

## **The Milford Track**

Stephen P. Smith (Photography Steven Hampton).

It's May 2017 when an email pings through from Steve Hampton in Melbourne. "I've managed to book us onto the Milford Track, February 5th to 8th 2018."

I reread the message. The Milford Track is one of the jewels in the crown of walking. New Zealand's South Island is noted to be stunning, and the Milford Track the most stunning of all.

Steve explains that from the moment the 2018 hut bookings went live he sat at his computer for an hour and a half queueing to get our application processed.

It's now February 2nd 2018 and, having just passed through customs, immigration and biological hazard control, Steve is waiting for me at Queenstown airport.

With my bags liberally filling a rental car we head to an Airbnb for a couple of days of preparation.

With packs packed, food bought we take Highway 94 to Milford Sound. It rises through the mountains to a Scottish drizzle and closed in clouds to match. The area is one of the wettest in New Zealand. It does not bode well. In the previous week people had had their Milford Track bookings cancelled as the relaying of people, through the three huts that adorn the trail, came to a standstill as the tail end of a cyclone whipped the west coast.

We break the journey to walk up to Lake Marian: a twisting path meandering through melancholic moss covered trees. A suspension bridge leads on to the occasional wooden walkway before the terrain steepens to the Marian Cascades - a river of pure white and blue thundering down the hill. Onwards we amuse ourselves with making up smutty limericks (the antithesis to Steve's recent PhD in early English Literature) before we reach Lake Marian after a two hour tramp. The green lake is settled in brooding cloud clagged mountains. Only the accents of fellow walkers remind me I'm not in Scotland.

We then drive to the Milford Sound Lodge in what can only be described as a vicious downpour. With the windscreen wiper working overtime we pull up at a mile long tunnel and wait seven minutes for a green light to proceed. This gives us time to survey a series of streams rushing down a bare, grey rock face.

At the lodge, which is at the end of the Milford Track that we are preparing to walk, we get assigned to Room 21. After a rain-soaked dash across the car park, both our hearts sink as we find six other people already ensconced in a tiny sweltering room - two top bunks are all that is left.

The occupants are all young, all backpackers. To us they look normal, to them we must appear like a couple of old gits - old enough to be their parents. We have to remind ourselves that we are no longer young.

We backtrack to the dining area where rain lashes against the windows. It feels like a restaurant at the end of the universe.

In total contrast to our dorm room it is gourmet style, catering for a very different clientele. All I want is some stodge for the walk - egg and chips would be ideal. Instead the waiter insists on describing each dish, how it is prepared, presented and what it contains. We order food I cannot pronounce.

We sit and eat and, recalling all the bad habits we've witnessed, over the years, in dorm rooms, we plot how to get the room to ourselves. Options range from choosing the most fart inducing dessert on the menu, clambering into our bunks with at least one testicle dangling from one's underpants to waiting until 0300 and yelling out, "Steve, chuck us the wee bottle. No, no the one with the wide top." In the end we settle on relying on Steve's recently diagnosed sleep apnoea.

We go back to the dorm, it's stiflingly hot. We get into our bunks and try and settle for the night. The others play on their smartphones, the light is not turned off until midnight.

Around four a.m., and after my third trip to the bathroom of the night, across a very wet tree lined car park, I get lost on the way back and, on finding a common room, make a bed on a sofa. I rue these youngsters with their youthful bladders - they don't know what lays ahead of them.

Over breakfast Steve informs me that Milford Sound is actually a fjord. I have to admit my ignorance, and he explains a sound is a river leading into the sea, whereas a fjord is a glacial scoop out. Apparently when the British first arrived there was no English word for fjord and, unwilling to borrow a perfectly good Norwegian one, they declared them all sounds. At least the area is now called Fjordland, even if it is full of sounds. I suppose Soundland would come across as the UK's downmarket discount store.

We make the short journey to the bus station, park the car, swing our packs onto our backs and search out the bus to take us south to Te Anau Downs for a boat ride to the start of the Milford Track.

The bus driver, Bruce, fills us in how the road and tunnel was built by unemployed men during the depression. He also explains the Maori myth that the fiords were carved by a giant who, by the 13<sup>th</sup>, perfected his craft and created Milford Sound.

He drops us off, wishes us well. Our hearts sink when we get to the jetty for the boat to take us along the Te Anau River. Nothing more than a dredger with a couple of park benches bolted to it. Bruce had recommended a shepherd's hut to rest in for lunch. With an hour to spare, before the boat departs, we go in search.

We find a display board which tells us that, dating from the late nineteenth century, it was the oldest building in the area and is of some significance. Boldly we open the door to a single room that is nothing short of a slum. Strewn with decaying artefacts, and what appears to be the original horse hair mattress, we backtrack, find a large rock to park ourselves on and eat our lunch.

A distant throb of an engine lifts our spirits that perhaps the motorised park bench is not to be our vessel. We wander down and find a handsome boat mooring up. We are first to board, outdoing a coach party on an upmarket version of our walk.

The voyage is in pelting rain and suggestions by the steward that one may wish to venture outside to enjoy the views are ignored. The trip is about an hour and, with the rain easing off, we follow the start of the Milford Track into trees, with green strands of moss hanging down like an enchanted garden.



A couple of New Zealand robins made themselves known to us and are quite happy for us to stop and admire. We pass the first hut (a lodge in fact), a posh place for the coach party guests, before plodding on, alongside the River Clinton, to the Department of Conservation hut - The Clinton Hut. With the weather clear our only hazard is a branch which brakes off and crashes to the path in front of us. A near miss - it would have hurt. With mountains steeply looming above the trees we arrive around 1515, enjoying the short first day.



I wake on Tuesday at 0330, sleep done for the night. I contemplate the twelve mile walk from the Clinton Hut to the Mintaro Hut. The next three hours pass slowly, there's only so many rude limericks one can make up. As I lay awake a number of people get up to use the facilities - the trail attracts an older walker.

The promised rain does not materialise, the day dawns bright with mist hanging in the valley.



We get going at 0905 with the steep sided mountains towering above the track, kissing the blue sky with the occasional tissue of cloud overseeing the creeks as they fall almost vertically.



These mountains, being newer than Scotland, are not rounded off. Sheer granite faces picked out by moss and vegetation give a spectrum of hues in the morning light. New Zealand is called 'Scotland on Steroids', and today I can see why.

We come in and out of dense woodland, the trees dripping with moss, with rich orange bark, are home to the most friendly birds imaginable. Some are dark with white breasts, others a khaki green but each not perturbed by our presence - New Zealand once had no land mammals, the birds evolved to not be wary. Their predators are now rats and the stoat which was introduced, against environmental advice, in the nineteenth century to control the rabbit population.

On being released the stoats, being no fools, took one look at the rabbits munching on the pasture land and, remembering their woodland ancestry, promptly buggered off into the forests and have spent the last one and a half centuries tucking into a ready supply of the eggs of ground nesting birds and, when not in season, snacking on the birds that do survive - especially the flightless ones who gave up flying when they realised their survival did not depend on it.

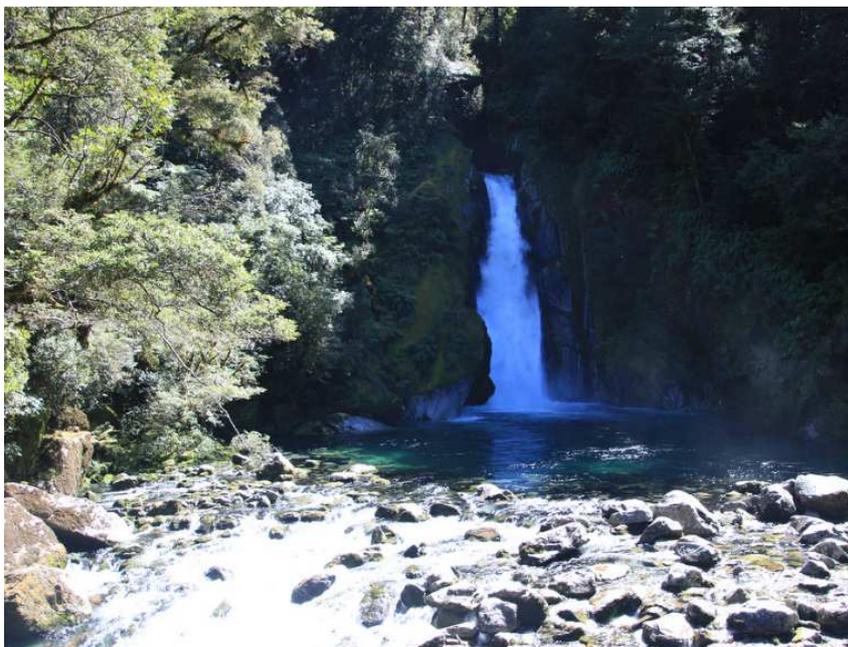
Traps, to outwit the stoats and rats, are prevalent on the trail. The odd hedgehog too, in New Zealand they are a pest that also destroys the bird life.



Out of the trees the views towards the Mackinnon Pass are truly stunning. The ridge lines undulate just enough to draw one's focus, high snow depicts the gullies and the vertical creeks tumble down with their rhythmical pattern that repeats every few seconds. Some blow back and form a swirling mist just below the ridge line.

We rest at a small lake where a flightless Weka bird, a bit like a British fowl, comes to say hello, again completely confident in our presence.

We scramble across a few river beds, some with running water that requires careful crossing. I help an older lady to find her way, backtracking and taking her hand as she steps from rock to rock.



We rest often, people pass us, it's so beautiful we don't want to hurry. Instead we take our time, taking it all in and savouring each moment, each step and each view. We arrive at the

hut around 1630, and take the advice to tie our boots up as the local Kea parrot population are adept at stealing shoes and boots.

At 1930 there's a hut talk from the warden, telling us the dos and don'ts plus tips for tomorrow. He's the most laid back young guy I've ever seen, totally happy with his work. I hope middle class aspirations never drag him down.

He labours the point about the Kea, not to feed them and to tie everything down. They nick everything they can, even the lead weights off car wheels are prone to their pesky beaks. He explains how they stole his young son, Tommy and are now raising him as their own. Actually I made that bit up but the warnings made it a plausible sounding possibility.

On an early morning bathroom visit I note the night sky is awash with stars, the dark sky sharpening the image like modern 4K technology.

Back in the dorm Steve's sleep apnoea is reaching its rafter rattling peak. At 0500, and feeling a tad grumpy, I ferret around for my pen light, click it on and shine it in his face in an attempt to get him to roll over. However, he's outfoxed me by wearing a face mask.

I get some brief sleep but at 0600 somebody's alarm wakes the entire hut. Over breakfast I speak to a lady, "Did you hear that alarm? Really inconsiderate."

"It was me," she replied.

I don't even try digging myself out of the hole.

On Wednesday, we get going at 0850 for the toughest day of the track, from Mintaro Hut to Dumpling Hut, across the Mackinnon Pass at 1154m. The path starts through the familiar trees, draped with moss, which looks like another enchanted garden. We then begin the zig zag path up to the ridge. It's well made and has a forgiving gradient. But the day is hot, the skies are blue and we are oh so slow.

We are soon passed by the walkers staying at the posh lodges (ours are called huts). We discover they have showers and I'm sure our lack of showers is nasally obvious. Other walkers are a mix of New Zealanders, Australians, Chinese and Americans.

There are sheer drops shielded by thick vegetation - a mix of ferns, trees and grasses. At the top the views are stunning, the alpine air is pure and the wafts of mountain freshness skirts past us with each light wind. The steep sided mountains undulating, some hogging the sky, others dropping to reveal big sky. The odd snow field is still around and waterfalls tumble, the rain of recent days adding to the vista.



Quintin Mackinnon found the route through to Milford Sound in 1888. In 1892 he drowned in Lake Te Anau - his body was never found. A monument commemorates his achievement of making Milford Sound accessible by means other than a boat. The descent is exposed, and therefore very hot. Steve and I cook in the heat as many overtake us. We don't care, we want to take our time.

In the distance the Sutherland Falls plummet from the high ground and we reflect how we have had the best of both worlds: perfect weather after heavy rain means the waterfalls, and creeks, are in fine fettle with rainbows forming on their spray and polished silver like reflections as the sun beats on their aqua flows.

We drop back into a path that's back to the enchanted garden spectacle. Now wooden walkways help us descend then guide us across boggy ground.

We skip the detour to Sutherland Falls, another uphill section in the blistering heat does not tempt us. The path improves and we trudge our way to the hut, arriving 1700 - two hours later than the estimated time. I note tonight's hut talk is at 2000, each night half an hour later. They obviously know tiredness is setting in.

Reading the notice boards I discover that Milford Sound is named after Milford Haven following the first European arrival, in 1812, being from Milford Haven. There's more information on the stoat problem - 95% of kiwi chicks end up as snacks for the said mammal. The traps are numerous, the problem momentous.

Thursday dawns another gorgeous day, we set off at 0730 - our boat at the end is booked for 1500 and, given yesterday's pace, we need to crack on.

Initially we head through the charmed trails of green twisted trees and mahogany coloured bark that entice us like a fairy tale. We snack often to keep our blood sugars up, yesterday we let them slip which, on the downhill sections, literally caused us to slip.

Today is a mixture of tree lined path, suspension bridges, snatched lake views, towering mountains with their waterfalls.

Steve warns me that the end of our walk, Sandfly Point, is one of the most appropriately named places in New Zealand. Apparently the sandfly is the bolshie cousin of the Scottish midge and awaits completers of the Milford Track with mouth-watering contempt.

Also Sandfly Point is named more in the Maori tradition of naming places, and wildlife, after some distinguishing feature. Unlike the white settlers who were hell bent on naming things after the discoverer, the discoverers birthplace or some white man who needed to be appeased; the Maori people are a more humble breed, closer to nature, closer to the earth.

We get to Sandfly Point at 1350, batting away sandflies as we emerge from the wooded track. With the 1400 boat about to leave, we take the last two places and, as it powers out into Milford Sound, we look back at the track - our home for the last three days. It's a sad goodbye, au revoir and auf wiedersehen, as the mountains bask in the sun.

