

## The Milford Track – “The finest walk in the world”

Robyn Leeder gives some tips for independent trekkers.

Tranquil lakes, crystal clear trout streams, gushing waterfalls, dank primeval beech forest, high glacier scoured mountains and delicate alpine plants. The Milford Track has all of this along an easy to follow, well made trail ending on the shores of the southern hemisphere's most beautiful fiord.

### Choosing your Class

The first thing to note when planning a trip along New Zealand's, historic Milford Track, is that there are two classes of walkers. Up to 80 “trampers” head south each day of the short New Zealand summer to walk the 54km track. They fall in roughly equal numbers into two very unequal groups:-

Guided Walkers pay about \$ to join the Milford Track Guided Walk, with meals and accommodation provided in privately operated huts. In 1889, the first Guided Walkers were led by Quintin Mackinnon. They slept in tents and primitive beech huts, but today's walkers can expect a lot more comfort, with generators providing luxuries like hot showers and electric lights. Carrying light day packs, these walkers are accompanied by experienced guides. In the evenings they relax after they're hot showers while hut staff prepare the evening meal.

*“I'd like to do the walk again the guided way, without the heavy pack and the blisters. I didn't really enjoy day 3 – I felt I just had my head down walking all day, and I didn't make it to Sutherland Falls.” Wendy*

Independent Walkers have been permitted on the track since 1966. They must obtain a permit (\$ NZ ) and stay in Department of Conservation huts. Independent Walkers carry their own food, clothing & a sleeping bag. The huts provide 40 bunks for trampers, slow combustion heaters, cold water, kerosene lamps and gas rings for cooking. A DOC officer is stationed at each hut to give advice on the conditions of the track ahead.

Opting to travel as an Independent Walker, you will soon discover that you are not free to do entirely as you please. Independent Walkers must walk the track on the days stated on their permit, must spend one night only at each hut, and may not camp anywhere along the track. They are, however, spared the irritation of compulsory getting to know you games and the need to appear in different designer coordinated thermals each day. Instead, they make do with comparing dehydrated delights around the gas rings in the huts and after dinner camaraderie on the verandah, accompanied by the rhythmical slapping of limbs as they attempt to diminish the vast clouds of biting sandflies that immediately surround any stationary trumper.

A wide range of people walk the track independently each year ranging from 70 year old grandfathers to school groups. Our group of middle aged Sydneysiders mingled with some New Zealander farmers on a budget holiday and young back packers on round the world tickets.

*“People our age walk ‘independently’ out of an attitude of perversity. Hot showers at night sound really good but I would still rather be ‘independent’ - you meet a wider range of people...” Marian*

### Clearing Customs

Having decided on the “independent” approach, you will probably have stocked up on some lightweight food items before leaving home. This is a good idea, as the stores in Te Annu can be quite pricey and a bit limited in range. Naturally, you will declare the food you are carrying

on your immigration slip and take the red customs channel. Be prepared for a couple of trick questions.

*“Do you have a tint” asked the customs man. “A tint?” Bernie looked bemused. Wendy & I exchanged puzzled glances at Bernie’s grey and thinning hair.*

*“Do you have a tint ?” The customs man repeated slowly, as if speaking to a group of preschoolers. Finally the light dawned. We were in Christchurch airport and had forgotten that in New Zealand vowel swapping is a national pastime.*

*“No”, I said. “He doesn’t have a tent”. “What about your tricken butts” the customs man continued, “are they clean?” Catching on more quickly this time, we assured him that our boots were indeed mud free. He smiled and waved us through.*

## Travelling to Te Anau

From Christchurch, there are various ways of reaching Te Anau. If time is limited, the obvious choice is to fly to Queenstown. From there a bus is the cheapest option, but flying in is far more dramatic. By now, you’ll be starting to get the hang of the language, so being told to go to the other “chicken counter” for your flight with Mount Cook Airlines shouldn’t present too much of a challenge. It’s easy really – just swap the “oo”s for “u”s, “e”s for “i”s and the “a”s for “e”s ...

Once aboard the six seater plane, it’s a spectacular flight down Lake Wakatipu with ranges of snow tipped mountains stretching to the horizon.

Be sure to pre book and reconfirm your accommodation. Te Anau is a popular stopping point for bus tours and can be filled to capacity during the limited trekking season. Also, remember that a visit to the Department of Conservation office at the Fiordland National Park Visitor Centre to confirm your permit is essential. Arrangements can be made with local bus companies to transport your luggage to Milford. It’s good to know that clean, dry clothes await you at the end of the trek.

*Arriving late in the afternoon at our Te Anau motel we were dismayed to discover that our bookings had been cancelled. They hadn’t received our deposit, despite the fact that credit card details had been supplied to the chain’s head office. The landlady hurriedly phoned around the town and eventually found back packer accommodation for the six of us – lucky we had sleeping bags with us!*

A wide choice of cafes and restaurants will tempt you, before boarding the early afternoon bus to Te Anau Downs to join the steamer for the final leg of the journey to the start of the track. S.S.Tawera maintains a stately pace down the lake as she has done for over one hundred years. Passing the intriguing inlets of North Fiord and the Worsley Valley towards hazy blue peaks, she finally, slips into the narrow inlet at the head of the lake and pulls in to Glade House Wharf and the start of the track.

## On the Track – Day 1

8.4km

From the wharf, it’s a pleasant four-hour walk through beech forest beside the Clinton River to Clinton Forks Hut. A short distance (1.2km) from the wharf is Glade House – the first night stopping point for Guided Walkers who will soon be settling down to afternoon tea on the verandah.

Cross the river via the long swing bridge and watch out for trout in the deep clear pools as you head up stream. A clearing with a view towards Dore Pass makes a good spot for a tea break. But don’t expect to rest for long – clouds of sand flies will soon have you on the move again.

Clinton Forks Hut is located at Kakopo Point where the river splits into the north and west branches. Floodwaters have eroded the riverbank so badly that the huts have had to be relocated. They are equipped with dormitories of twenty or so double bunks opening onto a mess room with gas burners, sinks with cold water and a wood heater. If you are trying dehydrated meals for the first time don't be tempted to take the "quick preparation" option no matter how tired and hungry you are.

*Wendy & I made the mistake of omitting the optional 10-minute soak before cooking our dehydrated meal. The New Zealand farmers amazed us as they pulled more and more ingredients out of their huge packs. As we struggled to digest our lamb leatherette, they sat down to a multi course gourmet feast complete with bottles of wine.*

*After dinner, we relaxed on the verandah, chatting until we were driven inside by the sand flies - a process that took about 6 minutes.*

## **On the Track - Day 2**

16.5 km

The track follows the West Branch into the Clinton Gorge where steep sided mountains are reflected in small glassy lakes formed by avalanche debris. Long mares tail waterfalls streak the valley walls with silver and the enclosing mountains ensure that you'll walk in shade, even on a sunny morning. Ferns and mosses deck the damp but silent beech forest.

The traditional lunch spot on day two is a stony creek bed, known as the Bus Stop. In heavy downpours this side creek can become impassable, necessitating a wait until the water level subsides – but please note that the "Bus" shelter is out of bounds for Independent Walkers who must stand in the rain.

Soon you'll reach the sidetrack to Poppeloma Hut. This is a hut for Guided Walkers, and track etiquette dictates that Freedom Walkers keep away from here too. The segregation between the two classes of walkers on the track is strictly maintained, with Guided Walkers being warned to "steer clear of Freedom walkers who are likely to be on the scrounge for extra food"! We found this attitude rather strange and at times little offensive. Our hut companions were a delightful and well-equipped group.

*"I have fond memories of some of the characters we met –the two gays from LA on their way to the Mardi Gras with video camera at the ready – the two Swiss girls who walked the whole way in sandals (notwithstanding a sprained ankle at the end) and not forgetting the Kiwi kids off the farm who brought their fishing tackle and bottles of wine to have with dinner every night.*

*As far as the comfort walkers went, we felt so superior! Mainly I suspect because we could all easily have afforded to do the guided tour but chose to prove our machismo (or something) by doing it tough. I just remember that the sweatier we got and the worse the dehydrated dinners tasted, the funnier it all seemed. Every minor discomfort added to the general hilarity, so that we seemed to laugh all the way to Milford." Judy*

*"It was an interesting and rewarding walk and we met some terrific people. I enjoyed the easy relaxed camaraderie – we had nothing to prove". Berni*

As that track begins to rise out of the valley towards Mintaro Hut, on a clear day the sun hits the track and the breathless air of the valley becomes oppressively hot. An effective antidote is a dip in the icy waters of Lake Mintaro. More enthusiastic walkers can dump their gear at the hut and head to the top of the pass discovered by Quintin Mackinnon and Earnest Mitchell in 1888. The spectacular evening views are a treat reserved for Independent Walkers only!

*"It was a real buzz to do the walk. It was my first overseas walk and I'd dreamed of doing it for at least 30 years. At the end of day 3 I slogged up that mountain cursing in the heat, but it was worth the pain to be on top of the pass on a clear evening. It was an elating experience, standing in that magic spot on top of the world." Bernie*

## On the Track – Day 3

14km

Day three begins with the zig zag ascent of 1073 metre high Mackinnon Pass. In clear weather, the Pass offers magnificent views back down the Clinton Valley. Often, though, the track is shrouded in cold damp fog forcing most walkers make use of the lunch shelter at the top of the pass. If you've packed a portable stove, you'll have the option of rejecting the stuffy, crowded hut in favour of a sheltered rocky ledge among the cushion plants and delicate alpine flowers for a brief lunch of soup, cheese and crackers.

With luck the swirling mists will clear, revealing the snow capped peaks of Mount Elliot (2003m), Mount Hart (1783m) and Mount Mackenzie, with Sutherland Falls spilling out of Lake Quill in between the later two. It is an awesome view, with the track ahead following Roaring Burn as it drops over 800 metres to the valley floor in a knee wrenchingly short distance.

*"For younger, fitter walkers it's not a daunting track, but for us older ones, coming down the steep slippery track off the pass with a heavy pack was quite taxing on the joints."*  
Bernie

Near Quinton Hut (Guided Walkers only), a sidetrack leads to Sutherland Falls, which, with a drop of 580m, is the third highest in the world. This 1 ½ hour detour is a must, offering the opportunity to relax on the spray brushed rocks at the base of the falls. A few kilometres of a flat, stony track leads to Dumpling Hut, and your last night on the track. If the weather is clear, step outside after dark to admire Milky Way floating overhead like a sequined shawl strung across the inky black sky. No light pollution here!

## On the Track – Day 4

18km

It's wise to aim for an early start to allow time for the minor detours to Bell Rock and Giant Gate Falls while still covering the 18 km to Sandfly Point in time for the early afternoon ferry to Milford.

The track follows the valley of the Arthur River to the Boat Shed. Pause in the centre of the long, suspension bridge to enjoy views of the mountains reflected in the clear glassy water. A succession of scrambles over the rocky debris of recent avalanches leads to the tranquil sandy shores of Lake Ada. Then it's just a few kilometres to Sandfly Point wharf, and the end of the track.

## Milford Sound

Afternoon busses run to Te Annu, but if time permits, a night at Milford is recommended. The two common choices for Freedom Walkers are the backpacker accommodation at Milford Lodge or a night aboard one of the boats that moor overnight on the quiet waters of the Sound. The third, somewhat more expensive option, is a night at the Milford Sound Hotel, where Guided Walkers end their trip.

*"I really enjoyed our beautiful 3 roomed suite at the Milford hotel. It was all the sweeter for its being such a contrast. A night of absolute bliss!"* Bernie

*"Obviously we bonded through sharing hardships, but there was more to it than that. Certainly it was natural that we would despise the guided walkers for their hot showers, clean cloths, designer thermals, edible meals and dinky little daypacks. That situation was only made worse by the track management working overtime to keep the two groups separate. Who was it who was offered a biscuit at the top of the pass before it was suddenly realized that they were from the wrong group and had it snatched back?"*

*Let's face it, life is made up of many different colours and contrasts, and the Milford Hotel's most luxurious suite and fine food was all the sweeter for the privations of the previous four days. The "comfort walkers" hadn't deserved it the way we had!"* Judy

It is essential to book ahead and send a deposit, making sure when booking that the Hotel understands that you are not a guided walker. They don't really expect Independent Walkers to own credit cards!

*Not again! The Milford Hotel had cancelled our bookings!!!*

*A group unkempt but credit card wielding Independent Walkers hung around the lobby, refusing to leave the hotel. The receptionist made international calls and studied her guest lists. If we definitely could not be persuaded to walk up the road to the Backpacker Lodge, she could only offer us one option. The eight of us would have to share an interconnected suite of two bedrooms, a sitting room (where they would put two folding beds) and two spa bathrooms. "We'll take it" we said in unison.*

*We retrieved our bags of clean cloths and groaned up the stairs. After some key fumbling the doors opened to reveal the most perfect late afternoon views of Mitre Peak and the Sound. We gasped. Gradually, as we took turns in the two spa baths, the group transformed itself from disheveled to clean and presentable.*

*The Guided Walkers were also in the Hotel. Most, it transpire, had rooms overlooking the car park behind the building. As we chatted over our delicious a la carte dinner, we could here them having tedious speeches and prizes around an uninteresting smorgasbord. We had no regrets!*

After dinner stroll along the boardwalk to Bowen Falls. A morning cruise to the Underwater Observatory will take you along the Sound, past seal colonies and delicate waterfalls streaming from near vertical rock walls. If the weather is clear, the short spectacular flight back to Queenstown is a fitting end to the journey. Barely clearing the mountaintops, you'll fly over turquoise glacial lakes and along the isolated Hollyford Valley.

There's said to be a fine walking track following the Hollyford River to the sea .... Perhaps next year....

## **Packing Tips**

Well worn-in boots – the track is often rough and rocky underfoot.  
Clothing that can be layered - cold wet mornings can turn into hot sweaty afternoons.  
Insect repellent (but don't be suprised if it seems to actually attract the sand flies...),  
sunblock, sunhat and sunglasses.  
Good wet and cold weather gear.  
Garbage bags to line your pack and a nylon pack cover.  
Spare food – bad weather may force you to spend an extra night at one of the huts.  
Sleeping bag. Cooking utensils & water bottle. Thermos  
Basic first-aid kit. Basic toiletries. Torch, matches.  
Ear plugs – some Freedom Walkers sleep very heavily after a day on the track!

## **Food Ideas**

Muesli breakfast bars or a mix of muesli & powdered milk.  
Tea, coffee, hot chocolate, cup-of-soups.  
Crispbreads, cheese & salamis.  
Dehydrated meals (from specialist camping shops) or instant pasta or rice meals. Add pine nuts, sundried tomatoes etc for more interest.  
Dried fruit, nuts and chocolate.

## **Further Reading**

To understand more clearly why 'freedom walkers' are treated with such suspicion, read "Bush Woman" (or should that be "Bush Rat"??) by

## **Photo Captions.**

1. Steaming down Lake Te Anau aboard the one hundred year old s.s Tawera which has taken first walkers to the start of the track since the late 1890's.
2. Independent Walkers disembarking at Glade House Wharf.
3. Dore Pass and the Clinton River. An ideal location for trout fishing but beware of the sandflies! (Day 1)
4. Moss festooned beech forest beside the Clinton River near Clinton Forks Hut. (Day 2)
5. Burnie and Marion entering one of the avalanche zones in the Upper Clinton Canyon.(Day 2)
6. Awesome rock walls enclose the Upper Clinton Canyon, making for a hot afternoon walk to Mintaro Hut.(Day 2)
7. Boiling the billy for lunch, Mackinnon Pass. (Day 3)
8. Clearing mist reveals the near vertical drop on the far side of the Pass (Day 3)
9. Starting on the decent. Sutherland Falls spills 580m from Lake Quill in the v-shaped depression between the mountains.(Day 4)
10. Lake Ada, formed when a large landslip dammed the Arthur River over 900 years ago. (Day 4)
11. Journey's end – Mitre Peak soaring over the silvery waters of Milford Sound.