

GREAT
COASTAL WALKS
BANKS TRACK,
NZ

A RAID ON THE BANKS

Great Walks enjoys coastal views, local wildlife and plenty of creature comforts on NZ's Banks Track.

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WORDS AND PHOTOS_HUW KINGSTON



A warning for all generations, Day 2.



Above: Trig 699, the highest point of the Banks Track, Day 1.

Opposite page: Two queens on their thrones at Seal Cove, Day 2.

GOOD things do indeed come in small packages, as my wife occasionally reminds me. It took me a while to realise she was speaking less about my Welsh stature than giving hints about her appreciation of diamonds. The Banks Track might only be 31km long, but each one of those kilometres offers new views and old stories. Three days on the track ensures there's always time for both.

Despite numerous trips to Christchurch, I'd never ventured to the alluring looking Banks Peninsula an hour away. Its amoebic shape holds mountains dropping steeply to deep bays, with the submerged crater of Akaroa Harbour dominant. The small town of Akaroa was the only town in New Zealand to be settled by the French. Street names indicate this heritage, brasseries, boulangeries and bistros satisfying the hungers of visitors and locals alike.

The Banks Track was born over 30 years ago when nine local families got together to develop a route across their land. With ownership changed hands and track reroutes, five landowners now maintain the trail, accommodate walkers, and proudly show off the southeast corner of the peninsula.

Off we go

The whole experience starts with an early evening pickup in Akaroa. Mafi, admin person and bus driver, gave a brief briefing, handed out the Banks Track guide and instructed us to load bags and bodies onto the bus for the short drive to our first accommodation at Onuku Track Hut. Your booking includes three nights' accommodation and transport of your luggage. You provide your own sustenance.

Stop off at Barrys Bay, en route to Akaroa, to pick up some locally made cheeses. Akaroa itself has a deli and small supermarket, a local fudge shop provides on trail sweetness and a new craft gin distillery is just the tonic for veranda aperitifs.

The hut wows us all, with panoramic views over Akaroa Harbour from well-tended gardens. Bunks are quickly claimed and soon glasses are chinking, cheeses cut. Wendy and I are the only foreigners in our group which consists of four retired Kiwis of Dutch descent, a couple from Nelson, another from Taupo. Jeff, also from the North Island, was planning his first solo walk until Emma, his daughter, flew in from Hong Kong to surprise him.



A maximum of twelve three-day walkers start the track each day. I will let you into a dirty little secret. Four can also book to complete the walk in two days, missing the second nights' accommodation at Flea Bay and pushing on through to Stony Bay. But really, unless you have an aversion to fleas or a too tight schedule, why would you?

On the up

The 11km of Day 1 begins with a post brekkie heart starter as a farm track climbs steadily away from Onuku. We settle into a pattern of passing and being passed by our fellow walkers. The trail narrows to a well-marked but thin foot track to eventually top out at 699m, the highest point of the walk.

Greenery is everywhere, from the hills all around to the waters of Akaroa Harbour and we're both already smitten with the peninsula. In the distance, white detailing indicates snow on the Southern Alps and a sign tells us that Aoraki/Mount Cook is 230km away.

The route now sidles across some steep slopes to reach a dirt road. I expected the

Banks Track Akaroa

New Zealand

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Banks Tracks to be wide and well graded but was pleasantly surprised to find it was mostly narrow, sometimes deliciously exposed.

If the first part of the day was about hills and distant views, the second contrasted nicely. We dropped into a shaded gully of beech trees and ferns sheltering a streamway dropping over numerous cascades. Our boots brushed through beech leaves, like scattered cornflakes, damp but not yet soggy.

Each waterfall was higher than the last, each dropping into a pool worthy of a dip. The final one was tall enough and wide enough to be in full sun, a perfect spot for our late lunch and a sneak behind the curtain of water for a dry shower.

Nesting penguins

Soon we were coming into Flea Bay, the last few hundred metres of trail showing signs of landslips, recent and repaired. I wondered about the cause. Earthquake? Deluge?

Back from the beach, a grassy area held a couple of little cottages. Although expecting to share, Wendy and I had a room to ourselves each night. One cottage had a couple of private rooms, with double beds, that could be booked for an additional fee. Belinda, one of the Taupo couple, invited us to smell their private room. There was a lovely aroma of regurgitated fish and eau de stomach, and a scribbled sign on the wall "Sorry for the funky smell. Penguins nesting under the floor."

Flea Bay is a working farm, run by the Helps family, originally part of the first sheep run on the South Island. It was in the hands of the Rhodes family for five generations until Francis Helps bought it half a century ago. Flea Bay is also home to one of the largest remaining colonies of Little Penguins or Kororas, which come ashore here to breed from late winter to early summer. The Helps family have made huge efforts to protect and preserve this smallest and most northerly ranging of penguins and, despite his tiredness from a full day of shearing, we all met Francis that evening for a talk and tour.

By trapping feral cats, stoats, weasels and the like, penguin numbers have recovered over the

decades, although Francis fears warming waters and changing food sources are now impacting their survival. At dusk, a few Korora waddled onto the beach stones as we returned to our cottage for the final brew of a satisfying day.

Short and sweet

The second day is only 8km but how easy it is to let that wander across four hours or more. A violent nor'wester had picked up during the night and, had the fattened lambs been a month younger, I'm certain they would have been rolled toward the sea by it. Our sea kayaking booking that morning was understandably cancelled.

The wind did drop as we climbed away, beginning the most spectacular section of coastal walking. A pod of Hector's dolphins, the smallest and rarest in the world, entertained us near the mouth of Flea Bay. Then it was all sea caves, seals, sun and seabirds as we crossed into the Armstrong property, the track winding up down and all around the cliffs.

Gorgeous was a gulch where a small creek flowed directly over the cliff into the sea near a seal colony. A hut too, built into some boulders, a pair of carved chairs outside, thronelike in position. We took our seats, looking out to a passing cruise ship. Surely, they would be staring back enviously from

Opposite page: Akaroa Harbour panorama.

Below: The legendary Hugh Wilson, Hinewai Reserve.

Bottom: Climbing away from Stony Bay into Hinewai Reserve.

“BY TRAPPING FERAL CATS, STOATS, WEASELS AND THE LIKE, PENGUIN NUMBERS HAVE RECOVERED”





Above: At the base of the final waterfall, Day 1.

Right: Wendy shoots some pool at Stony Bay before leaving, Day 3.

Below: A fate that could befall you. Approaching Flea Bay, Day 1.



their all-you-can-eat buffets, endless bars and cramped cabins?

Eventually we zig zagged out of the gulch and along the clifftops to overlook Stony Bay. No rush at all, we sat again, using a stile as a table for our lunch spread. By now backmarkers in our group, we knew no one would come by to trample our avocado or tread upon our wraps.

The hot sun had us descending for shade, and soon we were amongst the delights of Stony Bay. A little commune of cuteness, a hobbit's hamlet. Small cottages of varying sizes and styles hid around an open area featuring firepit, outdoor pool table and more. A bathroom built around a thick tree had steaming hot water running from a tank tottering high above, nearby a wood-fired open-air bath. Behind one little door a camper's fridge, behind another, perhaps the best stocked little shop outside of Akaroa.

Whilst electricity powers the shower and fridges, Sonia and Mark Armstrong, whose family have farmed here since 1891, provide candles for the cottages. It seems the right and rustic thing to do.

Rain started to fall when Sonia came across from the farmhouse for a chat and to tell me that Hugh Wilson had rung to arrange to meet me on the track the following day. Sonia also explained the reason for the increasingly prevalent landslips we'd seen. In December 2021 this corner of the Peninsula was hit by a deluge the like of which no one had experienced before. A deluge of such intensity that it caused numerous landslides, opened up new waterways and destroyed sections of the track, bridges and more. To the credit of the landholders and local community, the track was back up and walkable within weeks.

Meeting a legend

Dragging ourselves away from Stony Bay the following morning, waterproofs were donned for the first time as we crossed into Hinewai Reserve, a renowned success story in NZ conservation. The trail ascended, steeply at times, up the forested Opatuti Valley. At 690m, it popped us into more open country where out of control non-native gorse dominated, but snow tussock too.

Nearby, at a little shelter, was Hugh Wilson. Given his achievements at Hinewai this past 35 years I'll forgive him for spelling his name wrong. Starting with 109 hectares purchased in 1987, the reserve has grown to some 1250 hectares. Now approaching 79, Hugh has been there from the beginning, fencing the reserve, trapping feral animals and seeing the slow return of native flora and fauna from previously overgrazed and overgrown land.

Some of Hugh's methods are quite controversial, but certainly make you consider alternative approaches. Given the near impossibility of eliminating gorse, Hinawei uses it to shelter native flora that then can out-compete the gorse when big enough. Hugh also explains that you need to be careful when trying to remove feral animals. Using the example of the feral cat, he says that whilst we need to get rid of them, unless there is a control program for rats, they will grow in plague proportions once the cats are removed. It is a fraught balancing act.

The sun appeared and we walked on with Hugh, infected by his enthusiasm and impish sense of humour. We said our goodbyes at the Purple Peak track junction, Hugh to climb back to where he'd left his mountain bike. Hugh, who has no car, no mobile, no computer, tells me "I'm far too young for an E-bike."

Then, with the warmth on our backs, Wendy and I descended the final kilometres to Akaroa, certain, as this account has shown, that our Banks experience had repaid with more interest than we could ever have imagined. ⚙️

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Hut at Seal Cove, Day 2.

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