

The Call of the Valley

The Hollyford Track meanders through a part of the World Heritage listed national park. It takes you from forest to ocean and allows you to experience the stunning South Island scenery, reports **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.



I have been preparing for four weeks by keeping 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 fridge or car, so some basic training was definitely called

in the early 1930s. A complete mad man, Davey is a legend in these parts for such feats as stitching up a wound with nylon and then rowing the 16 kilometres of Lake McKerron and trekking up the river single handed in under 20 hours to save the victims of a plane crash

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 Aley, a Queenstown local with a penchant for Pinot.

WE START at Murray Gunn's Museum (he's Davey's 80-year-old son) at the source of the valley. The mad gene must run in the Gunn family for Murray once 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 toast out on pegs (don't ask). There is something unnerving about knowing Murray and his toast are the last pieces of civilisation we will see for three days.

The Hollyford River runs fast over river stones and is crossed by suspension 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.

There may be no snakes, spiders or other deadly critters to fear, but beware of the foliage canopy. 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 the leaves 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.

You can, however, eat the vines of the Supple Jack, which taste like green beans and provide excellent fibre. Similarly the curved Koru tastes like a walnut and the leaves of the Pepper Tree live up to their name. The flax plant provided the Maori tribes with weaving material and soothing liniment for sandfly bites.

The first day on the Hollyford Track is spent tramping 17 kilometres. Greater folk have done this before us. Jane Champion, the director of *The Piano*, went from Hollywood to Hollyford in her quest for authentic terrain. The New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clarke, is a well-known trumper and has walked this path. However, I suspect



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they both had porters. 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 sense of humour and flair in the kitchen. Sushi is served up for entrée with lamb shanks steaming in garlic followed by custard flan and red wine.

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

Day Two finds us walking in the rain under mist covered mountains to the silver-lined Lake Alabaster, named after the whaler captain who first met the Maori tribes of Martins Bay in 1863. The track is muddy after the night's downpour and I am thankful for the Gore-tex lining of my boots.

The afternoon is spent jet boating on Lake McKerrow, the meeting place of the Australian/New Zealand tectonic plates. This is fault line territory and we are told it's prime earthquake time as they occur every three centuries. Lake McKerrow is surrounded by waterfalls dripping from the glaciers above and is the home of the first



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European settlement of the area, Jamestown, now a deserted orchard of three apple trees with a plaque.

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 and hot coffee 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 the Bard's thing, but animals are mine.

New Zealand fur seals and their pups hide amongst the boulders, blending in like rocks. Nicknamed the 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.

Day Three comes round far too soon. A walk along St Martins Bay reveals red-banded dotterels who fake broken wings to lead you away from their nests. The temperature has dropped dramatically and we are shivering in our boots, which could explain why we don't feel the earthquake that registers a hearty 7.1 on the Richter scale that morning. Just another day in this prehistoric terrain.



Trekking is a physical, mental and emotional journey. 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 into sleep. It is impossible for the terrain not to impact on your soul. Thoughts of work, stress and civilisation fold away with each step taken and the colours and smells of nature become brighter as senses heighten.

The finale of Hollyford is the chopper flight over the majestic Milford Sound into snow country. It is a shock to see civilisation and I long to return to the beauty and isolation of Hollyford. Kea's, the world's only native Fiordland parrot and a protected New Zealand species, bid us adieu from Homer Tunnel on the other side of the sound as we weave our way back in the bus to whence we came. After three days, I know where I would rather be, trek boots, mud and all. ■

Discover New Zealand

- The 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.
- Emirates flies daily between Dubai and Christchurch on South Island. There are also 21 weekly flights between Dubai and Auckland via Sydney, Brisbane or Melbourne.
- The Emirates Associate Hotel is the Crowne Plaza Christchurch. Tel +64 3 365 7799 or fax +64 3 365 0082.
- Emirates Holidays offers a 7 days/6 nights South Island self-drive car tour that starts in Christchurch that includes Dunedin, Te Anau, Queenstown and Mount Cook.
- Go to www.emirates-holidays.com for more information on packages to New Zealand.