaken for deer by hunters. When invited on the Milford Sound submarine he took a can opener in case they got stuck inside and needed to get out. His museum is filled with trinkets from his father's exploration and cattle mustering days, as well as a washing line where he hangs out toast on pegs (don't ask). There is something unnerving about knowing that Murray and his toast are the last pieces of civilisation we will see for three days.

#### FRUITS OF THE FOREST

The Hollyford River runs fast over river stones and is crossed by swinging bridges. It is here that we fill our water bottles with fresh glacial water, don our backpacks and take our first steps into the temperate rainforest. As we hit our natural rhythm along the well-marked track, a meditative state begins to kick in which will settle and deepen as the days progress.

Unlike Australian trekking, there are no snakes, spiders or deadly critters to fear as we make our way under the canopy into a mélange of greens. It's these greens you have to watch out for. Swallow the berry of the native Tutu tree and you will die a painful death, eat its leaves however and your constipation will be relieved. The Heebe tree's leaves have the opposite effect and those of the Stinging Nettle are said to induce a searing fatal blow. Bard points each of these out along the way with a detailed description of their presence and history.

The Koru is the curved symbol of Air New Zealand and tastes like a walnut, and the leaves of the Pepper Tree taste the same as their name. The flax plant provided fibre to weave for the Maori tribes and soothing liniment for sandfly bites. How do I know? Because Bard told me.

Bard is obsessed by fauna and is determined to have a wild orchid named after his wife. The orchid's official name is *Earina mucronata*; however, if a flower becomes socially known by its adopted name in print then it becomes official. So, for the sake of Bard's marriage we dub the *Earina mucronata* 'Angela's orchid'.



The first day on Hollyford Track is spent tramping 17 kilometres. Greater folk have done this before us. Jane Campion, the director of *The Piano*, went from Hollywood to Hollyford in her quest for authentic terrain. The New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, is a well-known trumper and has walked this path. Though I suspect they both had 'sherpas', which we do not. We do, however, have hot showers, a warm fire and home cooking served up by Dagmar at Pyke Lodge at the end of our day. Dagmar is the keeper of the lodge, a hardy German with a hearty

## FIRST TRAVEL

sense of humour and a wicked way in the kitchen. Sushi is served up for entree with lamb shanks steaming in garlic followed by custard flan and red wine. The local river eels gnaw on lamb shank bones after dinner and when offered plain off-cuts without seasoning, they turn up their noses and wait for the good stuff.

Set on the edge of the river, Pyke Lodge's electricity is from a generator, and it is the site of the original Gunn settlement. Rumour has it Davey haunts this home, running up and down the corridors at night. I didn't hear him, but then I was having the best sleep in my life.

Day two finds us walking in the rain under mist-covered mountains to silver-lined Lake Alabaster, named after the whaler captain who first met the Maori

tribes of Martins Bay in 1863. The track is muddy and I'm thankful for the Gore-Tex lining of my boots.

The afternoon is spent jet-boating Lake McKerrow over the Australian/New Zealand tectonic plates. This is fault line territory and we are told it's prime earthquake time as they happen every three centuries. Lake McKerrow is surrounded by waterfalls dripping from the glaciers above and is the home of the first European settlement of the area, Jamestown, now a deserted orchard of three apple trees with a plaque.

### GO WEST

More trekking takes us to the glorious west coast and the comforts of St Martins Bay lodge where we dry out. Margot

replaces Dagmar, with home-baked bread, hot coffee and rescue remedies, and sends us on our way with warm cookies for our afternoon outing to Long Reef. Knee deep in mud and climbing through Triffid-like territory, we make our way to the coastal boulders to experience the Fiordland crested penguin. Being so close to these grandpa-like creatures and so far from civilisation is a privileged moment and I can feel my heart slow down another beat. Flora may be Bard's thing but animals are mine.

New Zealand fur seals and their pups hide among the boulders, blending in like rocks. Labradors of the sea, there is nothing tame about these critters – stand between them and the sea and they'll take you out with a hefty push and a nasty bite. I feel like a trespasser in their world as we marvel at their speed on land. The jet boat beats them as we head home to the lodge for homemade hummus, chicken curry and pavlova.

Day three comes round far too soon. A walk along Martins Bay reveals red banded dotterels who fake broken wings to lead you away from their nests and the strangely named oyster catch black bird that doesn't eat oysters. The temperature has dropped dramatically and we are shivering in our boots, which could account for why we don't feel the 7.1-Richter earthquake that shakes the Fiordland this morning. Just another day in this prehistoric terrain.

Trekking is a journey – physical, mental and emotional. While Hollyford is not an overly challenging trek, the days are long. The high of arriving is followed by the low of exhaustion and the retreat of sleep. It is impossible for the terrain not to impact your soul. Thoughts of work, stress and civilisation fold away with each step taken.

The finale of Hollyford is the chopper flight over the majestic Milford Sound into snow-laden country. It is a shock to see civilisation and I long to return to the beauty and isolation of Hollyford. Back to the land of stiletos and sugar-coated doughnuts. After three days, I know where I would rather be, trek boots and all. ■



### WHERE TO STAY

Queenstown has over 200 accommodation options including the St Moritz Grand Mercure at Lake Wakatipu.

### HOW TO GET THERE

Air New Zealand has direct services to Queenstown twice a week from Sydney or you can fly via Christchurch or Auckland daily from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Cairns. Return airfares from \$573.

### TOURS

Hollyford Track runs guided treks from October to April. The cost of a three-day guided trek with all meals, transport and accommodation is NZ\$1,550. [www.hollyfordtrack.com](http://www.hollyfordtrack.com)

All prices correct at press time.