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Fabulous tramping on our doorstep

by Belinda Cooper

"Explore diverse landscapes ranging from mountain beech forest, tussock country and alpine herb fields; to glacial river gorges and gushing waterfalls; and the Rangipo Desert with its wind sculptured sands and volcanic rock. The Round the Mountain Track showcases the varied volcanic landscapes and alpine vegetation on the flanks of the active volcano Mount Ruapehu."



Setting off from Whakapapa Village:

L to R: Hans Vetsch, Vitus Achermann, Kate Bailey, Ini Kim, Belinda Cooper-Flühler

What an enticing advertisement for a multi-day tramp for 5 keen trampers! So, two and a half Swiss, one Brit and one Korean with an average age of 65, spent 5 unforgettable days tramping the 66.5km around Mt Ruapehu.

We set off from Hamilton at 6am on Thursday 17th January, fuelling up with a good coffee from a cart in Taumarunui, left out intentions and car number at the Visitor Centre at Whakapapa Village and were on the track by 10am. The first day was via the top of the Taranaki Falls, the scenic Tama Lakes and the first

historic hut (1903) to reach the largest and most popular Waihohonu hut. It was full of enthusiastic trampers and the very informative hut warden enthralled us all with the history of the arrival of "tangata whenua" to the area and legends behind Mt Ngaruahoe. We were reminded of the privilege we have of being in such a beautiful area and how we are all guardians of its natural resources – trees, water ways, plants and birds.

Day 2 saw us setting off around 7.30am past the crystal clear Ohinepongo Springs before tramping along the

eastern side of Ruapehu into the very exposed Rangipo desert landscape. The sky was clear, visibility great and as we climbed in and out of river beds we could clearly see Te Heuheu Peak, the Tukino ski field, vehicles on the desert road and the Kaimanawa mountain range. The Rangipo hut, perched in splendid isolation overlooking the Rangipo desert and army training area, was a very welcome sight after many hours of tramping. Stretches, yoga, chats with the two working rangers, tea with Schnapps, bathing in some hidden water holes, dinner and cards filled the rest of the afternoon and evening.

We awoke to mist floating below us and had breakfast on the deck watching a beautiful sunrise. Today's section was lots of climbing in and out of steep valleys. We took turns leading and watching out for the guiding poles, being thankful for good weather and visibility. The most interesting section was through the Waihanoa lahar gorge with the warning sign of "Extreme lahar risk next 400m. Do not stop in this area; do not proceed past here if you hear a loud roaring noise upriver." Then came the most challenging section with very steep down and uphill climbing requiring careful footwork on the unstable volcanic narrow tracks. Finally we dropped into the Karioi beech forest and through some tussock to the Maungaehuehu hut. Three huge sacks of firewood blocked our view of the mountain from the porch so a chain-gang was set up and all the firewood stacked in nice neat Swiss rows. After cooling off in a near-by hidden water hole, other trampers arrived as this hut is only a 3 hour tramp from Ohakune Road. That evening, dark ominous clouds rolled in, the wind picked up and we were in for a stormy night but great to be tucked up in a hut, even if there were a couple of loud snorers!



first hour behind us, on the way to Tama Lakes



Leaving Ohinepongo Springs and heading into Rangipo desert



Rangipo hut yoga



One of a number of mountain streams to cross



Deepest valley to tackle

One never really sleeps well in a hut but we were still on the track, raincoats on, by 7.30am because we knew we had a pretty long day ahead, although the rain was over by 8.30am. The track varied from open alpine tussock to mountain beech stands with our morning tea stop overlooking the Waitonga Falls (39 m), highest falls in Tongariro National Park. One of us even spotted a whio flying off from a section of rapids and a North Island robin perched on a DOC sign awaited a photo. The next section was the least enjoyable – 3 km continuous up-hill on Ohakune Mountain Road to link up with the next section of Round the Mountain Track. We then wove down the steep track into the Makotuku valley, stopped for lunch amongst rocks and beside a little stream then crossed a lava ridge, seemingly barren, but upon close inspection, covered in clumps of alpine plants. In the afternoon we reached probably one of the highlights of our tramp – the Cascades in the expansive Mangaturuturu Valley. The rocks were coated with creamy silica and thousands of cubits of water rushed over them. We had to take great care how we crossed and at the bottom, gave each other a joyous and relieved “high five.” In inclement weather, after heavy rain, this would be very dangerous and impassable. The little 10 bunk Mangaturuturu Hut, deep in the valley, was quaint, empty and had a memorial

seat to a mountaineer made of stone where one could soak up the afternoon sun and spectacular views of the mountain, including the Turoa ski fields. We all decided that the Mangaturuturu river below the hut was too cold for a dip but we decided on the safest place to cross for the next morning. Relaxation time, cooking with a million dollar kitchen view of the mountain, scrabble and later some star gazing before sleep.

“Time to wake up, 5.15am!”...“thanks, Hans!” Just as well we were the only occupants of the hut! We had a long damp, misty day ahead of us. The afore-mentioned river had dropped more overnight so no need to link arms to cross, although to avoid a full day walking in wet socks and boots, we wore alternative footwear in the river. A climb out of the valley took us to Lake Surprise, a shallow alpine tarn but the surprise after that was the endless “stairway to heaven” which had us all puffing and pretty stuffed at the top. No visibility at all today so we counted the drops and climbs in and out of river valleys from the map and rested, ate and for the cold ones, donned another layer of clothing where we could find some protection from the wind. Finally we were overlooking the Whakapapaiti Valley with its spectacular waterfalls tumbling off lava bluffs and we could see the Whakapapaiti hut in the distance,

another hour’s tramp away. Here we boiled the billy, had lunch and donned our packs for the last 3 hours, having to wade through the Whakapapaiti river to start. By this stage, although still really enjoying the flora and fauna along the way, we were all flagging somewhat and Whakapapa Village Road was a very welcome sight at 4pm. A relaxing hot swim at Tokaanu hot springs, a steak in Taupo revived us all and Hans very ably had us back in Hamilton by 10pm.

A few days later came the exchange of “buzzing” emails and beautiful photos. It was indeed a wonderful tramping experience with a great team of like-minded and equally fit trampers. While the famous Tongariro Crossing resembles State Highway 1 on good days, the Northern Circuit around Mt Ngaruahoe is quite popular as a multi-day tramp, this circuit had few people, probably because it is the most challenging of all the hikes in the area. But what a “taonga” (treasure). With spectacular views of the mountains, changeable terrain on each section, fabulous flora and fauna, cheap huts with spectacular views, why would you head to the South Island on a Great Walk without first considering doing this fascinating and yes, challenging, multi-day tramp right on our doorstep?!

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/roundthemountain>



Waihanoa lahar gorge



Stairway to heaven