



# TREKKING INTO THE WORLD

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
KERRY VAN DER JAGT

There's a knack to traversing scree slopes. However, judging by the white-knuckle grip I have on my guide's hand and the pained expression on his face, I haven't mastered it. Like flakes of crumbled Weet-Bix, the loose rubble slips and slides under my boots as I shuffle towards the top of the 1,522-metre Surveyor Peak, deep in the Seaward Kaikoura Ranges on New Zealand's South Island.

As we approach the summit, the clouds roll back revealing jagged peaks wearing shawls of grey mist. I can see across the ocean to the Kaikoura Peninsula and as far south as Christchurch, while in the distance the legendary 2,590 metre high 'Te

Ao Whekere' or 'World of the Gods' stands like a signpost to the heavens.

I'm in God's own country with two goals - to test my fitness and to learn more about the Maori concept of Kaitiaki (meaning caretaker of the land). The land we are walking on is protected as the Puhi Peaks Nature Reserve - not just a handsome mountain range - but one of only two places left on earth (both within the Seaward Kaikouras) where the Hutton's Shearwater breeds and nests. If these mountains are wild enough and remote enough for a seabird to test Darwin's 'Survival of the Fittest' theory, I can only imagine what they'll do to me.



# OF THE GODS

**“I’m in God’s country to test my fitness. If these mountains are wild enough and remote enough for a seabird to test Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” theory, I can only imagine what they’ll do to me.”**

# SURVIVAL OF THE SLOWEST

The three-day guided Kaikoura Wilderness Walk begins at the woolshed at the historic Puhi Peaks Station, a remnant from the early farming days. It is a few hours drive north of Christchurch on the east coast and a 45 minute drive north of Kaikoura through the 'Valley of the Feathers'. Maori hunters named the valley for the feathers the moa, or puhi, (a now extinct flightless bird resembling the emu) provided for their cloaks.

It's October and late in the walking season. Our small party of five includes me, a German honeymoon couple and our guides Lance and James.

Day one is a six-hour hike from an elevation of 550m to our base for the night, Shearwater Lodge, a luxury eco-retreat set at 1000m. Carrying a light daypack (our luggage has been transported to the lodge), I set off at a cracking pace through the lowland shrubs and up the steep mountain trail. Conditioned to exercising indoors or in a hurry, I find it difficult to establish a relaxed walking rhythm. With legs and lungs on fire I hear nothing except the blood pounding in my ears and see little except my boots. "Slowly, slowly," suggests Lance, placing his steadying hand on my elbow. "Take your time to smell the tea trees."

And so I do. I inhale the honey-like fragrance of the manuka tree, the lemony tang of kanukas and the



pungent aroma of wet soil. I stare up at soaring mountains and down at rushing streams. And I listen - to bell birds and bush robins, chuckling streams and a boisterous breeze.

As we walk Lance talks about the Hutton's Shearwater and points out the colony, just below the peak of Te Ao Whekere. These hardy little birds, the highest nesting seabirds in New Zealand, travel at 150 kilometres per hour, breed in burrows and every winter rocket over to Western Australia to loll about in the Indian Ocean.

With my head full of birds and bees we soon reach a clearing, Totara Saddle, where the lunch fairies have laid out hampers. Inside my lunch box is a handwritten note, "Take your time to enjoy the walk today," signed Nicky. It will be a punishing number of hours before I meet the owner of this message.



# WILDERNESS AND WEDDING TREES

Sporting pink lipstick, pink T-shirt and a pink, skunk-like streak in her hair Nicky McArthur greets us on the steps of Shearwater Lodge with a basket of warm muffins and a cool drink. This is luxury hiking; not a wet tent or outdoor dunny in sight.

The outdoor table is set with fresh fruit and nibbles, while through the window I can see the inviting glow of a roaring fire and I know that a hot shower awaits us. Set in a magnificent alpine valley, Shearwater Lodge sleeps a maximum of 12 guests in six rooms. With a cosy guest lounge, communal dining and outdoor deck this is down-to-earth luxury at its comfortable best.

As well as being the owner/operator of Shearwater Lodge, McArthur also runs Kaikoura Wilderness Walks, is a committee member of the Hutton's Shearwater Charitable Trust and, most importantly, is a trained cordon bleu chef. Over the next few days we indulge in locally sourced venison, salmon and crayfish, field mushrooms, vegetables from Kaikoura, cheeses and local wines. The salt, though comes from

**“There’s a knack to traversing scree slopes. However, judging by the white-knuckle grip I have on my guide’s hand, I haven’t mastered it.”**

Nepal, “Connecting two great mountain ranges,” says McArthur.

On day two, we head up the Surveyor Peak, where a series of steep zigzags and switchbacks has me clutching at Lance like a howler monkey up a tree. The chance to add my small pebble to the rocky cairn at the summit makes all the pain and perspiration worthwhile. On the return we descend through a green valley to find that Nicky has laid out an afternoon tea under a mountain ribbonwood. Nicky calls the tree ‘a wedding tree’ because in January it sheds white flowers like confetti. As I watch the honeymooners share a private moment under its boughs I’m reminded of another of Nicky’s notes, about the responsibility of each generation to look after the land for the next, “Mo tatou, a mo ka uri a muri ake nei - for us and our children after us”.

After a second night at Shearwater Lodge we make our descent on day three, past the spectacular Beverley Falls, soaring beech forests and ancient Totara trees and finally, back to Puhī Peaks station.

Taking one last look up at Te Ao Whēkere I vow to continue to combine my quest for fitness with a deeper connection to the land - there can be no greater achievement than that. *The writer was a guest of Christchurch and Canterbury Tourism*



## 5 TOP NEW ZEALAND WALKS

**1**

### KAIKOURA WILDERNESS WALK

**What** Two-day or three-day guided walks through the Puhī Peaks Nature Reserve.

**Where** Seaward Kaikoura Ranges, South Island.

**When** October to March.

**Leg-burn level** Medium.

**Details** [kaikourawilderness.co.nz](http://kaikourawilderness.co.nz)

**2**

### MILFORD TRACK

**What** A 53-kilometre (four-day) hike across the heart of NZ’s water-filled fiord country.

**Where** Glade Wharf to Milford Sound, near Queenstown.

**When** November to mid-April is best, though the track is still open during winter (subject to weather and avalanche conditions).

**Leg-burn level** Medium.

**Details** [doc.govt.nz](http://doc.govt.nz)

**4**

### ABEL TASMAN COAST TRACK

**What** A 55-kilometre (3-5 day) coastal walk (can also be kayaked).

**Where** Abel Tasman National Park, top of the South Island.

**When** Open all year (check track condition after heavy rain).

**Leg-burn level** Easy.

**Details** [doc.govt.nz](http://doc.govt.nz)

**3**

### TONGARIRO NORTHERN CIRCUIT

**What** A 3-4 day circumnavigation of Mount Ngauruhoe taking in volcanic craters, glacial valleys and coloured lakes.

**Where** Tongariro National Park, North Island.

**When** Late October to end of April.

**Leg-burn level** Medium to hard.

**Details** [doc.govt.nz](http://doc.govt.nz)

**5**

### ROUTEburn TRACK

**What** A 32-kilometre (2-4 day) track crossing NZ’s Southern Alps.

**Where** Mount Aspiring and Fiordland National Parks, near Queenstown.

**When** Best November to mid-April but the track is open in winter (subject to conditions).

**Leg-burn level** Medium.

**Details** [doc.govt.nz](http://doc.govt.nz) **S**