

A TRAIL FROM TRAGEDY

GREAT NZ WALKS
PAPAROA TRACK,
SOUTH ISLAND

In November 2010, 29 men died in a mining disaster. Ten years later, NZ's newest Great Walk, the Paparoa Track, honours them.

WORDS AND PHOTOS [HUW KINGSTON](#)

Wendy looking out from the escarpment.





Left: Crossing a swingbridge en route to Ces Clark..

Below: A Kiwi not averse to standing guard over the toilets at Pororari Hut.

Below left: The Paparoa is a dual use walking and riding trail.



THE 15-year life of Great Walks magazine had not, until early this year, seen the launch of a New Zealand Great Walk. That all changed with the opening of the Paparoa Track, the first new Great Walk in 20 years, the first to be purpose built from scratch and the tenth in total. Like an iPhone launch there were many queuing for the experience. Unlike an iPhone launch it was hardly a smooth opening. The South Island's notorious weather made certain of that. A landslide delayed the planned grand opening on 1 December and West Coast rainstorms pushed the date back ever further. Finally, on 1 March, the Paparoa Track stuttered into reality.

With a booking for that first week, I regularly scanned the DOC social media pages, nervous the opening could be further delayed. Given our Kiwi neighbours are a decent lot, I was intrigued to come across one post advertising a course in Kiwi Aversion Therapy.

The Paparoa weaves through the ranges, staring down onto the West Coast back from the town of Greymouth. Greymouth in Grey District on the banks of the Grey River, is a gritty, real town with few pretensions – a town built on fishing, logging and mining. With access via slow, winding mountain roads, west coasters are renowned for their self-sufficiency and a stubborn spirit hewn from the mountains to their west and distilled from the wild Tasman Sea to their east.

No stopping for smoko

Monteith's Brewery, in Greymouth since 1868, is a West Coast institution, glowering at pubs nearby that have the temerity to offer Speights (Est. 1876), that modern upstart from Invercargill. A West Coast IPA washing down whitebait fritters, the local specialty, set us up for the Paparoa. The shuttle to the trailhead at Smoko the next morning was hair raising, for us at least. The dreadlocks belonging to our Maori driver hardly flinched.

We passed through the village of Blackball, only 8km from Smoko, chuckling at 'Formerly' The Blackball Hilton. This pub and accommodation proudly displays the cease and desist letter received 30 years ago from the Hilton International Company in New York. The letter warned them off using the name so, in classic Kiwi "up yours" fashion, they carried on with the word Formerly now added.

It was raining steadily as Wendy and I pulled on waterproofs beneath the half shelter of the trailhead sign. The first part of the 55km long Paparoa follows the historic Croesus Track, an old miner's track that, whilst now repaired and newly bridged, has stood up to the onslaught of time remarkably well. The trail was soon climbing steadily through dripping beech and podocarp forest. It was gold that originally drew men into these mountains and later, coal. It was a tragedy of mining coal that led to the creation of the Paparoa Track.

NEED TO KNOW

For general info and bookings greatwalks.co.nz/paparoa. Huts must be pre-booked and no camping is allowed. Huts have mattresses and stoves but you will need to carry sleeping bag, billies and utensils. You can walk the track in either direction, starting/finishing at Smoko or Punakaiki. Several operators offer drop-off and pick-up to both ends of the trail. They will also move your vehicle too.

Paparoa Shuttles:
paparoashuttles.co.nz

Paparoa Great Walk:
paparoagreatwalk.co.nz

Trail Transport:
greymouth@sportsworld.co.nz



Left: Crossing one of the swingbridges between Pororari and Punakaiki.

Below: Moonlight Tops Hut in the sunlight.



“OCCASIONAL STRONGER GUSTS HAD US STRUGGLING TO STAY ON OUR FEET”

29 reasons for a trail

On 19 November 2010, an underground explosion at the Pike River Mine trapped and killed 29 miners. It was one of the darkest days in modern West Coast history and one for which final answers are still being sought. There is currently an attempt to find and retrieve the bodies of the men that may provide closure for the families. It was these families who wanted to create something in the memory of their loved ones. The Paparoa Track is that memorial.

After 9km and 600m of climbing we popped above the tree line and arrived at Ces Clark Hut just in time. Wind and rain knocked on the windows as we sheltered for lunch in a hut that, like the trail to it, pre-dated the Paparoa.

The forecast was for increasing gales. A sign in the hut warned of setting off in such conditions, across the highest, most exposed

part of the trail. Our booking for that night was in Moonlight Tops Hut, another 10km further and we were keen to get there. With hood on and heads down we walked away from the hut. Conditions certainly worsened and views were limited to the metre beyond our feet. On a good day you can see Aoraki/Mount Cook, we'd been told. We'd have happily just taken the good day. The wind howled across the ridge, up at over 1100m. I jokingly suggested to Wendy we drop packs for the half hour return trip to Croesus Knob to pop above 1200m. She didn't smile. Two kilometres further, the old Croesus Track turned off the ridge to barrel down to the coast. From this point the Paparoa follows an all new trail.

Occasional stronger gusts had us struggling to stay on our feet while rare clearings showed glimpses of the mountains around us. We were

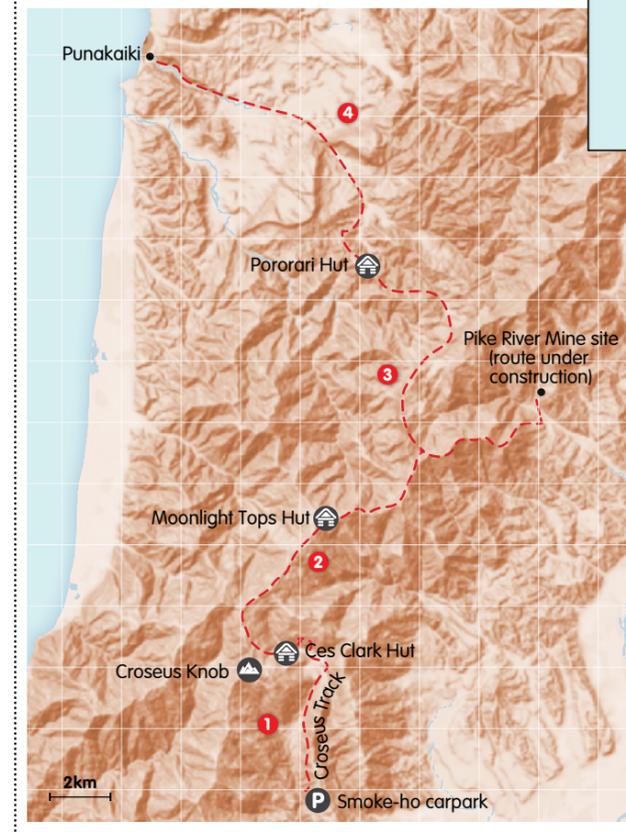
drenched, wind blasted and happy to arrive at Moonlight Tops Hut by late afternoon.

Purpose-built for the Paparoa, the hut sleeps 20 in two bunkrooms with spacious living and kitchen areas. Inside, 20 trampers moved wet gloves, thermals, waterproofs around the fire like a damp game of chess. A strategically wedged boot trumps a sports bra filling beneath a dripping shirt. A gap opens as a beanie is moved from hearth to head, but a pungent sock soon slides into its place.

Walking in NZ, I seem invariably to come across a bunch of old-time trampers, invariably farmers. Tramping is in the Kiwi DNA; a respect for the land, an enjoyment of it, even when being out in all weathers is your day job. At Moonlight Tops, Mac, Roger, Noel and Anne told their stories and indeed Roger, a North Island sheep farmer, allowed his pasta to boil over three times in his quest to tell them, tall or true.

WALK NOTES | PAPAROA TRACK, NZ

Time: 3-4 days | **Length:** 56km | **Grade:** moderate



Day 1: Smoke-ho carpark to Ces Clark Hut (10.3km, 4-5 hours)

Day 2: Ces Clark Hut to Moonlight Tops Hut (9.7km, 3 hours)

Day 2: Moonlight Tops Hut to the Pororari Hut (19.1km, 5-7 Hours)

Day 4: Pororari Hut to the Pororari River carpark (16km, 4-5 hours)

“THE HEAVY RAIN OF THE PREVIOUS DAY ENSURED WATERFALLS WERE FLOWING OFF HAWERA PEAK.”

The sun we always wanted

A watery, tangerine sun after dawn sent shafts of light across the mountains and now we could truly appreciate the hut's setting. Wispy cloud hung in the valleys but the main escarpment we'd soon be traversing was picked out in the light, the remote peaks of the Paparoa Range to the north black in silhouette.

From the hut the trail dropped into the most enchanted of mossy forest which held us for some time before emerging onto the mudstone escarpment, then hugging its edge for some kilometres. Looking beyond the cliff edge we could just see Pororari Hut, our destination for the night. Looking back we could see Moonlight Tops, its roof glimmering in the sun.

Far below, to the east, we could pick out the construction of the final piece of the Paparoa jigsaw. The 11km Pike 29 Memorial Track will lead walkers and riders steeply down to the Pike River Mine site. Here, a memorial and interpretive centre will unfold the story of the 2010 disaster. Whilst much of this side trail is complete it won't open until the retrieval project is and the mine sealed off again.

The Memorial Track will undoubtedly be a rip-roaring 800m descent by bike, but it's hard to see how it can be incorporated into the full Paparoa traverse. With no intermediate hut it would be a 30km return hike from Moonlight Tops or a 40km day onto Pororari. Ultimately, walkers and riders will choose whether they enter/exit the Paparoa from the mine site or complete the

standard Paparoa and miss the Pike 29 Track.

The heavy rain of the previous day ensured waterfalls were flowing off Hawera Peak. Wendy and I put a brew on and made lunch on the escarpment, facing out to the ocean. Soon after, the trail plunged off the escarpment, threading a route through very steep, cliff-lined country. Whilst walking trails can merge into direct scrambling trails on steep terrain, the need for the Paparoa to be rideable means it must keep angles sane. This also ensures the trail is built sustainably; grades of less than 10 per cent and regular reversals ensure much reduced erosion by water. Some traditionalists might wonder why they must walk tight switchbacks, covering more ground, but the land benefits and maintenance is much reduced.

Below the steepest section we met Martin, one of the trail builders. With a family history steeped in mining – his mother came from a mining family in Broken Hill, his father a miner on the West Coast – Martin too had worked the mines of both countries. Now he was putting his skills to work above ground, not below. The Paparoa sidled across to a ridge line that held Pororari Hut and, some 7.5 hours after leaving Moonlight Tops, we arrived, more than satisfied with the day's effort.

Mountains to beach

Pororari is a mirror image of Moonlight Tops and it was enjoyable to sit outside and take in

spectacular views and, at day's end, a sunset over the ocean. A handful of sandflies did little to spoil the moment. The third day on the track took us off the ridge, through fabulous fern country, down to the Pororari River, crossing by swingbridge. We followed the river, at times hugging the walls of a gorge, to find ourselves in limestone country. In warm sun, under another bridge where the Pororari meets Cave Creek, we sat on river stones for lunch. A dip was tempting. Then I felt the water.

Soon we were at the junction with the Inland Pack Track, a historical trail heading north to Fox River. The Paparoa itself splits for its final kilometres. Those on bikes head out to the Punakaiki River while those of us on foot continue down the spectacular Pororari River Gorge. Here, huge limestone cliffs drop into verdant vegetation and the river itself.

It's a fitting finale to a fine walk, although when we popped out at the trailhead carpark it felt right to continue to finish on a wild West Coast beach. Back at the nearby Punakaiki Tavern we gathered with friends made along the track for a celebration drink in the garden. Beach then beer, now that's a finish.

I'll remember the Paparoa for many reasons, not least it being the last overnight walk I was able to do before so much of the world shut down. The Paparoa had finally opened but then, only a month later, it was closed. Get to it when it re-opens. We will all need mountain therapy by then, with absolutely no reason for Kiwi aversion. 

THE INLAND PACK TRACK

An excellent 25km/1.5 day walk that links with the northern end of the Paparoa, the Inland Pack Track was actually part of the original main route up the West Coast until 1929. It does require overnight and cooking equipment, some navigation skill and a penchant for wet feet. The scenery in the Fox River/Dilemma Creek section is nothing short of stunning with towering limestone cliffs dropping to crystal clear rivers. Much of the trail is in riverbeds and not on formed tracks and, given the number of crossings, should not be attempted after or before rain.

The trail starts at Fox River, 12km north of Punakaiki, and, for an hour, wanders up the Fox River to Dilemma Creek, requiring one 50m crossing of Fox River en route. Those with tents might turn up Dilemma Creek and follow the route.

Continuing up Fox River by wading back and forth half a dozen times, brings you after half an hour to the huge overhang of The Ballroom. This offers plenty of room to camp and shelter from all weather if not from the marauding wekas and possums that will steal whatever you don't want to offer. There is a toilet here.

The following morning return to the Dilemma Creek confluence and, with plenty more crossings, follow that river upstream for an hour or so to its junction with Fossil Creek. Look for a sign. The 'track' wades up Fossil Creek, with plenty of fallen timber to limbo under or clamber over. Occasional orange arrows mark the way until a sign and trail is met on the right.

The Inland Pack Track now becomes a real trail, easy to follow, as it cuts across country through the forest to the open area of Bullock Creek Farm and a final wade across Bullock Creek. Be sure throughout this area to stay on the track as numerous caves and sinkholes exist.

Soon you will come to the junction with the Cave Creek track and a very understated memorial commemorating another West Coast tragedy. In April 1995 a viewing platform at Cave Creek collapsed, killing 13 outdoor education students and their teacher from a college in Greymouth. The Inland Pack Track continues through country much damaged by ex-cyclones Gita (2014) and Fehi (2018) to pop out at the Pororari River and the Paparoa Track, 3km from its finish. It's a good 7-8 hours from The Ballroom and, whilst the Inland Pack Track could be done in a day, it would be a very long one indeed.

More info: doc.govt.nz

On the Paparoa before leaving the escarpment.

