



Swing bridges are negotiated in darkness during Stump the Hump, but can be appreciated in daylight during other hikes.

steepest stretch, and after a bit of a grunt we're on top of the ridge. A faint glow of lights at Okaka Lodge is now visible, and soon I'm resting in front of a fire savouring every spoonful of hot porridge.

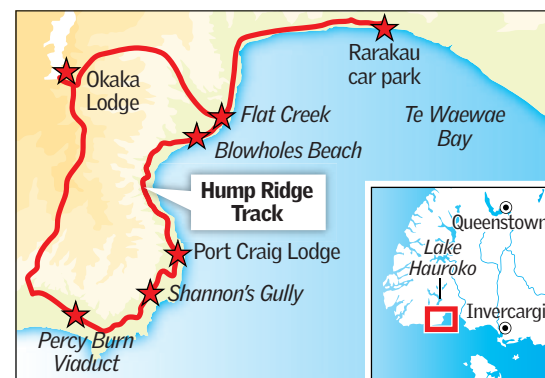
Back out on the boardwalk there are no more glow sticks, and it's still very dark. I hope my headtorch battery lasts. This was my favourite stretch — no other hikers around and just the slightest hint of the Fiordland vistas to come.

It's impossible to get lost, and after a gradual descent on the tussocky steppe, passing through one of the seven distinct floral zones of the Hump Ridge Track, we re-enter the forest.

The sun is rising by the time I reach the 6.5km straight to Port Craig, an uninhabited collection of buildings that used to be New Zealand's busiest milling town. The rail track that used to transport timber there passes over three wooden viaducts which loom like bridges to nowhere. The largest, the Percy Burn Viaduct, is the world's highest remaining wooden viaduct, built in the 1920s.

Fatigue has returned, and every jolt of the knees on uneven rail sleepers intensifies the ill feeling. Now 9am, and more than 24 hours without sleep, the mind wanders to dark places.

Fortunately, the consistently cheerful checkpoint



volunteers are great at alleviating the monotony.

The lunch stop at Port Craig brings a spirit-lifting supply of hot soup, sandwiches and coffee. More trampers come through and remove their shoes to mask the pain. The soles of one woman's feet are completely blistered. Suddenly I don't feel so bad.

No lingering now. It's the home run. The track winds down to the beach, and the feeling of relief at seeing the ocean again is immense.

A short walk along the shore, back into the bush then another hour of grunt and we return to familiar territory, rejoining the loop of the previous evening.

The final 30 minutes is agony, and I come home in just under 14 hours, an hour behind the fastest pair, which included the youngest entrant, a 14-year-old from just up the road.



Info

● Next year's Stump the Hump will be on Friday, February 1, starting at midnight. Cost: \$130. Bookings open around August at www.humpridge-track.co.nz.

● Luxury bed-and-breakfast on a working farm at Kirmington Dene. Contact Julie Sanderson on (03) 226 6630 or www.kirmingtondene.co.nz

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