



New Zealand *nature trail*

Kerry van der Jagt discovers clean air, amazing scenery and gourmet food on an unforgettable three-day adventure.

Sadly, I've just broken the first rule of mountain hiking – don't look down. The zigzag path we've been steadily climbing for the last few hours has disappeared and we're crossing a steep section of loose scree with a dizzying drop to the side. I'd like to say I faced my fears and seized the moment; instead I clutch onto my guide, Lance Godfrey, for dear life. After some coaxing, Lance leads me up the last few paces to the top of the 1522m Surveyor's Peak in the Kaikoura seaward ranges on the South Island. "You can look down now," he

says. I let out a gasp, just like the one you make when unwrapping a surprise birthday present. The view is magnificent. Under a cloudless sky, I can see as far south as the Banks Peninsula and as far north as the North Island. In the distance, fresh snow dusts the rock face of the legendary Te Ao Whekere (or World of the Gods), one of the highest peaks in the range.

Bountiful flora & fauna

My spectacular, three-day guided Kaikoura Wilderness Walk through the privately owned Puhi Peaks Nature

Reserve began the previous morning at the historic Puhi Peaks station, a 40-minute drive north of Kaikoura through the beautiful Valley of the Feathers. It's late in the walking season and our small group consists of just me and a young German couple on their honeymoon. With Lance leading the way and a second guide, James, bringing up the rear, our small party of five is soon engulfed by dense foliage, with its layer upon layer of living things. We pass through lowland kanuka and manuka forests, where delicate tendrils of old man's beard lichen hang from branches like lace curtains, before bursting out into a sunny clearing where the lunch fairies have somehow laid out a lovely picnic.

After lunch, we rock-hop across streams, zigzag through stands of beech trees and finally enter an ancient totara forest. For the next two hours, my legs and lungs burn and I

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Kaikoura Wilderness Walks run from October 1 to March 31. The three-day walk costs \$1395, including transport, accommodation, meals and guides. Call +64 3 319 6966.



stop often to catch my breath. "You're doing fine," says Lance. He's lying, and I love him for it. Lance uses these moments to identify birds including tomtits, black fantails and bellbirds, show us the trees from which the Maoris made their war canoes, and point out red deer, wild goat and chamois. Occasionally, I stop to stretch out on the spongy moss and enjoy a silence so pure it leaves my ears ringing. At other times, I have to shout to be heard above the nearby streams.

Pancakes & panoramas

Around 5pm, we finally emerge into alpine meadows and get a first glimpse of our base camp for the next two nights. The luxury eco-lodge Shearwater Lodge, with its six guest rooms, is set in a spectacular valley at an elevation of 1000m. Owner/operator Nicky McArthur welcomes us with a fruit platter, raspberry muffins and

cool drinks. Nicky is a trained Cordon Bleu chef and the food is magnificent. We indulge in locally sourced venison and salmon, fresh vegetables and field mushrooms, berries and ice-cream, banoffee pie, cheeses and local wines. For breakfast, it's pancakes and maple syrup, plus fruit salad and yoghurt.

On day two, we head up Surveyor's Peak, passing a spectacular mountain ribbonwood named the 'Wedding Tree'

of this seaside town. Click on www.kaikourakayaks.co.nz.

4 THE PENINSULA: This walk provides easy access for exploring the entire Kaikoura Peninsula. Stop for a traditional seafood barbecue on the beach.

5 LUNCH WITH LLAMAS: Trek the countryside while a llama carries your picnic. Go to www.llamatrekking.co.nz.

YOUR MUST-DO CHECKLIST

- 1 SWIM WITH SEALS:** Kaikoura is one of the few places in the world where you can swim with fur seals in their own environment. See www.sealswimkaikoura.co.nz.
- 2 SEE DOLPHINS:** A once-in-a-lifetime experience. Visit www.dolphinencounter.co.nz.
- 3 HIRE A KAYAK:** The best way to explore the waters

because it sheds white flowers like confetti. I watch as the honeymooners share a kiss under its boughs and am reminded, not for the first time, that while nature may provide the setting, the human spirit fills in the rest.

Our final descent on day three takes us past Beverley Falls and through beech forest, marking the end of what might possibly be the most beautiful walk in this truly beautiful country. www