

OVER THE HUMP

THREE DAYS OF HARD SLOG ARE REWARDED
WITH SPECTACULAR SOUTHERN SCENERY
AND SOME WELCOME CREATURE COMFORTS

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PREVIOUS PAGES: The view from Hump Ridge of Te Waewae Bay, Stewart Island and south-western Fiordland; boardwalk protects fragile vegetation and keeps your boots dry. THIS PAGE: From the coast, the track moves into lush forest then scrambles up 900m to the alpine environment of Hump Ridge; cheeky South Island robins appear at scroggin stops; Sally Duggan. OPPOSITE: The loop track from Okaka Lodge (top centre) wanders through tors and tarns.



SOD'S LAW SAYS that just before a big tramp, every ache and niggle in your body makes itself felt. Nick's knee had been playing up all year and on the morning before we started the Hump Ridge Track he shuffled stiffly out of the backpackers' into the clear blue Tuatapere dawn to haul our packs out of the station-wagon. The caged parrot on the veranda fixed him with a beady eye. "Hello Grandad!" he squawked.

Guffaws from the teenage son Ben, but Nick and I weren't much in the mood to be reminded of our ages and physical limitations. The Hump Ridge Track is a three-day, 53km trek along the base of the South Island, taking in coastal bush and sub-alpine landscapes. It is the same length as the Milford Track, but more challenging, and the first day's walk is notorious for its nasty finish – a 914m climb up the Hump Ridge to the Okaka Hut. The track operators offer a helipack option, where you pay to have your pack airlifted to huts to meet you, but in a penny-pinching moment we had decided we'd tough it out and carry them the whole way.

"So how bad IS that final climb?" someone had asked the staff member running the compulsory pre-track brief in the Tuatapere track office the night before. And even though he was a local with a southern burr and a straightforward turn of phrase, he prevaricated like a politician. "Well," he said finally, "the really, really tough bit is only 20 minutes long."

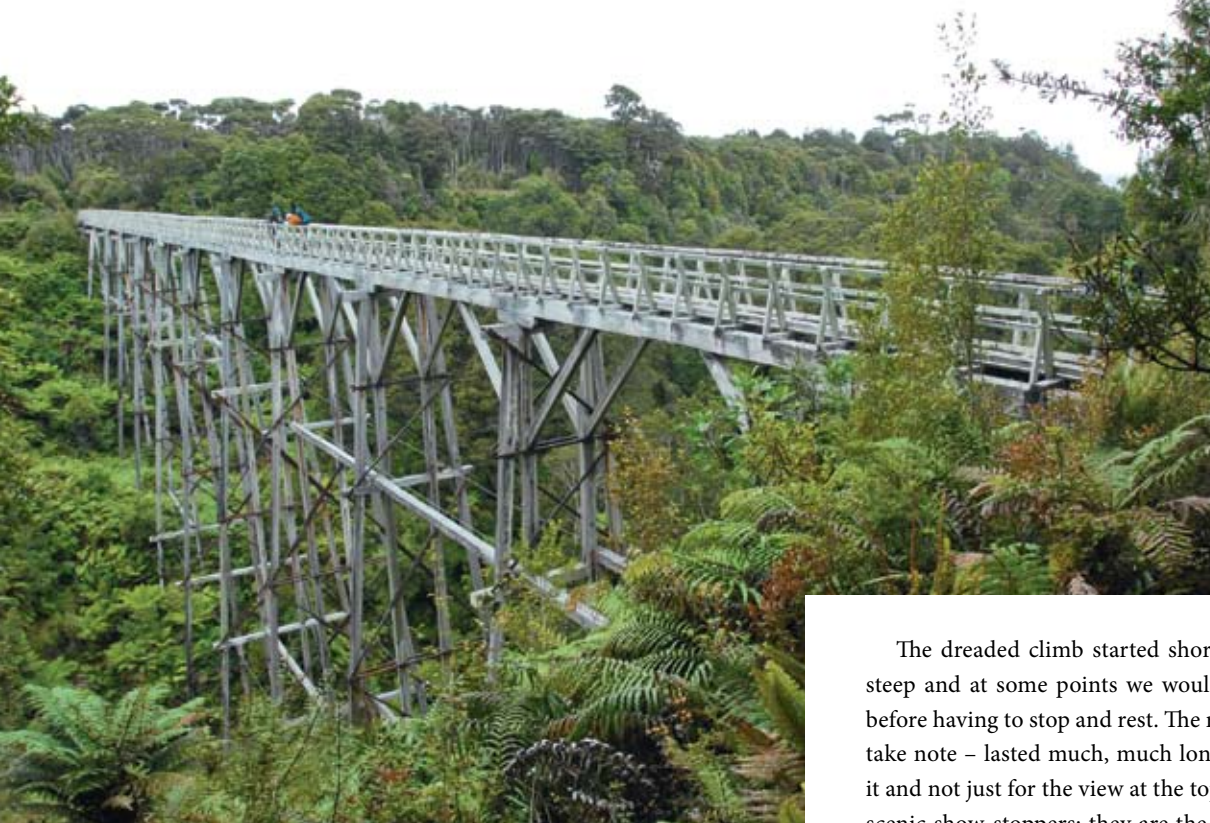
That morning we started early as advised and by 9.00am we were on the coast, a wild expanse of driftwood-littered sand and glittering ocean with the dim bulk of Stewart Island on the horizon. It felt as if we were walking along the edge of the country, and we almost were. Keep walking and we'd get to Puysegur Point which stars in the weather reports on National Radio as the south-western outreach of the South Island.

After a few kilometres we headed inland and hit our first stretch of boardwalk. On most New Zealand bush walks, boardwalk is a bit of a novelty: a short, smooth stint that comes as a relief from the standard dirt bush track. On the Hump Ridge Track there are 10km of it, forming dramatic mini-highways through the forest. All of it was hammered together in three-metre lengths by volunteers working at a local sawmill at Tuatapere, then dropped into position by helicopters.

This heart-warming all-hands-on-deck, behind-the-scenes effort is a central theme in the Hump Ridge Track story. The track was the brainchild of the Tuatapere Hump Ridge Community Trust, a group of devoted locals who decided in the late 1980s that the town needed a walk like the Milford Track that would bring in tourist dollars to supplement local dairy farming and forestry. After prolonged negotiation (the track runs across DOC, Maori and private land) the track opened eight years ago. For a few years it was run by a private operator but now it is back in community hands with nine staff members – almost all of them from Tuatapere – managing the track during the October to April season. ▶



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On day two, the interest is more historic than scenic. Remnants of the doomed Port Craig tramway and sawmill project include the Percy Burn viaduct (left), the largest wooden viaduct in the southern hemisphere, and (below) rusting relics of machinery at Port Craig.



The dreaded climb started shortly after lunch. It was lung-burstingly steep and at some points we would manage to climb only a few metres before having to stop and rest. The really, really tough bit – track operators take note – lasted much, much longer than 20 minutes. But it was worth it and not just for the view at the top. The real joys of tramping are not the scenic show-stoppers; they are the small, domestic things which become magically transformed by hardship. Tea in a plastic mug, for example, is indescribably soul-warming when drunk in a bush hut. And on the Hump Ridge Track, where the huts are several rungs above the standard DOC-run variety, you can buy a shower and a glass of wine for a few dollars from the hut warden. That night in Okaka Lodge at the top of Hump Ridge we had both a warm shower and a cold chardonnay, then wandered up to the nearby loop track with its dramatic tors and tarns and looked out at a sunset burning orange over the Southern Ocean and Fiordland.

After such a high, things could only go downhill. The weather the next day was misty and cool and the track (more boardwalk, with lots of steps) headed up and down across the ridge. Nick's knee hurt. The last few kilometres of track towards the lodge at Port Craig were along a disused tramline – flat, straight, difficult underfoot and, it has to be said, a bit boring. The story behind the tramline was interesting though. In the 1920s Port Craig was the site of a sort of early Think Big project: the largest and most modern sawmill in the country with a network of tramlines and massive viaducts running through the bush and over ravines, feeding logs to the port. The enterprise employed 200 men but it ultimately failed and was closed in 1929. The area around the Port Craig lodge is a bit like an informal outdoor museum to all this enterprise. We took a self-tour pamphlet from the hut and wandered among artfully rusting remnants that nestle in the greenery around the hut and along the shoreline.

The walk out the next day was along the coastal fringe of the bush. The Hump Ridge Track is lasso-shaped, so you end up walking back along the same bit of beach you came in on. We walked briskly because we didn't want to be late for our arranged pick-up ... and even at lunchtime we kept right on walking, going around in circles eating our crackers and cheese. Sandflies, which somehow hadn't been there the day we walked in, had discovered us and descended on our bare legs every time we stood still.

Staff member Trish King picked us up at the end of the track, right on time. We threw the packs in the back of her ute and kept her talking all the way back to Tuatapere. Around 2000 people walk the track each year, she said: 70 percent are New Zealanders, 15 percent Aussies and the rest international. Through my fatigue, I wondered at Trish's in-depth knowledge of the track operation. Turns out that she is the general manager of Tuatapere Hump Track Ltd, the company that runs the track for the Trust. Trish doesn't usually do track pick-ups but no one else was around that day so she leapt into the ute herself. That Tuatapere all-hands-on-deck spirit again.

NOTEBOOK

How fit do I need to be? Average to above-average fitness. Some hill training is recommended. If you're worried, use the helipacking option.
What do I take? All the usual tramping clothes and food supplies. Insect repellent is essential. Crockery, cutlery and stoves are provided in the lodges and the wardens make porridge for breakfast. You can buy wine, beer, juice and snacks there.

How do I get to the start of the track? Drive and park in the track car park (theft doesn't seem to be a problem) or catch a track minibus to and from Tuatapere for \$40 per person return.

How far do I walk each day? Days one and two: 19km, seven to nine hours; day three: 17km, five to seven hours.

Where do I stay in Tuatapere? We loved the clean, spacious, cheap Shooters Backpackers. There are plenty of other options including B&Bs and hotel and motel accommodation on the track website.

Where do I get more information? www.humpridgetrack.co.nz

