

ROUTEBURN TRACK

Mount Aspiring and Fiordland National Parks

South Island, New Zealand

DISTANCE: 28 miles (45 km)

TIME: 3–4 days

PHYSICAL CHALLENGE: 1 2 3 4 5

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGE: 1 2 3 4 5

STAGING: Queenstown or Te Anau, South Island, New Zealand

As we crossed the narrow, swaying suspension bridge at the end of three days on the Routeburn Track, I shared a novel moment with companions from three different countries. Realizing the end to an astounding backcountry excursion was near, we stopped to look at each other with a single, simultaneous impulse: to turn right around and do the whole thing again the other way.

The Routeburn Track is like that, a hike of rich variety and complex beauty that whets the appetite for more. This historic alpine route penetrates the glacier-carved landscapes of New Zealand's Southern Alps—rain forests, high basins, and mountain peaks. From classic U-shaped glacial valleys to snowy passes, the Routeburn traverses strikingly diverse mountain terrain while delivering botanical surprise,

exotic bird song, and scenic payoff on a big scale. I'd have to say the experience here surpasses that of even its superstar sibling, the neighboring Milford Track.

Slightly shorter than the Milford, and much less popular, the 28-mile (45 km) Routeburn Track connects Mount Aspiring and Fiordland National Parks on New Zealand's South Island via a high pass called Harris Saddle. The route is a venerable one steeped in local tradition. Nineteenth-century European settlers used the track to connect settlements on the Greenstone River with budding commercial centers on Lake Wakatipu. Long before that, as early as

The beech forest below Lake Mackenzie is a magical place for hikers. PHOTO BY PETER POTTERFIELD.



1500, the Maori used the track to reach the Dart River drainage and its treasure of jade—the precious greenstone, or *pounamu*.

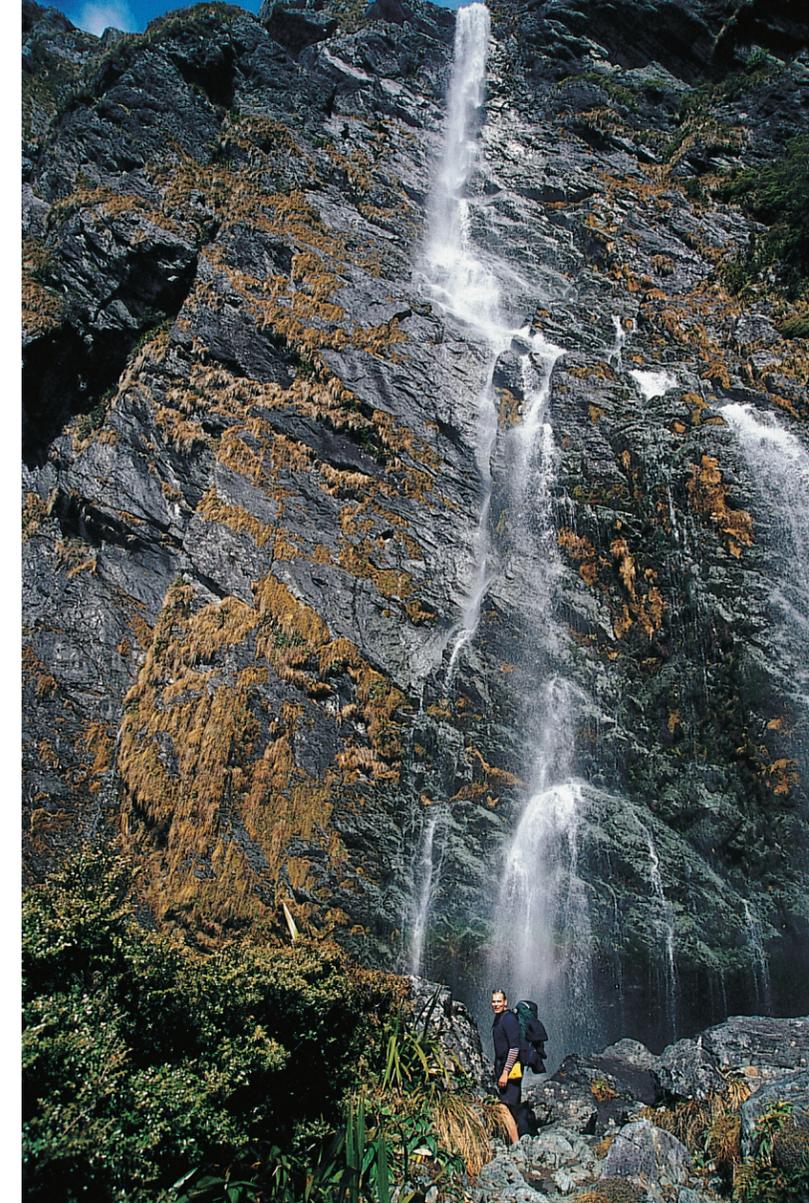
While the route has been plied for centuries, today's track offers a different sort of treasure. By connecting a series of radically different eco-zones, the track covers an almost unbelievable assortment of natural wonders, given the three or four days it takes to complete. An ancient, tranquil grove of ribbonwood trees called the Orchard, with the feel of cultivated acreage among the surrounding wildness, gives way to the high-decibel wonder of Earland Falls. Earland's roaring torrent descends in streaming cascades and drifted spray as it drains Roberts Lake, 265 feet (80 m) above. Ocean Peak Corner, a highlight of the second day, is the start of the long grinding traverse up the Hollyford Face. From here you get a view all the way down valley to Martin's Bay on the Tasman Sea.

From the high vantage of the flat mountaintop known as Key Summit, the peaks of Mount Aspiring National Park surround an open meadow set high on a rare triple continental divide. Three epic valleys—the Hollyford, the Eglington, and the Greenstone—drain into the Tasman Sea (west), the Foveaux Strait on the Southern Ocean (south), and the South Pacific Ocean (east), respectively. The landscape is astonishing, spiced with views into the Darran Range, where Hillary trained for Everest.

The sum of these parts renders the Routeburn memorable, but the allure is sharpened by the oddness of the flora and fauna, left here way down under to evolve on its own. This is home to the Kea, an alpine parrot prone to comic behavior, swooping overhead, making a racket, hoping for a handout at lunch stops. At Lake Mackenzie, set in a hanging valley surrounded by granite boulders the size of buildings, dawn is heralded by the haunting chorus of the New Zealand bellbird, backed up by the tomtit, coming from somewhere in the weird dragon-leaf shrub.

The route in places reminded me of the rain forests of the Pacific Northwest, rising through an ancient forest draped in moss—except here the stuff in the trees is wispy goblin moss and the trees are twisted silver beech and red beech, not Douglas fir. Those flowers include the world's largest fuchsia, the *kotukutuku*, and Mount Cook lilies, the big buttercups you see on the Hollyford Face, the biggest on Earth. Things down here look slightly familiar but, on closer inspection, unmistakably are not, so the overall effect is to give the landscape a cockeyed look, as if one landed on a planet a lot like Earth, only different.

This wilderness is even more appealing because in New Zealand the seasons are reversed. One can go hiking—they call it tramping down here—in the dead of a Northern Hemisphere winter, an appropriately twisted schedule for a place so full of surprises. When you fill out the landing card on arrival, for instance, you find out that “dangerous goods” include your tramping boots and tent stakes. Weaponry is not the issue, but potential contamination. Microorganisms



The cascade of Earland Falls drains Roberts Lake, an impressive 265 feet (81 m) above. PHOTO BY PETER POTTERFIELD.

carried here from other continents on a Vibram sole could wreak environmental havoc on this remote island country. So declare yourself on arrival and brace for a good going over. It's well worth the trouble. One of the best reasons for doing the Routeburn is that it's a great excuse to come down to this engaging island country where a sense of lighthearted fun and self-indulgence prevails right through to the wilderness.

LOGISTICS & STRATEGY

International hikers arrive in New Zealand via Auckland, the capitol and largest city in this island nation of reserved but affable Kiwis. Affectionately known as The Big Smoke, this cosmopolitan city on the North Island is a worldly and entertaining place, well suited for a day or two of easy living while working through the major-league jet lag acquired on the way.

