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"Swiss 5" walk Te Araroa

In this article Adrian Blaser shares his family's amazing trek in the South Island.

We wanted to give our kids some adventure. For most families that would probably mean a trip to Disneyland or a cruise. We decided to walk the length of the South Island instead! Two months following the Te Araroa (the New Zealand long path) through the back country, with limited internet access and hundreds of kilometres of landscape to scamper through. Crazy? Yes, that's exactly what everybody else said!

We spent a whole year and countless hours of research on the internet and found a huge amount of information for solo hikers or for couples; but feeding and accommodating 5 people turned out to be a completely different beast. The more we planned the bigger the logistics became, especially with resupplying specialised food (dehydrated) for such a big group.



We learnt that weight of gear and money are inversely related and this meant searching sales and clearance racks for affordable equipment because everything had to be bought times 5. Maybe I forgot to mention at the start we had never even hiked overnight!

We did a handful of 2-3 night hikes to practice and iron out gear trouble during 2017. Some were more successful than others and we had a few disasters and miles of excel spreadsheets ... and then it began.

We took the water taxi from Picton to ship cove on a beautiful Tuesday morning in early December. It was a stunning, clear day with hardly a cloud, the sound was calm as a lake and we even saw dolphins. When we started on the track though, reality bit home quickly. It was a horrendously steep first climb and we were red-faced and puffing. For the first time in over a year I seriously questioned my sanity in starting this adventure. The views were worth it though! The next 70km introduced us to amazing views of the Queen Charlotte and Kenepuru Sounds with water so green-blue it looked artificial. We became accustomed to walking every day and got more and more practiced with setting up camp. Our teenagers who had been less



than enthusiastic about the whole hike quickly settled in and started to enjoy the freedom of it. We experienced "trail magic" (good things just seem to happen) and met lovely people, dealt with a couple of small blisters, enjoyed a thunderstorm and chased a Weka through the bush because it had stolen our hot chocolate powder! A friend of ours picked us up from Anakiwa after 5 days and back in Nelson we spent the day organising the next section – the Richmond Ranges. The weather forecast for Mount Rintoul was for gale force winds and very low temperatures. On top of that the track between mid Wairoa hut and top Wairoa hut was deemed dangerous by DOC and so we decided not to do this part. Instead we decided to go northbound or "backwards" on the TA towards Pelorus Bridge.

Pelorus River track

On the Pelorus River track we encountered very rough terrain for the first time and it took a toll on our footwear to the point that we were a bit worried if it would last the trip. The river itself was beautiful with stunning green-blue waterholes which we took full advantage of despite the cold! The swing bridges weren't much to my taste especially as the access was often hair-raisingly steep and slippery. But the 4 days offered a lot of different landscape from bush to tussock plain, from river views to an old broken forest and of course a lot of sandflies. Back at Pelorus Bridge we organised transport to Saint Arnaud, reversing our direction once again.



Swing bridge over the Pelorus

By now the whole family had settled into a routine and was enjoying the trail. I guess the people we met on the trail telling our children how incredibly lucky they were – doing a trip like this – might have helped.

Nelson Lakes

We spent a very low-key Christmas day at St Arnaud and it was lovely not to have to worry about food preparation, guests and Christmas presents for a change. The next section worried me quite a bit because I knew that there would be long days and steep ascents and descents. But the worry was unnecessary; we did manage to pack 8 days' worth of food into our packs; we managed the traverse saddle in one day (9 hours of walking, 1000 meters up and 1100 meters down!) and our tents survived camping at Lake Constance in gale force winds even though no one slept that night. We came across the scariest part of the whole trip (in my view) sidling along a very slippery flank above Lake Constance with



Lake Constance

a sheer drop over a bluff into the lake and a very steep descent down a gully to the lake head. The children got better with every day and we secretly think they liked the scary parts of the trail more than we did. We all agreed that Waiau pass (the second highest point of the TA) was an absolute highlight with stunning views on both sides even though it had to be earned the hard way, 500 meters up a scree slope and climbing down a rock face on the other side – not for the faint hearted. After the Waiau pass we deviated into Saint James conservation area via Lake Guyon, because we wanted to walk into Hanmer Springs. The historic Stanleyvale hut was well worth a side trip and we spent New Year's Eve walking over Fowlers Pass. This included a small bottle of Lindauer at the top which I had carried all this way, up and down all these mountains to celebrate not just New Year's Eve but also Fiona's



Waiau Pass

16th birthday. We reached civilisation after a night spent in an abandoned woolshed and being visited by a possum at 3am, after 7 days and roughly 110 kilometres.

Hurunui, Lake Sumner and Harper River

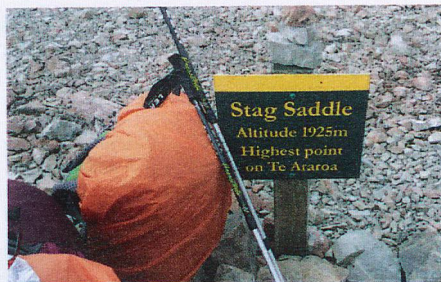
It was hard work to hoist a full pack again after 3 days of rest and the first day felt really long even though we "only" walked for about 5 hours. Funny how by this stage 5 hours had become a short walk! The next day was spent lounging in a large hut due to pouring rain and then we moved on for the next couple of days through relatively flat river valleys past Lake Sumner towards Harper Pass. Once we got to the other side of the Harper Pass we followed the Taramakau river out to Aitkens carpark (half an hour drive to Arthurs Pass). This was our first exposure to river crossings and therefore wet feet as the river bed was basically the track. After waiting at Bealy hut for the rivers to go down (it had rained for 3 days) we had an accident at the Avoca, a tributary of the Harper. Having crossed the Harper about 12 times, the Avoca proved very fast flowing and in spite of us linking up and doing all the right things, when Adrian slipped and went down, we all did. It was a scary experience but we were lucky as no one got hurt.

Canterbury High Country

Getting a lift around the braided rivers (Rakaia and Rangitata) with alps2ocean, we skipped the multiple river crossings on the original TA and walked in a different route (via Stour river valley). It was probably the most testing part of our journey as we did not get into civilisation for 12 days, the landscape was vast and the temperatures hot. But the plains were majestic to see. We ate snowberries and hiked up a very steep saddle (Bullock Bow Saddle) which



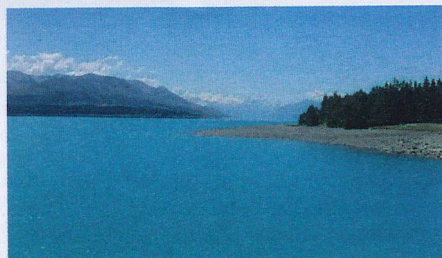
went pretty much straight up from forest creek for a thousand metres. There were smaller rivers to cross and we basically had wet feet for what seems like weeks



on end. Our children talked with strangers we met in the huts and by now we had almost become famous on the trail. Everybody seemed to have heard of us and we became known as the Swiss 5. We climbed the highest point of the TA, Stag saddle at 1925 metres and enjoyed the great views to Lake Tekapo, the Alps and of course the phone reception available at the top.

Swapping the hiking shoes for bicycles

From Tekapo we hired bicycles to ride to Twizel. There is a 47km stretch along the canal where no camping is allowed. Even though we had been on the trail for many weeks now we were pretty certain that 47 km in one day was out of our league, so we decided to bike. We spent an enjoyable day riding the predominantly flat way to Lake Pukaki where Mt Cook



greeted us in absolute splendour and then on to Twizel. We had so much fun doing something different for a change that we used the bikes to ride to Lake Ohau as well (instead of taking a shuttle bus).

The last leg

From Lake Ohau we embarked on our last leg of this 2-month journey. Hiking up to the East Ahuriri valley first through beech forest and then through spear grass and tussock again, we hit those really hot days in Central Otago. With temperatures of 32 degrees it was very hard going, especially as there was not a single tree or bush to provide a scrap of shade. On the third day we had to cross the Ahuriri River, the largest unbridged river on the TA. The bank on the other side went almost vertically up for about 25 metres and we just about crawled up on all fours. We made it over Mt Martha saddle but then Cyclone Fehi had us stuck at Top Timaru hut. It snowed almost down to the hut and the Timaru River which was a clear creek the day before turned into a raging torrent of black silt. We spent Tob's

18th birthday waiting for the water to go down and the snow to melt. Even though we only had 2 more days to walk to our destination it wasn't meant to be. Waiting for 3 nights at the hut, we started to run low on food and the river was still brown and fast, so we decided to turn back over Mt Martha saddle (1.9). 32 kilometres and

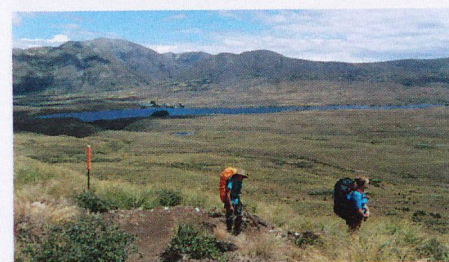


1900 metres change in altitude later we got to state highway 8 where we hitch hiked into Wanaka. Not quite the way we wanted to arrive but definitely safer.

Final thoughts

It has been an incredible hike with many lessons learnt. We met amazing people, saw out-of-this-world scenery and hiked hard terrain that tested our limits. We became well known on the trail as the "Swiss five" and we think Cedric holds the record for the youngest hiker on the TA. We saw strength and grit in all our children which makes us immensely proud and we created a family bond that will last forever. All the experiences – good and bad – made this an unforgettable two months. We have become part of the fabric of the trail, our story woven into Te Araroa and we will carry it in our souls forever.

Courtesy of Adrian Blaser, one of the Swiss 5.



Lake Clearwater



Queen Charlotte sound - at the start of the hike