

Todd Smith

Southern Crossroads

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by
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The Last Straw

It was a scruffy, portly sandal-clad Kiwi who did it. It was Peter Jackson's vision of Tolkien's Middle Earth come to life under the southern skies of New Zealand. His Lord of the Rings films captured the sweeping vistas of river valleys, rolling hills, and endless mountains as well as the more intimate verdant forest landscapes of his home; his films captured me too. New Zealand had always been on The List, but these images drew me more strongly than ever before: pristine forests shadowed in mist; lonely windswept grasslands with mountain ranges rising sharply in the distance; desolate sweeps of high alpine meadows with weather so extreme nothing but a few ground hugging plants eek out a living; jagged peaks girdled with glaciers, challenging all who dare to pit their will and skill against them. These are the images that caused me to quit my job of eleven years for a chance to wander through these landscapes. The images were indeed compelling. Why not blame Peter Jackson? He's the one who put them in front of me on the big screen?

Truth be told, I was looking for an excuse. The movies gave me one. Twelve years at the same place had been a few years too long. This was a telecom job. That market had collapsed. We had lost eighty percent of our employees. Salaries had been severely cut. There were no customers for the product I had just helped create. The company was hanging by a thread. Not having any ownership stake, I felt like a sucker having stuck around so long on a sinking ship as I watched friends bail out to take other lucrative jobs. There were reasons I had been there for so long. I was trusted, had a level of autonomy that was rare, and had earned five weeks of vacation per year. Being a small company, there was a complete lack of the political games played out at larger firms. They had always given me the jobs I had asked for. But all of that no longer made any difference when the fact of the matter was that I hadn't been happy with my job for a few years. Watching the company fail due to the prevailing market as well as business decisions I had no say in, it had become a chore to get myself out of bed every morning. I didn't feel like it made any difference if I came into work or not. Then with so many people gone, it no longer felt like the family it once had. Even so, inertia held me in place. A comfortable unhappiness had become easier than change. I needed to find some external force to act on me, something to effect change.

I found that force in the form of a plane ticket to Queenstown, New Zealand. I had done it before: purchased new skis to get me skiing more; bought a new mountain bike to get me riding more; ordered a new camera to get me taking more pictures. And it had always worked. I'm not sure what it says about my character, but investing cash into something makes me more committed. This time it was a plane ticket ordered with a near enough departure date that I paid too much for it. Something as simple as a few drops of ink printed on a few slips of paper were the force that set me in motion this time. As if this ticket would admit me to some better life, I quit my job. I didn't ask for a leave of absence. I simply quit, knowing that, without such a commitment, nothing would really change. But what was I committing to? I didn't really know. The act of quitting my job was not so much a positive commitment as a commitment to not remain on the same

path. It was a commitment to change, if nothing else. So it wasn't actually Peter Jackson that did it. His latest *The Two Towers* happened to debut at the right time to focus my attention on a latent dream, to backpack in New Zealand. I needed a catalyst for change. This was good enough for me.

Maybe I would write when I finished my trip. Maybe I would teach. Maybe I would start my own consulting business. None of these paths had yet become clear. All I knew was that I wasn't content with the linear path of my career anymore. My life had been optimized for somebody who I was not. Growing up in the suburbs, I modeled my life after what I learned there: steady career; nice single-family house; yard; two-car garage; dogs. But an important part of what makes all of that make sense is a spouse and kids. I had neither and wondered about my priorities, about my needs, about what I had that contributed to my happiness and what served as an anchor. For example, if having all the accoutrements of suburban life means working twelve months a year with only minimal vacation, is that better than having less and working less so that more time is available for leisure or nonpaying/low-paying pursuits.

It was time to take stock of my dreams. Travel serves as both a literal and metaphorical journey. The literal part is obvious and satisfying in itself. See new sights. Experience different cultures. Experience new things. But it's the metaphorical part that, to me, is equally or more satisfying. I don't mean to get all New Age here, but travel can represent a spiritual journey. The idea of a physical journey enabling spiritual growth is not a new concept. To get the spiritual benefit, a quick vacation with all the comforts of home won't do. Getting out of my comfort zone is key. There are theories on personality types that say that under stress we revert to our core behaviors, behaviors that form the basis of our personalities. Being out of my comfort zone puts me in touch with my core personality. Without being surrounded by the familiar, I am laid bare for myself to see. Those things that are truly important to me become more obvious. Priorities are easier to set. The benefit goes beyond knowing oneself. Independent travel (i.e. little to no itinerary, no package tours) forces you to be self-reliant, to not be afraid of ambiguity, to accept the unexpected, to deal with the unfamiliar. The world becomes less scary when I have the confidence of knowing I can deal with what comes my way. As such, travel can serve much more than a physical here to there on a map, a series of mere photographs. It can be a journey of self-discovery or, at the least, rediscovery.

Not knowing what to do next with my life, I needed my own walkabout. New Zealand with its dramatic and undeveloped wild lands seemed like an excellent medium. I had frequently made trips into the wilderness of my Colorado home. The scale of the mountains and vast stretches of forest had always made me feel small. More importantly, the wilderness had made the trivial things about my life seem even smaller. A journey through the wilderness of New Zealand promised to have an even more profound effect owing to the fact that home was not a trailhead and car ride away. New Zealand has a well developed trail and hut system which would make packing easier if just a little less wild. So with only small backpack and what necessities I could fit in it, I was off with Peter Jackson's foot kicking squarely in my behind.

To Southern Skies

The 777's massive jet engines roared, shaking everything inside. I gave control over this moment of my life to the pilots, maintenance crew, engineers, builders, security personnel, all the people involved in making this technological marvel and complex airline system work. It's not easy giving up control. Seated deep in my very core is the need to control my own destiny. I have to quell an itch of frustration when I'm a passenger in a car. I want to drive, regardless of the driver's skill. I don't even like to give up control of the TV remote. This desire to drive my own life is what had led me to my recent separation from a job of twelve years, a new path to pursue some dreams on my own terms. So it is always with a certain amount of discomfort that I surrender control when I fly. My only reasonable option now was to sit back and absorb the experience. The seat pushed against me as the plane lost its attachment to the ground. I was leaving attachment behind, my job, my house, my dogs, and my comfort level. If I didn't, I would never enjoy the journey.

The ability of the airline system to move thousands of people around the world every day stands in stark contrast to the inability of RTD, the regional bus system, to transport passengers thirty miles to the airport. I had allocated plenty of time to get through post-9-11 security at the airport; so I was not pressed for time. Nevertheless, RTD's inefficiency managed to effront my engineering sensibilities that require elegant, efficient solutions. *How can RTD manage to turn a forty-five minute trip into two hours!? 95 percent of the passengers on the bus go to the airport, but the bus makes detours and stops to optimize the trip for the remaining five percent!* I was getting myself worked up. Knowing the bus driver had nothing to do with setting the route; I quelled my frustration and thanked him with a smile when we finally got to the airport. I also realized that one of the great values of travel is to reset the way I react to the world around me. Impatience needed to be reset to patience, and this was a good time to start.

On the long LA to Auckland leg, I spotted a friend. I knew Jean worked the Pacific flights, but had no idea she would be on this flight on this day. I hadn't seen her in years. But there she was, standing just three seats away. I sat grinning at her as she went through her safety presentation, so practiced she could have a furtive conversation with me as she demonstrated the proper usage of the flotation vest that would surely be useless if the plane ever crashed in the water. With her elfin features, Jean would fit in equally well at the North Pole or Tolkien's Middle Earth, depending on which story you prefer. On this day, she was one of Santa's little helpers, delivering little treats while I slept. One time, I awoke to find a business-class sized pillow at my feet, worth a king's ransom here in economy class where sleep is, at best, fitful. I think the two French matrons sitting next to me were more than a little querulous, but I couldn't do anything but smile in that uncomfortable way that I do when I can't otherwise converse.

Traveling alone, this coincidental meeting bode well. The last time I had traveled alone I was hut to hut hiking in Austria. It was only two weeks, but during that time, a sense of isolation and loneliness grew in me to a point that I wanted to return home early. Very few people I ran into spoke English and my German was far less than

conversational. In rooms full of people engaged in lively conversation, I was alone, books my only company. So it was with some trepidation that I set out alone on this trip to New Zealand. Even with the knowledge that English would be the common language, I still had doubts. It didn't make any sense to me, but after seeing Jean's friendly face, I was sure that I would continue to see more. I would have no problems enjoying the company of fellow travelers.

Twenty hours after stepping out my front door, I landed, bleary-eyed, smack dab in the middle of the self-proclaimed adrenaline capital of the world, Queenstown. As if on queue, a wild-haired, shorts-wearing, barefooted young man, the very essence of a Kiwi stereotype steps into the airport and gives his mum a big hug. Disoriented and with no reservations, I had the bus driver drop me off at the information center. I booked a bunk in a backpackers' hostel, or as they say in New Zealand simply a *backpackers*. Not knowing any better, I chose a friendly looking backpackers. It was only after I had settled in that I realized that a mildew smell permeated the place. It took days to shake that smell from my gear or at least overpower it with my own.

Still dazed with lack of sleep, I sat in the lounge at the backpackers, forcing myself to stay awake in an effort to adjust to my new time zone. I never got the feeling that my stoned, glazed eye look was out of place. I felt alone in a crowd of thrill seeking kids. They couldn't be older than twenty. They had made their pilgrimage here to drink at the well of adrenaline bliss; and the tap of the golden brew. Their desire is quenched with bungee jumping, jet boats that skirt steep canyon walls, skydiving, and riding belly boards down a gushing stream. Friend's greeted each other with a question, "Have you done it yet?" The passage into adulthood here is a bungee jump, and better yet, what's known as the Triple, a marketing ploy of three prepaid jumps designed to strip these supplicants of their funds.

All of these activities are just simulations of danger. There is little actual danger. Nevertheless, the perception of it is enough to tickle some ancient part of the brain to command the adrenal glands to secrete their potion into the bloodstream. While these amusements can also have their effect on me, I prefer actual danger, not necessarily of life and limb, but sometimes. I knew a guy named Dean once who would say that if it isn't dangerous, it's not fun. There is some truth to that despite the fact that Dean had the last fun ride of his life when his soar plane's wings folded and he augured in. Now don't go thinking I'm some thrill seeking daredevil. More than likely, I'm just taking a small risk of limb alone, not life. I go for something like a long ski day in the backcountry involving descent of treed slopes and pushing my limits of endurance lest I have to bivvy in the snow. If I don't perform well or make the right judgments, there is some danger of breaking a bone, blowing out a knee, or getting frostbite, all out of range of communication or an ambulance. Whatever the actual danger is, I prefer to pit my wits, training, fitness, and will against it. The thrill and satisfaction are far deeper than when it is simulated and you haven't put any effort into it.

Queenstown is not known for its historical character. There is nothing particularly interesting about the architecture. Most of the buildings and houses are of modern, undistinguished design. A few businesses serving the locals can be found in the town center, but most exist to serve and captivate the tourists. It is Queenstown's location and diversions that are its distinguishing features. Located astride the Southern Alps, mostly tussock covered mountains rise behind it. Lake Wakitipu's eastern shores border the

front, the rest of its 83 km length stretching to the west. Aside from the ubiquitously hyped adrenaline activities, you can plan and provision for any of the treks in the region. It is a crossroads with routes from the west coast glaciers, Mount Cook, Mount Aspiring National Park, Fiordlands, and Christchurch.

You are likely to cross paths here with a variety of outdoor enthusiasts in transit to destinations near and far, backpackers, car campers, tour bus riders, and bicycle tourists. But there is a more dominant and longer-term yet still transient population of twenty-year-olds, many students on summer break or recent graduates staying their eventual entry into the world of responsibilities. Some stay for weeks or months. Some augment their student budget with short-term work at a backpackers. The streets are alive with distractingly young bodies; boys with carefully unkempt hair held in place with mousse; girls uniformed with tattoos on their ankles or peeking out above their hip hugger pants, their belly buttons on display sporting studs and rings. Not as bacchanalian as Florida during Spring Break, there is nevertheless a party feel. Queenstown's party reputation even brought one of those insipid, trendy, so-called reality shows to town. You know, one of those where they film the lives of maladjusted young adults that they throw together knowing conflict will ensue. I had to step around a cameraman following a self-consciously chic young couple from one of these shows. They were shopping for clothes while the camera recorded their inane comments.

Lifting the sleeve of an ordinary leather coat that could be had just about anywhere in the world, girl comments, "Ooh. This looks cool."

Feigning interest for the camera, boy manages an enthusiastic, "Yeah. That's cool."

European backpackers that I would meet on this trip consistently sneered at the mention of Queenstown. To them, Queenstown was too commercialized. To me, it had a commercial feel, but I don't know about "too". American tourist towns are much more brazen. Gatlinburg Tennessee is the worst example I know. Located on the edge of the Smokey Mountains, some of the most beautiful, ecologically diverse land in the country, Gatlinburg sits in sacrilegious contrast to the sanctity of the dense wilderness beyond. It's packed with cars and tourists waddling past a noisy array of shops nobody would ever go to at home: salt water taffy stores; t-shirt clotheries; candy apple stands; wax museums; stores selling clocks made from a plastic-coated slice of tree trunk with decoupage pictures of the mountains; candy outlets; curio stores. It was originally the Smokey Mountains that made Gatlinburg a destination, but with Gatlinburg's popularity, it has its own tourist gateway town, Pigeon Forge, home of Dolly Parton's Dolly World and a host of other amusements that could not be squeezed into already overcrowded Gatlinburg. Queenstown is most certainly *not* like these towns. It is really not a bad place to spend a few days, if only for the eye candy.

I hadn't planned anything on this trip before I arrived. The only information I brought with me was a copy of Lonely Planet's *Tramping in New Zealand*. So with a quick orientation to the area, I was able to plan my first week and a half. This would take me out of Queenstown, closer to the tracks, which are what I came here for. Tracks, that's what they call trails here. Tramping is what they call hiking or backpacking. This combined with the absence of people with whom I had anything in common made me anxious to head out of town. Wanaka, located on the other side of the Crown range to the north, was my first destination.

The shuttle bus to Wanaka swung by the airport where we picked up a teenager on his way to the outdoor education college in Wanaka. College is what they call years twelve and thirteen. But these schools can be specialized like the one in Wanaka. The student collapsed in the backseat and slept the whole way. But the bus driver, a proud Wanakan, was keen to tell us about where he was taking this kid. The college offers courses in outdoor activities that fuel much of the New Zealand economy, kayaking, rock climbing, tramping, alpine skiing, nordic skiing; mountaineering, sailing, and mountain biking. Students not only learn the technical skills, they also learn about group dynamics, leadership, and what to do if someone gets hurt. As the school's promotional material puts it, "lots of valuable learning occurs while paddling the rivers, climbing the rocks, tramping the bush, and sliding around on the alpine snow." I couldn't have said it better myself.

Wanaka is an unremarkable town. It is fairly young so has no distinguished old town or well-preserved classic homes. On the way here, the shuttle bus driver lamented at the prodigious growth of his town, the two nearby ski areas bringing in crowds in the winter. I couldn't see it. Wanaka seemed a small and sleepy to me, almost too sleepy. Fortunately, because of the tourism, there were plenty of restaurants to choose from. I had dinner at an Indian restaurant. It seemed a little strange to me that beef was on the menu. I ordered chicken, Indian hot. I thought that in New Zealand, with its British history and accompanying bland food, Indian hot would be mildly spicy. I'm used to eating hot southwestern cuisine so I imagined this would be no problem. As a matter of masochistic pride, I managed to get it all down and smiled when the waiter asked how it as. "Just fine." My pride didn't come back to haunt me though. I felt nothing of the spice next morning.

It is no coincidence that Wanaka is a popular tourist destination. The town is situated on the shores of Lake Wanaka. The lake is deep, below sea level in fact. Tussock covered mountains surround it, the higher glaciated peaks rising beyond. At sunset, the tussock grass glowed a reddish yellow. A strong wind kicked up waves that broke against the rocky beach. This could easily be the land of the Rohirrim, Tolkiens's highland horseman, endless land for grazing protected by high mountains that seem close yet can only be reached after many days journey. I imagined spirits as from Middle Earth living in the depths of the lake, young like the land, at least in spirit and geologic time, young enough not to be fully awakened, young enough to have only seen the arrival of the Maoris and the Pakehas (Europeans) not long after, young enough not to have seen the structures of man surrounding the shores of their watery home.

That night I laid out all my gear. I had recently laundered all my clothes in a partially successful attempt to rid them of the mildew smell they had picked up at the backpackers in Queenstown. Spread out before me was all that I had brought with me to New Zealand. It all fit in my mid-sized pack with room to spare for food. The trip to the Aspiring Hut would be the first test of the gear choices I had made. Each item had been carefully chosen through the advice of friends who had tramped in New Zealand and my own experience backpacking. I had fretted over this pile again and again at home in an attempt to take what I needed and, more importantly, to leave behind what I didn't need. When you are carrying your home on your back for a month, its best not to be overburdened. New Zealand is a developed country. Anything I needed that I didn't bring could be purchased. Nevertheless, I prefer not to have to purchase anything major. I

derive great satisfaction out of having packed correctly and of using gear I have a history with, gear I know I can count on, gear that is not bought at exorbitant prices at tourist destinations. Packing is an art that matures with the practice of travel. So here was my masterpiece, laid out and ready to be packed for tomorrow: down sleeping bag; rain jacket and pants; hiking shoes; sandals; two pairs of socks; quick-drying hiking pants and shirt; long underwear; wind-resistant, warmer pants and shirt; two pairs of underwear (OK, I had one pair on at the time); Speedos; lightweight insulated pullover; knit hat; sun hat; gloves; sunglasses; sunscreen; headlamp (more on this later); toiletries; first-aid kit; Swiss army knife; canister stove and fuel; lighter; emergency kit; guidebook; novel; journal; camera and film; fork; eating container; titanium pot; food; waterproof turkey basting bags to pack everything in to keep it dry. Travel into alpine regions can bring four seasons of weather in the summer; hence, the emphasis on adequate clothing. I packed everything in reverse order of when I would need it, stuffing the last needed equipment like my sleeping bag at the bottom of my pack. An extra layer of clothing and my rain gear went on top in case I needed to get to them quickly. I put my snacks, water, and camera in an easy to access pouch that hangs in the front. No need to take my pack off for that stuff. If you can't tell by the green behind their ears, novice backpackers give themselves away by how long it takes them to extract what they need out of their packs. Depending on the weather patterns, the length of the trip, and the terrain, I would leave some clothing behind at the backpackers. The backpackers generally allow you to leave behind a bag of stuff while you are out tramping. For me this usually included some clothes, my guidebook (not really needed while on the track), extra food, and sometimes my stove when the huts had propane.

An hour's van ride the next morning took me to the Raspberry Creek carpark, the start of the track up the Matukituki valley to the Aspiring Hut. New Zealand is full of oddly different names like Matukituki and Aspiring, Maori alongside English. These geographic labels function together on a map, but the human reality of these two groups is more complicated, too complicated to cover adequately here. The short version is that Maori and English cultures have survived and blended together dominated by English, but there are still grievances, legitimate ones, the Maoris have. Maoris arrived in New Zealand from Polynesia around 1200 AD. The South Island was less settled than the North Island when European settlers arrived in the late 1700s. The Maori names and their icons lend a Polynesian feel to what does not otherwise feel like Polynesia, on the South Island at least. There are no tropical beaches here and you don't see snow and glaciers in Polynesia. I saw on the TV in Wanaka shows entirely in the Maori language. I couldn't understand a bit, but I was struck by its rhythm, each word flowing into the next, spoken as if to the rapid cadence of a drummer.

Toitu he whenua, whatungarongaro he tangata – The land is permanent, man disappears.

The trail followed the river through cattle pastures on private land. An Australian university student on summer break was in the van with me and we walked to the hut together. Australians, I learned, get paid to be students through a small stipend. They even get a stipend in the summer. I didn't know whether to be happy for him or resentful that I didn't get the benefit of such government largess. He had been trekking around

already for a few months and was in good walking shape. His pace kept increasing. I do quite a bit of hiking at home in Colorado; so my ego forced me to keep up, causing more than a little discomfort. Never mind the fact that he was twenty-one years old and had been backpacking for the better part of the last three months. I suppose for this to make any sense to those who don't already know, I should mention a fact whose revelation will probably get me kicked out of the club. The fact is most guys, including me, have ridiculously fragile egos that lead to equally ridiculous tendencies toward competition and rationalization when we come out on the losing end of that competition.

The isolation I felt at the backpackers in Queenstown was replaced with a friendly camaraderie at the Aspiring Hut. We were all here for similar reasons, mainly to enjoy this beautiful landscape away from the bustle of cities and towns. There were people from all over. I heard people speaking Dutch, German, Hebrew, and six accents of English. If somebody hasn't already pulled you into a conversation, striking one up is easy. Nobody ever tires of the standards. *Where are you from? How long have you been traveling? Where have you been?* Like the standard opening moves of chess, these questions lead to an unending variety of outcomes. The conversations take winding paths through any number of subjects, culture, geography, politics, family, and, of course, travel.

One person in particular got my mind going about a new road I could add to my map. Marty had just finished a nine-month tour at the McMurdo Sound research station perched near the edge of Antarctica, one of the last terrestrial frontiers. He was from Colorado just like me. Marty had an odd, but good, fascination with whatever somebody would tell him about their life. He seemed to find interest in the most mundane. I guessed that spending nine months isolated in Antarctica with a relatively small community of people had something to do with it. He had spent his time there as an airplane mechanic, a skill he had learned mostly on the job. Shifts there were ten hours, six days a week. Even though the hours were long, everything else was taken care of for you. You didn't have to worry about food, laundry, or more importantly bills that plague you when you're in more civilized surroundings.

My interest was piqued in taking an orthogonal turn towards something like a stint in a frozen, barren outpost. I had computer skills they could use down there. I had no commitments other than the dogs at home. It would be an adventure, like what it might be to explore Mars! And there would be plenty of time to work on my writing. Marty told me there was an Antarctica job fair (Who ever hear of such a thing?) going on in Denver in early April. *Great, I thought, I'll be back just in time to check it out!* But I never made it there when I got back. Other things became priorities. Nevertheless, I added that road to my map. Maybe I'll take it when I reach another crossroads in my life.

When I went out to the bathrooms to brush my teeth that night, I was stunned. I couldn't help but stand there and marvel at the sight. And it wasn't the quality of the bathrooms, which was considerable by the way. It was the sky. The Milky Way was splattered above me as never before. There was no moon. The lights in the hut were out. Yet, there was a bluish glow cast by the stars. Orion's every star sparkled with a clarity that brought him to life. Back home in Colorado, this is a rare sight. Few places are remote enough not to suffer from light pollution. The loss of our night skies is something our spirits suffer from in much of the modern world, only a handful of stars left to remind us to dream. But here, there is no loss. The South Island is blessed with an amazingly low

population density. As a result the air is clear and the light pollution low. The sight of this celestial panorama gave me a sense of the vastness of our universe, a humbling sense of our place on this tiny planet. It rekindled the sense of wonder and possibility I had as a child when I laid back in the grass on a hot summer night gazing up at the stars.

I stayed at the Aspiring Hut two nights, taking a day hike after the first night to the Cascade Saddle, reputed to be one of the most spectacular tramps around. The Cascade Saddle track is steep, cruelly steep. On Lonely Planet's scale, it's rated as "very demanding". That's as hard as it gets in their book. It was the steepest sustained climb I had ever been on, no switchbacks, just straight up (mostly anyway) 1200 vertical meters from the hut to the high point on the ridge. It must have taken a creative imagination to conceive of this track over the saddle. There appears to be no natural route. Half the climb is in thick bush that had to be hacked away to allow passage. Roots tangle the path. Snow grass covers the relentlessly steep slopes on the top half. The Aussie student passed me easily early on, with a full pack no less. I couldn't possibly keep up. My fragile ego was slightly repaired when I caught up with some people who had left the hut earlier than me. I had chosen this climb because it is reputed to be one of the finest alpine crossings in New Zealand, at least as far as the views go. Unfortunately when I reached the pylon marking the high point, the morning clouds had not burned away. Worse weather was moving in. A cloud surrounded the pylon, bringing with it cold and a spitting snow. Disappointed, I descended back to the hut.

Keas (pronounced kee-uhs) made a commotion early the next morning as they are wont to do. A kea is an alpine parrot indigenous to New Zealand. They are the Arnold Schwarzeneggers of the parrot world, definitely burly. Four of them were on the roof, trying to pry the bolts holding down the corrugated metal panels. Their feathers mirrored the many shades of green in the nearby forest. Keas are best described as cheeky. Some studies show that they have the problem solving ability of higher apes. This and their strong beaks, make them a mischievous lot. One tramper couple who tented near the hut came inside to prepare breakfast only to return to a tent with all of its mesh panels shredded by keas. The hut warden said that was only the second time in ten years he had seen that happen. Lucky them. The pranks of keas are legend. To be as accurate as possible, the stories that follow are based on eyewitness accounts from people I met. There is also a lot of hearsay, which, after hearing the eyewitness accounts, I do not doubt, but I've tried to keep it only to eyewitnesses.

Apparently keas favor the feel of rubber. They have been seen to tear the window stripping from the Aspiring hut. Cars parked at the trailhead are not immune to kea curiosity. People have seen keas tearing off windshield wipers and even the stripping around the windshield. Others have experienced it in absentia, discovering it only when they got back to their car after a day of happily tramping.

Kea mischief isn't limited to destruction. They are also thieves. More than one person who left their boots outside the hut to dry woke to find one missing, never to be found. Boots have also been mutilated. While not really an eyewitness, one person relayed a story of someone finding a kea nest near a ski area full of hats, gloves, and goggles. It is hard to not anthropomorphize their behavior, but they also seem to have a sense of fun and humor. One person observed them sliding down the roof of a ski lodge on their bird butts. When they reached the bottom, they waddled back up to the top and repeated the maneuver. I suppose an alien might observe us slid down slopes of snow and

find the behavior just as curious. Another person observed them break chunks of ice from the apex of a ski lodge's roof, waddle down to the roof edge, and drop the ice on passersby. To top it off, they would cackle as if laughing. Then they would repeat their prank. It seems to me that, if not done as a joke, then the keas must have devised some plan that dropping ice on tourists serves. Either way, it's remarkable behavior.

Back in Wanaka, I ran into Jill, an English dentist whom I had met back in the Aspiring Hut. Some married friends of mine originally met in New Zealand, discovered a spark, and traveled around together. Before I left on my trip, friends had joked that the same thing could happen with me. Suffering the stigma of being single well into my late thirties, I smiled politely. "You never know." But I did harbor a secret fantasy that the same thing would happen to me. However, I was determined not to let it consume me. Expectation of it would just get in the way of enjoying myself. On the other hand, I did not intend to pass up any opportunities. This was my state of mind when I saw an attractive thirty something woman sitting alone in front of the Aspiring Hut's wood stove, reading quietly amongst the din of voices. I had seen her earlier in the hut that day, but she had gone out for a short hike shortly after I arrived. She had kept to herself then too. One of the standard openers couldn't go wrong. "Where are you from?" She looked up, revealing her sparkling green eyes and smiled with her endearing *jolie laide*, typically English overbite, an aesthetic flaw that created her beauty. It took only that one question to open her up. She took to conversation as enthusiastically as everybody else in the hut. Back in Wanaka, we lingered over dinner and later at a café for tea and dessert. Brief encounters like this with fellow travelers are part of the therapy of travel, focusing on the present to enjoy another's company for the brief moment it lasts.

I noticed that Jill used the particularly English expression, *blimey*. For example, on looking out the window and seeing it rain cats and dogs, she might say, "blimey!" It struck me that American English has no equivalent exclamation of surprise. Some expressions are close, but none that convey astonishment in such a polite and earnest way. There's *wow*, but its soft consonants have no punch. It is also a word too often used by a bored listener as an obligatory response to something they are not actually wowed by.

"My precious little angel is six months ahead on her reading ability!"
"Wow."

More often than not, Americans will instead use a more vulgar expression, anything ranging from the invocation of a deity as in, "Jesus!" or the attribution of holiness to fecal matter. Blimey is a singularly perfect general-purpose exclamation of surprise. It can be used in most circumstances, reserving the more vulgar when such colorful punctuation is needed. Unfortunately, the use of particularly English expressions in America is viewed as pretentious. An American using the word *bloody* instead of *fucking* or *goddamn* too many times at a party is unlikely to get invited back. An intense drive to be unique or a vestige of colonial rebellion, who can say? At least I had the transient enjoyment of using *blimey* on this trip among non-Americans. I knew I could use it only in secret back home.

###

My reservation for the Kepler track was for Saturday. On Friday I took the shuttle bus south to Te Anau. It's mostly tourists that take these shuttles; so the drivers frequently provide a narrative over the loudspeaker. As if for added authenticity, all my drivers had thicker accents than Kiwis I met in town. A thick accent coming through distorted loudspeakers like they have in the DC subway added a challenge. No matter. It the accent character to the stories. Today's driver told us about an old tavern we passed. Gold originally drew people to these hills in the gold rush of the 1860s. The owner of this tavern had a trough built into the floor below the bar. Nobody knew why until in his later years he admitted their purpose. The miners would come in after a hard day's work, coated with dirt. He claimed to have made money on the side by collecting this dirt. It turns out that a significant amount of it was gold dust. That's the story anyway.

The only remnants of mining I saw were piles of rocks around rivers and water races used to bring water to the digs. There were no ugly discolored mine tailings like you see in the Rocky Mountains. The majority of mining in this area was alluvial. This is just a fancy way of saying they extracted gold from the surface rocks and gravel deposited by rivers. This also means that the higher alpine areas remained untouched by mining scars, unlike in the Rockies where the lure of silver and gold drew miners and their mule trains ever higher. Despite the slow healing scars those miners in the Rockies left, I have to credit them for their fortitude. With very little by way of mechanization, they pushed roads and tracks deep into the wilderness with brute strength, making a living in the cold, inhospitable climate above 12,000 feet. These were all hardrock mines. There were few hardrock mines in New Zealand, which is a good thing. That type of mining tends to require nasty chemicals that remain in the environment years after the mine has been played out. Though the discarded remains of these old mines have blended into the landscape, their legacy remains. The mining settlements turned into the towns that now support the tourism and agriculture industries.

###

With much anticipation I arrived in Te Anau, ready for the Kepler Track, one of New Zealand's Great Walks. The Great Walks pass through the finest examples of the country's landscape. However my enthusiasm was dampened when I realized it would be harder to find a bed in town than I thought. I would embark on the Kepler the next day, but I needed a bed for that night. The most likely place seemed the backpackers on the main road into town. Young backpackers who need to make some money for a few weeks staff some backpackers' hostels. Not this one. The proprietor was working the desk. I have found that when it comes to innkeepers, there is a proportional relationship between age and rigidity over procedure. I was at an Austrian hut with a friend I had met on the trail, Frank from Germany. Speaking German, Frank took care of the formalities with the warden, a man in his late fifties I would guess. He told me the price and I paid. Then Frank was told a lower price because Frank was an alpine club member. Frank didn't realize I had an alpine club card too. I pulled out my card and in the best German I could muster, I said, "Ich habe auch eine Alpenverein Karte," to inform the warden I also had a membership. The cross look he gave me told me I had violated some protocol. With a frown, he handed me back the difference. That evening as Frank and I were sitting enjoying dessert in the Gastube, the warden came through, all smiles. He stopped at every

table and had some friendly words with the guests. When he came to our table, he frowned and continued to the next table. Ours was the only table he skipped. The only table! So much for Austrian Gemütlichkeit. The proprietor at this backpackers was no exception to the rule either. After suffering her officious attitude about me not having made a reservation during this busy time and for arriving before check in time no less, I obtained a bed. Granted, she had a friendly way about saying it, but the attitude was there behind the tight-lipped smile. I remembered that smile one night when I was rudely awakened. I was trying to enjoy the small luxury of a single room at the backpackers that I had allowed myself when I was shaken out of my sleep at one o'clock in the morning by a blasting stereo in the parking lot outside my window. Unable to convince myself I was dreaming of my days at college, I got out of bed to investigate. I had paid two and a half times what a bed in a dorm cost; not a princely sum, but I was determined to get my money's worth nonetheless. Two drunken revelers were sitting in the front seat of their car, beers in hand, and were, unsurprisingly, not interested in my protest when I told them to knock it off. So I called the backpacker's emergency number and got the proprietor out of bed. To her credit, she took care of the problem and was very nice about it.

The Kepler

I wanted to do the Kepler Track instead of the more famous Milford to avoid the crowds. Besides, you need to book the Milford half a year in advance. Reservations are still necessary on the Kepler, but more like days or weeks in advance depending on your party's size. Fortunately I was a party of one and only could obtain a reservation just days in advance. Traveling alone does have its advantages. I didn't know anything about reservations before I arrived in New Zealand. It's a good thing I stopped in the Department of Conservation (DOC, pronounced doc) in Queenstown first thing when I arrived in the country. There a not-so-helpful clerk stared at me with a mixture of exasperation, boredom, and, if I'm not mistaken, contempt. This was not the attitude I expected from an agency that is a primary interface to tourists. She was an exception though. In all my days there, I never would meet a Kiwi with such an attitude, not even the woman at the backpackers in Te Anau. She blandly gave me two possible starting dates for the Kepler, the next Wednesday or the next Saturday. I was quickly running through options in my head and also looking for some local knowledge and a little creativity on her part.

Prompting her, I asked, "Maybe if I took the Saturday option I could squeeze in the Rees-Dart Track before then. Would that be possible?"

She replied with a curt, "Yes," making it clear that no more information would be forthcoming.

I was alone in choosing my fate. With only a cursory glance at my copy of *Tramping in New Zealand* for advice, I opted for Saturday. That day was Sunday. My destiny was set, at least for the next week and a half. It turned out that I did not actually have time to do the Rees-Dart Track in the meantime. That would have to wait. So I went up to Wanaka to tramp into the Aspiring Hut. That trip behind me, here I was in Te Anau, ready to embark on one of New Zealand's Great Walks.

The Kepler, like it's more renowned brother, the Milford, lasts four days, is located in Fiordlands National Park, has a spectacular alpine crossing, usually is on the wet side of wet, and guarantees sandflies. Unlike the Milford, the Kepler has fewer trampers, no private guided parties staying in private huts, and no gawking tourists heedlessly flying over in helicopters and planes. Well, that's not entirely true. Kepler trampers just the week before woke up and found themselves snowbound. DOC closed the track for safety reasons and brought in helicopters to ferry those that did not want to turn around across the alpine crossing (for a fee). One thing the Milford has that the Kepler does not, I have heard, is a collection of dramatic waterfalls.

A minibus dropped me off at the start on Lake Te Anau. These buses are a key part of the New Zealand tramping experience. They represent a key difference from the US where every activity, even backcountry hiking, requires a car. In New Zealand inexpensive shuttle buses link the towns to the tracks. There's a sort of liberation not having a car, no keys, no responsibility, no worries about how to do a track that does not return to where you left your car. This last point is particularly important. It means freedom from loop and out-and-back tramps. The world of traverses and crossings opens

up to you (Never mind the fact that the Kepler happens to be a loop). The cost of this freedom is only a minimal hassle coordinating with shuttle schedules. Although it should be pointed out that the shuttle schedules were designed with trampers in mind. To get to a track, all you have to do is book a shuttle at your backpacker's reception. In fact, you can book just about anything through a backpackers.

These backpackers, by the way, are great. Without them, extended stays in New Zealand for all but the wealthy would be impossible. It seems that everybody staying at a backpackers is either between jobs, trying to figure out what to do next in their lives, is a student on break, or an Israeli who just got done with their mandatory three year stint in the military. Accommodation in the US is relatively expensive and hostels are few. The US could learn from these backpackers. I would love to see these at home.

The accommodation is basic. If you don't mind having anywhere from three to seven dorm mates, little privacy, snoring, and, if you are tall like me, short beds, it's not bad considering the low price of NZ\$20. That's only about as much as a basic meal at a restaurant. Single and double rooms are sometimes available too. The kitchen of a backpackers is a frenzy of activity at dinner, full of the clatter of pots and pans, steam from boiling water, and when there are Asian travelers, the pungent swampy odor of vegetables unfamiliar to my nose. Due to their tendency to walk off, the selection of pots, dishes, and flatware is as mismatched as the socks in the top drawer of my dresser. The meals people prepare for themselves are usually modest, rarely fancier than spaghetti and more often baked beans or ramen noodles. Alcohol rounds out the diet of Queenstown hostellers. Through a combination of being spoiled and lack of a twenty-year old's constitution, I could not thrive on such a student's diet. Not being on a student's budget either, I usually ate out for lunch and dinner. The kitchens and lounges after dinner are abuzz the same as in the huts. An informal line frequently forms at the internet terminals. The terminals blare an alarming claxon as each user's time runs out. Filaments of your web of friends and family extend across the ocean, keeping you in touch with a welcome piece of home. The shared toilets and showers were generally clean. It never occurred to me until my trip was over, but never once did I have to wait for either.

The styles and sizes of backpackers vary. Some are basic in style with little decoration. But some are decorated throughout with some sort of theme like an African theme or an animal theme. It varies with supply and demand; the more supply, the more likely it is you can find a hostel that seeks to distinguish itself from the others with style. Some backpackers are small and some are overwhelming like the three-hundred bed YHA hostel in Auckland. To extract extra space out of their property, some proprietors bring in beat up camping trailers and park them on the property. They charge extra for guests to stay in them as they are considered a double room. The better backpackers are those where the owners actively manage the place rather than having young travelers in need of a short-term job run them. These ones have a homier feel and the owners make it a point to know you by name.

Most people at the backpackers, even the younger ones, are courteous enough to make it all work. The creak of opening and closing the door, the zipping and unzipping of zippers, the rustling of stuff sacks, and the crinkling of plastic bags can all sometimes be a problem late at night or early in the morning when people do not adequately prepare ahead of time for going to bed or leaving. But it is not a big problem. This is an important

point. The system only works if people are respectful of one another. Come to think of it, maybe it couldn't work in the US after all.

###

My next three nights, though, would be at the well-appointed Kepler huts. Now that I was actually on the track, I thought as if that minibus that transported me to the trailhead was a time machine, transporting me millions of years into the past. The track passed through a forest that appeared positively Jurassic, dominated by ferns covering the ground and tree ferns rising above them. I wondered if one of those crafty velociraptors was creeping up on me, taking advantage of the soft moss floor to silence its footsteps. I was afraid that, if I stood in one spot for too long, I'd provide it with a snack. And if that weren't my fate, the moss and lichen that covered the rocks and trees might find a home on me, transforming me into one of Tolkien's tree people, an Ent. I didn't know how to speak Entish so thought it best to move along.

The track was extremely well groomed. Even though the route that first day to the Luxmore hut was fourteen kilometers, I soon cleared the bushline and had the hut in sight. Bushline in New Zealand is remarkably abrupt. One moment you are walking under a primeval forest canopy, your steps accompanied by songbirds. The next moment, you are in bright light surrounded by tussock grass, no velociraptors to worry about.

On trips like this where there are the same people traveling the same track in the same direction for four days, it is at the first hut where a social structure forms. Social clusters is probably a more apt term. Clusters frequently, and not surprisingly, are formed along national or language lines. On this trip it was the Kiwis, Hungarians, Israelis, Japanese, and for lack of better terms, Germans 1, and Germans 2. Then there was the group I was in, the Free Agents. Free Agents because none of us had come here with anybody. Having so many people not only provides opportunities to meet people from all over the world, it's also great for people watching. While traveling alone can sometimes feel lonely, here there were many wandering souls such as myself. By necessity, the situation encourages me to be more gregarious than my introverted disposition dictates. This is a good thing. People who travel as couples or in groups tend to (but not always) stick more to themselves.

The Kiwis were a group of three older couples. Kiwis as well as native English speakers in general were a minority on this trip. The Kiwis lamented this fact. Even though they said they were happy that so many people had come to appreciate their beautiful country, I could tell from the wistfulness in their voices that they longed for the less crowded days of their younger years. Tourism in the last few years has boomed for New Zealand. No longer are the days of quiet huts (on the Great Walks anyway) and easily had reservations. This fact is not lost on me either. I prefer to travel with a loose plan, obtaining reservations is antithetical to my style of travel. Reservations are too restricting. If I were to meet somebody at a hut who could give me some local beta, I prefer to be flexible enough to take advantage of that information. If I had reservations for the next place, it would be difficult to change them. Unfortunately with the popularity of this area, reservations are a must. Worse yet, reservations for buses and beds are typically paid in advance. Once you make a reservation, your plans are locked in. It's not all that bad, though, since a week in advance is usually sufficient (Great Walks excepted).

It could be worse. And besides, when you roll into town, there is the comfort of knowing you have a bed and where it is.

The Hungarians were just a couple of guys. Some Irish girls arrived late at the Luxmore Hut and seemed keen on these guys despite the Hungarians' protestations that they had girlfriends at home. Other than the fact that the Hungarians were Hungarians, which is remarkable in and of itself (How many Hungarians have you ever run into?), perhaps the only remarkable thing about them was the fact that I loaned one of them my headlamp so he could go have a look in a nearby cave. The problem is, he didn't promptly return it (This digression is not intended as an indictment against Hungarians in general). This wouldn't normally be such a big deal except for two things. Firstly, without a headlamp after dark in the huts, you bumble around when you go into the bathrooms and dorms. Most people go to bed earlier than me so I'm likely to wake them up if I can't see when I go to bed. What might somebody think having a smelly American feel them up as they lie in their beds? Secondly, my headlamp is a special headlamp, one of those LED kind that don't burn out and the batteries last forever. It's very tiny, and I've lost it more than once as a result, only to find it again when I wasn't actually looking. It's the coolest little thing. In fact, the hut warden was coveting it when the Hungarian finally returned it. Imported outdoor gear can be expensive in New Zealand.

A headlamp is possibly more useful than the towel Douglas Adams recommends as an essential for travelers in his *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. As Adams puts it:

A towel is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have. Partly it has great practical value - you can wrap it around you for warmth as you bound across the cold moons of Jaglan Beta; you can lie on it on the brilliant marble-sanded beaches of Santraginus V, inhaling the heady sea vapours; you can sleep under it beneath the stars which shine soredly on the desert world of Kakrafoon; use it to sail a mini raft down the slow heavy river Moth; wet it for use in hand-to-hand-combat; wrap it round your head to ward off noxious fumes or to avoid the gaze of the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal (a mindboggingly stupid animal, it assumes that if you can't see it, it can't see you - daft as a brush, but very ravenous); you can wave your towel in emergencies as a distress signal, and of course dry yourself off with it if it still seems to be clean enough.

More importantly, a towel has immense psychological value. For some reason, if a strag (strag: non-hitch hiker) discovers that a hitchhiker has his towel with him, he will automatically assume that he is also in possession of a toothbrush, face flannel, soap, tin of biscuits, flask, compass, map, ball of string, gnat spray, wet weather gear, space suit etc., etc. Furthermore, the strag will then happily lend the hitchhiker any of these or a dozen other items that the hitchhiker might accidentally have "lost". What the strag will think is that any man who can hitch the length and breadth of the galaxy, rough it, slum it, struggle against terrible odds, win through, and still knows where his towel is is clearly a man to be reckoned with.

My little headlamp has gotten me out of more than one tough spot. Aside from keeping my lights from being punched out by a burly Swede in a dark bunkroom, it has proven extremely valuable. More than once a headlamp has saved an epic (and by epic, I don't mean good) day from turning into an epic night, lighting the way back to camp or the trailhead after unexpectedly long climbs. With most items you have to pack, there is a tradeoff of weight, bulk, or price with whatever value the item provides. My tiny three-ounce headlamp is one of those few things that cheats the usual tradeoff balance demanded by the universe. The value of this headlamp so greatly outweighs the minimal cost of weight and, over time, the cost of purchase that it is as if Prometheus himself stole from the gods and bestowed on mankind the miracle of the virtually weightless LED headlamp that burns on three tiny batteries for an eternity. Each time I use it, I enjoy a secret pleasure of cheating the gods, even if it's just for a trip to the bathroom in the middle of the night when it keeps me from tripping over a pack and yelling "blimey."

I like to keep it simple when I travel. This means bringing as few items as possible, each one providing the biggest bang for the buck. My headlamp is always in the kit, and, as Douglas Adams advises, so is a towel. Maybe it's not so bad the Hungarian made me miss my headlamp. It reminded me how much I appreciate it.

Besides the Hungarians, there were the Israelis. The Israelis actually consisted of four young couples, all recently out of the army, who happened to meet each other for the first time at the Luxmore Hut. Despite being strangers, they were like old friends too long parted. They could not stop talking. If not for the Hebrew, I could have easily mistaken them for Italians with their vociferous and animated conversation and the effort they put into preparing their meals. Most of the Israelis I encountered would arrive at the hut laden with fresh fruit and vegetables, liters of olive oil, garlic – lots of garlic -, and even fixings for a sort of pancake desert; all far beyond the normal freeze-dried backpackers fare. It is embarrassing to admit, but earlier at the Aspiring Hut, I took some Israelis for Italians. I suppose I didn't pay enough attention to their conversation or I would have recognized that they were not speaking Italian, but I couldn't help but be misled with their dark skin, the hand gestures, constant chatter, and not to mention their elaborate meal with a copious use of olive oil. They had a giant 1.5 liter bottle of this Italian butter; so you can understand my confusion. I asked if they could spare a little bit for me, which they were happy to do. Thinking that it would be nice to thank them in Italian, I said, "Grazie!" They looked at me, dumbfounded, and mumbled, "You're welcome." This time I knew better. And did I mention they could not stop talking? This earned them the ire of most everybody else in the hut and was reinforced every night of the trip. It didn't bother me though since they were good-natured and I always went to bed at least as late as they did.

Then there were the Japanese. This group was really just a couple who were shy about their English, so tended to stick to themselves. Two things about this couple are notable. The first is that they were on this track at all. The vast majority of Japanese in New Zealand seem to tour exclusively in buses. The second is the degree to which the woman shielded herself from the sun. On the particularly hot alpine crossing of the next day, she had every square centimeter of her skin covered. Even her face was shielded with a hat and a towel wrapped around her neck (She must have read Douglas Adams too.).

Germans 1 consisted of two young couples. The two girls were clearly not happy about walking sixteen kilometers a day, with a pack no less. One of the guys confided

that the girls were complaining the whole time. They did strike me as being a little citified. I saw little of the girls. They spent most of the time at the huts in their bunks, complaining I imagine, unable to enjoy their time in this beautiful place with all these international travelers to converse with.

Germans 2 consisted of three guys and a girl. They mostly kept to themselves. The remarkable thing about them was that one of the guys was a professional classical guitarist. Being a mediocre amateur myself, this fact was both a bit embarrassing as well as delightful. On the last night of the Kepler at the Moturau Hut, we obtained permission from the warden to have a fire on the beach. An American girl had lugged her backpacker-sized guitar around the whole track. She was just a beginner herself. She brought it down to the beach and I had a go at it. Then the German guy asked for a turn. Here I was, playing the few songs I could remember, having some difficulty with the small fret board, and this guy picks up this tiny guitar and proceeded to do what I could not, make music. He played classical, Calpton, Pink Floyd, and Zeppelin. Feeling mighty inferior, I was nevertheless able to appreciate his artistry. It was a wonderful accompaniment to the friendly conversation we had there on the shores of Lake Manapouri.

Finally, there was the group I was in, the Free Agents. As it happened to be, all of us were essentially unemployed. There was Nadja from Holland, spending a remarkable three months here while her husband stayed at home, working. She is one of those people whom you immediately feel comfortable with, unstressed, clearly enjoying the moment. There was Steve from Wales, a taxman taking a sabbatical, wondering if collecting hard-earned money from people is what he wants to keep doing when he got back home. If I didn't know better, I would have guessed he was Anthony Hopkin's son the resemblance was so close. There was Chris, an abrasive Englishman who happened to be tenting, so was thankfully not around much. I ran into Chris a week later in Queenstown, and it turned out he was not abrasive at all. He just had the misfortune of saying something inappropriate in those awkward moments of introduction at the Luxmore Hut. Then there was Simon from Australia who happens to have been born in Hungary and lived there until the age of ten. Simon coughed more than a few times at dinner without covering his mouth and passed whatever he had along to me. He was a good storyteller though, able to make the mundane process of getting a bus ticket sound like the comic adventures of Mr. Bean. Simon emailed me after my trip and told me how he had gotten friendly with a couple of Israelis on the Routeburn Track which he did after the Kepler. They brought him into their close-knit group for the rest of the trip, even having him participate in some Jewish rituals. But they, like the Israelis on this trip, did everything together. It was all Simon could do to escape their cloying comraderie.

It turns out Simon spent some time working in the US, some of it near where I live. He pointed out some uniquely American habits. One in particular was that Americans say, "mmm hmm," with "mmm" being a lower pitch than "hmm" as a way of saying "you're welcome." I had never thought about it, but he's right. Thinking about it a little more, I decided that it is a bad habit. I realized that frequently when it is used, we don't even look at the person who said, "thank you." It's like we are saying, "Well you did put me out, but now I've moved on with my own business and don't have time for you anymore, but I am acknowledging that you said thanks." I vowed to myself not to use this shorthand anymore and always say, "you're welcome." Surely enough though, old

habits die hard. A few days later I was at the DOC office trying to make some plans, and an American girl was asking about information on the Cascade Saddle track. Since I had been on part of it, I let her know what I knew, and let her borrow my copy of *Tramping in New Zealand* so she could see what it had to say. When she returned it with thanks, I was looking down at some maps, and without looking up, said, "mm hmm," barely acknowledging her presence. *Damn! Maybe I'll get better with practice.*

###

While meeting people was an important part of the experience, I was very much here for the great outdoors. I awoke the next morning in a fog, the atmospheric kind. It soon burned off, leaving clouds below us over lake Te Anau, the steep slopes of the surrounding peaks rising above this white sea. I always thought that if I could put myself into a trance and levitate, I would float up to a place like this, sitting in a lotus position on a cushion of white, cottony clouds. It was like this all day, clear skies for the alpine crossing to the Iris Burn Hut with views of forested slopes rising out of the cloud floor. I was told this was exceptional weather, this effect not often seen.

The track to the Iris Burn Hut followed a ridge above bushline for most of the day. Alpine crossings are special. This one was no exception. I felt like I was at the top of the world, an airy feeling with views in every direction. The persistent layer of clouds isolated the track from the green valleys, leaving us suspended in a world of floating peaks. The highlight of the day was a ridge crossing where, just feet on either side of the track, the slopes plunged steeply out of sight into the mist, the tawny clumps of tussock grass clinging their sides. It turned out to be an exhausting crossing full of more climbs than I expected for following a ridgeline. At the point the track started to descend abruptly towards bushline, DOC had thoughtfully installed a series of wooden steps. My feet and my knees were grateful. So was the overweight Australian whose triathlete brother convinced him that doing fifty kilometers in a day, skipping the first two huts, would be fun.

The track descended back into a primeval forest like on the first day, except that this side of the mountains was wilder than the Lake Te Anau side, the bird life more prolific. Dr Seussian beech trees held out their bushy trays of tiny leaves that sat at the ends of bent arms, extending far from their trunks. As the trail penetrated deeper into the valley, their squat trunks became elongated, their crowns towering over the mossy, fern covered floor. Birdsong surrounded me for the rest of the way to the Iris Burn Hut where, unfortunately, I was confined to its dark interior.

Outside of the hut, the sandflies would have drained me of my blood in no time. I had been warned about these. Their bites leave the persistent and itchy welts. Of the sixteen known species in New Zealand, only two bite humans. Small comfort. Captain Cook, the first European to explore New Zealand sailed the Endeavor into Dusky Sound in what is now part of Fiordlands. He wrote of the sandflies. "The most mischievous animal here is the small black sandfly which are exceeding numerous and are so troublesome that they exceed everything of the kind I ever met with, wherever they light they cause a swelling and such an intolerable itching that it is not possible to refrain from scratching and at last ends in ulcers like the small Pox. The almost continual rain may be reckoned a nother inconvenience attending this Bay." One of Cook's suffering crewman,

Johann Forster, wrote in his log, "My hands are now so much swelled from the stings of the sandfly, that I can hardly hold the pen, & have great pain in them, & can pull my Jacket with difficulty off."

Perched at the edge of the forest with a wet meadow in front, the Iris Burn Hut's beautiful location is what attracts the sandflies. It's the Chinese dualistic concept of Yin and Yang in action.

That night the calls of kiwis could be heard. These birds are nocturnal so it is unlikely that a visitor to New Zealand will see one in the wild. This included me. I suppose it must have been ubiquitous enough at some time to be identified with all things New Zealand. But now it is threatened, due in no small part to introduced predators like the possum and stoat that eat kiwi eggs and chicks. Possums were brought to the islands for the fur trade. These are not like American opossums which look like giant rats. Rather they look more like a cross between a small troll and a cute teddy bear. However, like American opossums, flattened possum carcasses litter New Zealand roads. Stoats are weasel-like creatures introduced to control the also exotic rabbit, against the protests of naturalists who believed, rightly so, that they would decimate native bird populations. That situation reminds me of a more modern issue regarding the introduction of genetically modified crops. Agribusiness is arrogant enough that they believe they can safely introduced genetically modified crops without having a negative or uncontrolled effect. They would do well to look at the history of humankind's attempts at the introduction of foreign species.

Kiwis don't just have stoats and possums to worry about. Male kiwis must be persuasive lovers to convince their mates to lay an egg. A kiwi egg is a prodigious 20 percent of the female's body weight. This must be a record of some sort.

"Come on Martha. Lets give it another go. Just one more."

"I just can't do it Nigel. Not another one. Oh the bloating. And do you see these stretch marks? Besides those bloody stoats'll just nick our fuzzy little Arthur from the nest just like last time. I'm not gonna do it, I tell ya! I'm just not gonna do it."

The Maori have a legend about how the kiwi lost its wings. Not only is it entertaining, it is also instructive about the habits of two other native birds:

One day, Tanemahuta was walking through the forest. He looked up at his children reaching for the sky and he noticed that they were starting to sicken, as bugs were eating them.

He talked to his brother, Tanehokahoka, who called all of his children, the birds of the air together.

Tanemahuta spoke to them.

"Something is eating my children, the trees. I need one of you to come down from the forest roof and live on the floor, so that my children can be saved, and your home can be saved. Who will come?"

All was quiet, and not a bird spoke.

Tanehokahoka turned to Tui.

"E Tui, will you come down from the forest roof?"

Tui looked up at the trees and saw the sun filtering through the leaves. Tui looked down at the forest floor and saw the cold, dark earth and shuddered.

"Kao, Tanehokahoka, for it is too dark and I am afraid of the dark."

All was quiet, and not a bird spoke.

Tanehokahoka turned to Pukeko.

"Pukeko, will you come down from the forest roof?"

Pukeko looked up at the trees and saw the sun filtering through the leaves. Pukeko looked down at the forest floor and saw the cold, damp earth and shuddered.

"Kao, Tanehokahoka, for it is too damp and I do not want to get my feet wet."

All was quiet, and not a bird spoke.

Tanehokahoka turned to Pipiwharauoa.

"Pipiwharauoa, will you come down from the forest roof?"

Pipiwharauoa looked up at the trees and saw the sun filtering through the leaves. Pipiwharauoa looked around and saw his family.

"Kao, Tanehokahoka, for I am busy at the moment building my nest."

All was quiet, and not a bird spoke. And great was the sadness in the heart of Tanehokahoka, for he knew, that if one of his children did not come down from the forest roof, not only would his brother lose his children, but the birds would have no home.

Tanehokahoka turned to Kiwi.

"E kiwi, will you come down from the forest roof?"

Kiwi looked up at the trees and saw the sun filtering through the leaves. Kiwi looked around and saw his family. Kiwi looked at the cold damp earth. Looking around once more, he turned to Tanehokahoka and said,

"I will."

Great was the joy in the hearts of Tanehokahoka and Tanemahuta, for this little bird was giving them hope. But Tanemahuta felt that he should warn kiwi of what would happen.

"E kiwi, do you realise that if you do this, you will have to grow thick, strong legs so that you can rip apart the logs on the ground and you will loose your beautiful coloured feathers and wings so that you will never be able to return to the forest roof. You will never see the light on day again."

All was quiet, and not a bird spoke.

"E kiwi, will you come down from the forest roof?"

Kiwi took one last look at the sun filtering through the trees and said a silent goodbye. Kiwi took one last look at the other birds, their wings and their coloured feathers and said a silent goodbye. Looking around once more, he turned to Tanehokahoka and said,

"I will."

Then Tanehokahoka turned to the other birds and said,

"E Tui, because you were too scared to come down from the forest roof, from now on you will wear the two white feathers at your throat as the mark of a coward. Pukeko, because you did not want to get your feet wet, you will live forever in the swamp.

Pipiharauoa, because you were too busy building your nest, from now on you will never build another nest again, but lay your eggs in other birds nests.

But you kiwi, because of your great sacrifice, you will become the most well known and most loved bird of them all."

The next morning Steve and I set off for the final hut, the Moturau. The forest on this stretch was as lush as it gets. At one point the forest floor opened, the sparser trees here still providing a full canopy, casting an emerald light. A sea of ferns spread in front of me, highlighted by an occasional ray that managed to filter through the canopy high above. Other parts of the forest reminded me of the complexity of a coral reef. Every surface from the rocks to the trees was covered with growth upon growth. While it never rained on my tramp, this is, after all, a rainforest. The wet climate encourages this prodigious growth.

Towards the end of this day's walk, we came upon a man kneeling at the side of the track. He had a wild-eyed look and a silently menacing axe at his side, putting me on edge. He looked like a creature born of the forest with his long bird-like legs, short barrel chest, and dark round possum eyes. Only the DOC emblem on his shirt belied his association with civilization. He stammered as if surprised to see us, identifying himself as the hut warden at Moturau. "Only thirty minutes to the hut," he said. It took us closer

to an hour to reach this hut on the shores of Lake Manapouri. He did not reveal what secret paths though the forest he must use.

Each of the huts on a Great Walk has a warden. The three on the Kepler had distinct personalities. At Luxmore there was the environmentalist. At Iris burn there was the schoolmistress, with her strict rules defining what was required of us. At Moturau, the forest man cum crotchety warden was concerned not about what was required of us but what was not required of him. There was a common theme among these wardens, however. They were all hermits. You might think living in a hut and working alone all day one would be starving of human company. Not these characters. After each of them gave their obligatory lectures on safety procedures and rules, they disappeared, no chitchat, little opportunity for extended questions or discussion.

The Luxmore warden looks like a shaggy version of one of those television naturalists who wrestle with crocodiles and grab poisonous snakes around the neck. With his unkempt hair near to obscuring his eyes and bushy beard he looked the part. He even has a Hollywood sounding name, Peter Jackson, not to be confused with the movie director of the same name. He sprinkled his lecture on hut procedures and local flora and fauna with a heavy mix of environmentalism and political cynicism. In explaining the weather that affects Fiordlands, “The hot air rising from the politicians and sports writers on the continent to our northwest combines with the colder Antarctic air to from the south...” He struck me as a man who could live happily up here forever without contact with the wider world. But I think he knows better than to completely isolate himself. Otherwise there would be one fewer of the already small group of environmental advocates. His hut might become a ski lodge with a paved road right up to it if not for people like him.

At the Iris Burn Hut, the warden made her appearance in proper DOC-issued shorts, green mid-calf rubber boots, and rubber gloves she spent all her time in, apparently cleaning. Her face was much too stern for her age, somebody who otherwise looks to be in her thirties. I didn't get her last name but it was probably something like Crabtree. She lectured us, clearly outlining our responsibilities at the hut and when she would enforce quiet hours. And here I was thinking I was on a pleasure trip in New Zealand's wilderness until this moment when I felt like I was in a military academy full of rules. The fact that Ms. Crabtree didn't stick around for any chitchat after her enumeration of the rules didn't bother anybody. At one point that night, she did indeed come by to enforce quiet hours when some of the hut visitors were reveling beyond the respectable hour of 11:00 PM. After the last party left the next morning, she radioed ahead to the Moturau warden to inform him that some people had not cleaned up after themselves. It was the dirtiest she had ever seen it since her arrival five days before. Five whole days. Imagine that.

The warden of the Moturau Hut, a.k.a. the Forest Man of Moturau, had a sort of jovial bitterness quite unlike the serious Ms. Crabtree's. He seemed conscious of it and could, in his own way, revel in it. In a screechy bird-like voice, he gave us his rules. “I'm the only hut warden that supplies these books on flora and fauna. You are all adults and can teach yourselves. I taught outdoor education for twenty-five years and I'm not gonna do it anymore.” His line in the sand was drawn. There would be no question time with him. He continued. “Make sure you take everything with you. I used to send left items ahead with other trampers, but I stopped that six years ago. I don't do it anymore. If you

leave it here, you will never see it again. And I expect you out of the bunkrooms by 8:30.” Sure enough, the next morning at 8:30 on the dot, he fired up his chainsaw, purportedly to make sure it was in good working order for a day of trail work. He wasn’t really as bad as he put on. The twinkle in his eyes betrayed a sense of humor behind his bitter words. Besides, he gave us permission to light a bonfire out of driftwood on the beach in front of the hut.

Kayaking

Back in Te Anau after the Kepler, I had to hang out for two days before my scheduled sea kayak trip in Doubtful Sound began. There was not a whole lot to do in or near Te Anau except for the Kepler which I had just done. If you are willing to spend extra money, however, day excursions to Milford Sound are available. Being recently unemployed, I elected to pass my time in town and around the backpackers where they had a guitar I could pass some time with. Although it did not take long to exhaust my repertoire, there were always enough new people passing through that I never got, “Please not Blackbird again!”

I felt like I needed some sort of reward for having completed the Kepler. The night I got off the track, I paid NZ\$2 to be admitted to the hot tub at the backpackers. Even two dollars was too much for most of the guests to spend on such a luxury; so when the desk clerk unlocked the door to the hot tub shack, it was empty of people. I had just managed to stop my eyes from watering from the chlorine fumes and was trying to soothe my calves which were suffering the results of kilometers pounding the track when someone else entered the chlorine gas chamber. He strutted in, trying to hold in his gut. His hair was perm’ed and greased, it’s shoulder length not quite making up for the thinness up top. A Maori bone carving hung around his neck, giving me the willies with the thought that two centuries ago, it would have been made of human bone. It wasn’t the bone carving, but I took an instant dislike to him, even before he said anything; an animal reaction like when a normally friendly dog suddenly raises its hackles at the sight of another dog that is posturing too much.

In as low and artificially smooth voice as he could muster, “Hey man. How’s it goin’?” (I’ve only ever heard Americans greet people with “Hey man.” It sounded so out of place here.). I could detect an accent from the American south, but it wasn’t thick, made more genteel at university probably. Indeed, he was from Mississippi, between gigs as a port pilot in the merchant marine. I surmised that he was in his late twenties since he told me how he was looking forward to his ten-year high school reunion when he got back home. *Looking forward to resurrecting his glory days more like.* Without any prompting from me he told me about his conquests. “The busses here are great aren’t they? Man, you meet all these hotties. I just hooked up with one last week in Dunedin.” He was referring to the “Kiwi Experience” buses that cater to the party crowd, mostly students in or just out of university. Steve from the Kepler Track told me he sold his Kiwi Experience ticket after a week. He couldn’t take the college dorm atmosphere. Mississippi dude went on about his other conquests. All I could think was what a load of crap. I suspected he had come to the hot tub to let the chlorine bleach his hair in a vain attempt to cultivate what he believed to be his cool dude look, hoping to make those fantasies come true. I was relieved when the clerk came in to tell us our time was up.

Even though I had to wait around in Te Anau for two days with little to do, it’s hard to say I was stuck there since the setting is really quite pleasant. Spread out in front of the town is Lake Te Anau and its convoluted arms and surrounding forested peaks. But the fact was that I would be idle for two days. To help pass the time, I stretched out my

daily rituals as long as I could, but there was only so long I could keep a communal shower in use before somebody beat the door down or, more likely, I ran out of hot water. So I walked the two blocks to the main and only strip. Curiously, the main strip is not oriented towards the water. It runs perpendicular to it, unable to take advantage of the lake view.

As I took my time ambling about, I couldn't help but notice the steady stream of tour buses with slogans painted on them like "Putting the New into New Zealand." They stopped here and disgorged their passengers. The Japanese groups stuck together in tight schools as if herded by the sheepdogs New Zealand is famous for. All of the groups, Japanese or otherwise, were filled with retirees or soon-to-be retirees. When a tour bus arrives, it feels as if aliens have landed. They and I live in completely different worlds that happen to share some of the same space. I really don't see what the attraction of a tour bus is for all but the most physically incapable. You get led around on a preplanned route with a rigid schedule. You stop in a town like Te Anau, which other than its setting, doesn't have anything to offer. You stroll around the few tourist shops filled with postcards, kiwi birds made of possum fur, toy sheep, and the usual assortment of tourist bric-a-brac crap you find all over the world. You take an occasional side trip where you are herded around some more. Then you get back on the bus and do the same thing again. You don't meet lots of different people, you don't stay long enough to get the feel of the place, you don't have freedom to linger or modify your plans, and worst of all, you don't experience the remote tracks surrounded by the natural world.

For my retirement, I don't aspire to doing tours like this. I picture myself doing something more like being a volunteer hut warden like the warden I met at the Aspiring Hut or traveling around on a bicycle like a retired Scottish/Australian gentleman I met who circumnavigated the whole of the South Island in three weeks. During that moment of reflection, I told myself I would strive to maintain my physical condition into old age and hope not to be prematurely forced on a tour bus where I watch the world flow past my window without actually participating in it.

Te Anau is a young place as is the rest of this country, especially the south. Most development has only come in the last century. In Te Anau, there is a street called Little Park Lane where, oddly enough, there is a little park. There's also Garage Lane where the town garage is located. In only a young town could such names describe what is actually there. Growth and redevelopment have not yet erased the original landmarks.

Te Anau is not without attractions. Near the DOC office is a wildlife center that has many native birds, including the takahe, a colorful flightless bird that looks something like a chicken with an endocrine problem. It was thought to be extinct until it was rediscovered in 1948 in the Murchison Mountains opposite the lake from Te Anau. Scientist estimate that only around two-hundred birds survive in the wild; so it was a sad thrill to see one, even if in captivity. Because of exotic predators, islands in the lakes and off the coast that are pest free are used as nurseries to help bring various endangered birds back from the brink of extinction. It's a noble cause, but I'm afraid the pests are here to stay. At best, those islands will serve as zoos when these species won't otherwise be able to survive in their natural ranges.

The takahe has so far barely survived extinction. Animals imported by the Europeans threaten their survival. But the Europeans were not the first to cause such trouble. When I first arrived in New Zealand at the Auckland airport, I was surprised to

see life-size sculptures of the Moa, a giant flightless bird that looks something like a giant ostrich. The largest was the giant moa, reaching four meters tall. I'm embarrassed to say that I had not done my homework. I hadn't ever heard of these before and got excited about seeing one of these birds. But I learned that, while moas serve as a popular icon, they have been extinct for about 600 hundred years. The Maoris hunted them to extinction within 300 years of settlement.

I continued on from the bird center and retraced some of my route on the Kepler Track. But this time, it was different. I saw what I had not seen the first time. Armed with more knowledge of the birds, the birds on the track were revealed. I knew what to look for this time. I wonder how much else I missed not knowing much about the flora and fauna. On my way back, I encountered a woman who wore a sheepish look. I noticed a small teddy bear perched on a post. She was photographing her little buddy she who comes along on all her travels. I told her not to worry, that I have a friend who does the same thing with cheese, those little Mini Baybybels. With my confession about my friend, I sensed a fear from her that I was some kind of creep, having such an odd friend, or maybe she thought it was really me taking photos of cheese and not my friend.. All I could do was mumble something about the cheese's slogan, something about being the cheese you can take anywhere.

Also near Te Anau are glowworm caves. Glowworm caves can be found elsewhere in New Zealand. Here, as in many other spots, they are a touristy operation. Nevertheless, I was here and did not plan on being near any other caves. So this time I was content to be herded around like everybody else. The caves here are relatively young with few formations, but people come here to see the glowworms, not stalagmites. Once my group was in the darkest part of the cave, a sky of stars appeared with unfamiliar constellations. It was a strange sensation being underground and seeing stars. The glowworms attract insects to their star-like glowing lights, capturing prey with sticky strands they hang from the ceiling. When a glowworm grows large enough, it metamorphoses into an adult sex machine. The fly that emerges has a head but no mouth. Its sole purpose in life is to reproduce. Some would argue that is any creature's, including us, sole purpose in life. If that's true, at least we have more style about it and enjoy the journey more than a glowworm fly which can't even enjoy a good meal.

The boat trip to and from the caves was, itself, worth the trip. The boat glided over the glassy surface of this 344 square kilometer lake, the largest in the South Island. In the last light of day, the water took on an inky sheen, obscuring everything below the surface. Even in the most penetrating light, the lakes 417m depths are hidden from human eyes. As the boat returned to Te Anau, the sun set behind the mountains, leaving mysterious indistinct silhouettes in the hazy distance.

One afternoon while I was sitting on the front steps at the backpackers, I met an old friend I didn't know I knew. Hanna was reading in one of the tattered chairs in the lounge the night before I left for the Kepler. I was quietly playing the guitar and felt her beaming at me. I looked up and she clasped her hands together under her chin. She closed her eyes, and gave herself a snuggle. In her German accent, she exhaled a heartfelt, "Oh, thank you." Could this have been my first groupie? I can assure you that my skill at the guitar did not deserve such admiration. Nor was I ever successful at charming women with it. That was all I saw of Hanna until Steve and I ran into her on the Kepler going around in the opposite direction. She had met Steve briefly before, also at the

backpackers. When she saw us, she squealed with delight. With the exuberance of a puppy, she bounced up and down at having seen familiar faces. She knew Steve by name but recognized me as the “Gitarre Spieler”. Now on the steps of the backpackers, we met again. We talked for at most five minutes before her bus came by. She gave me a hug as if we’d been friends forever and skipped off to the bus.

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That was how I spent the days before my kayak trip. One of the things I absolutely wanted to do in Fiordlands was to kayak the fiords. While not unique to New Zealand, these fiords are fairly unique inasmuch as the land is covered with a temperate rainforest. Besides, I don’t live anywhere near fiords, and here I was in one of the greatest places on the planet to see them. My destination this day, Doubtful Sound.

In the wilderness of Fiordlands, it is an act of industrialization that makes it possible to access Doubtful Sound from landside. At the end of the boat ride across Lake Manapouri, is a hydropower plant. Tunnels were bored under the mountains separating the lake from Doubtful Sound. Water draining out of the lake drives generators deep underground. The workers building the plant were given a sandfly allowance to compensate them for their pains. When the plant was built in the late 1960s, these generators were so heavy that they could not be transported on the small highway that linked the nearest port of Invercargill to the lake. Faced with the dilemma of how to get the generators to their home, somebody, through false assumptions, calculated that it would be cheaper to blast a new road through the torturous terrain between the lake and the sound than it would be to improve the existing road. As you might expect, this scheme was a financial disaster. The new road ended up being, meter for meter, the most expensive road in all of New Zealand. Worse yet, hardly anybody gets to use the road, it’s so remote.

As with most hydropower projects, this plant came about with much controversy. Considering that it was designed without requiring changing the levels of Lake Manapouri and it’s neighbor, Lake Te Anau, it had about as minimal impact as you could expect. It is true that the natural outlet of Lake Manapouri, the Waiau River, had to be dammed, but the river still flows if at a lower rate. As little impact as it has for a major hydropower station, there are still its detractors, including our guide Dave, who want to pretend that power comes for free and believe humans have no right to affect the environment for any reason anywhere. The fact is any kind of power plant impacts the environment. At least this one doesn’t belch smoke into the clean air. The lakes are minimally affected and even the sound was already adapted to receiving massive quantities of fresh water due to all the rain drainage.

The purpose-built road for the generators, while not useful to most of the population, does, however, provide excellent access that fuels a small ecotourism industry of which my kayak trip was part. The reason for this road still exists. The roads that link even major towns in the South Island are small and unlikely to handle heavy loads. The South Island has an area roughly half the size of Colorado, but only one million inhabitants. So while human presence is spread to all points, it is sparse. As a result, there is not much demand on the roads. They generally just have two lanes, a chip and seal surface, and no shoulders. In a word, rural, which is in keeping character with

this land, part of its charm. All of the bridges I crossed had only one lane. With a lack of traffic, it all seems to work.

Now I found myself in a Toyota Landcruiser, heavily modified to carry ten passengers, powering up the most expensive road in New Zealand. The kayaks were waiting on the other side in Deep Cove, one of the arms of Doubtful Sound. Thick morning clouds threatened to make it a wet start, but they burned off without dropping any rain.

Eight clients; One guide. Two clients per kayak. Knowing I would be paired with one of these strangers for two days in a kayak, I started sizing up the other clients as soon as our journey began from Te Anau began. Maybe this sounds too cold and calculating, but two days is a long time to be in the same boat with someone. My choices were limited since there were two pairs already, a married couple and two brothers. Of the three left, one was a smoker. He was out. It's a prejudice I don't care to rid myself of. Of the remaining two, an American and an Australian, I didn't have enough information; so I picked at random the American, a mistake. The best thing I can say about him is that he's one of the reasons I consider telling people I'm Canadian when I travel. This was not so much a case of an ugly, arrogant American. Rather it was that he was not the brightest example of the American public education system. Whether it was an idiotic comment or purely a gaseous emission, he did not have the sense to keep his mouth shut. He felt compelled to punctuate our guide's commentary with some inane comment of his own in a lame attempt at sounding hip.

"These slopes are so steep and rocky that all the trees' roots are enmeshed. When one tree goes, it brings down the rest in a tree avalanche."

With an exaggerated nodding of the head, my companion utters, "Way cool."

"You'll probably only hear the kaka, our forest parrot. It is rarely seen."

With his hands beating an imaginary drum, "Yeah, radical. Uh huh."

Fortunately, with the photosynthesis of the abundant greenery, the waste of oxygen was not too dear. Equally fortunate was that this trip was all about scenery. We were all too awed to engage in conversation. It was like nothing I had yet seen, at once serene, dramatic, and wild. The winding coves and mountains whose sheer walls plunge below the water contoured a three-dimensional fractal landscape. Captain Cook never explored this sound. He was doubtful that he could turn his ship around; hence its name. I had hoped to spot dolphin, seal, and penguin on this trip but none were to be seen. It didn't matter though. The elegance of paddling a kayak through this remote fiord was satisfying enough in itself, enrichment of spirit. Tour boats passed in the distance, reinforcing what I already knew. A sea kayak is a far more intimate way to explore these waters.

We paddled an easy twenty kilometers each day. Despite the dry weather of the past two weeks, water still cascaded down the mountainsides. We maneuvered our kayaks under overhangs where water dripped from the moss clinging to the rock, a welcome shower in the midday heat, our mouths open, tongues out, tasting water as sweet as it gets.

Our overnight camp was situated in a secluded cove. The guide company had a semi-permanent base here, complete with a bug net and the best luxury of all when camping, an odor free composting toilet. The sandflies were thick, something like those insect repellent ads on TV where some brave soul thrusts his arm into a box full of

mosquitos. I waited for an opportune moment when the wind on the beach was strong enough to keep the flies down. When the moment arrived, I quickly changed out of my wetsuit into my long pants and long-sleeved shirt. Sandflies respect insect repellent containing DEET. I had repellent on my extremities, but in the few seconds the rest of my body was uncovered, they got me, some in places I don't care to mention. It's not all bad though. For the great irritation the bites cause, there is an equal or greater pleasure in the relief of scratching them. Once scratched, you enter a pleasure/pain cycle. Scratching creates pleasure in the form of relief, but this further irritates the bites, causing them to itch even more which induces more scratching, and so on. It's a perverse experience that, in the end, I could live without, but so long as I had the bites, I made the most out of it.

Safely inside the bug tent, we cooked our dinners and watched the ravenous flies get picked out of the air by equally ravenous fantails. Fantails are birds that have evolved, as their name says, tails shaped like fans. The tail allows them to make acrobatic moves in midair to snatch their prey. If I had been the first to discover these birds, I would have called them squeaker-toy birds instead. Their chatter was a bittersweet reminder of my dog, Lyndsay, back at home. Her toys make the same sound as she ravenously chews them. I've been told that dogs don't experience time the same way humans do, that they can't tell the difference between two days and two weeks. I don't know how anybody could actually determine this, but it's nice to believe. It helped assuage my guilt about leaving my dogs in the care of friends for a month. It's a funny thing how choosing to believe something we know is unknowable or, at most, unproven helps us to rationalize our lives. The trick is keeping track of all of these beliefs, especially when one is built on top of another. One of the good things about foreign travel is that it exposes you to people who don't operate on the same sets of beliefs. It shakes up your worldview.

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As the conversation around the bug tent drifted, so did my mind. I was thinking about my friend Brian Roberts who had kayaked these waters years before. Brian, in part, served as inspiration for the road I had recently taken. The same job cannot bind Brian for too long. Even before taking a job in the *real* world, Brian spent a year in Alaska after college, being a lifty at a ski area and working on a salmon boat in Bristol Bay driftnetting. I had been working with him on some engineering projects for a couple years when he decided to spend the summer in the remote Brooks Range in Alaska, in country that is about as remote as you can get in the US, country also filled with grizzlies. Then after another year of work, Brian decided he needed to take a sea kayak adventure in the South Pacific. Without any former experience, he headed for Fiji with a new collapsible kayak in tow. After some solo paddling between the more remote Fijian islands and wandering around in Australia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Nepal, he found himself being drawn towards New Zealand where he found a job. It was only nine months later that his wanderlust kicked in again. He quit his job and embarked on a circumnavigation of the South Island by kayak.

Brian is living proof that it is possible to lead a nonlinear life. Life for him is not all about career. Life is his career. Not having a wife or kids, he has achieved a balance of priorities different from most. After each adventure, he manages to resume his engineering, richer for having taken time to live outside the bounds of nine to five.

Brian's restlessness and need for pushing his limits through adventure seem far beyond my own. But his example served as inspiration for my own turn at this crossroads in my life. A psychoanalyst might suspect this desire to travel is a desire to run away from something. I know I've suspected that in myself. Regardless, it's living; it's learning about myself.

Brian had kayaked Doubtful Sound during his stay. But that is not in and of itself remarkable. Not only did he kayak these waters, he kayaked around the whole of the South Island, the first to do it solo and unsupported. You wouldn't know it if you met Brian. Somebody would have to tell you that he accomplished this feat. His unassuming demeanor and lack of any egotism about his adventure hides the fire that burns within to push his limits on such feats. This was in 1995/96, a couple years before adventure sports were marketed to the masses. Major vendor sponsorship of these kinds of expeditions was hard to come by. All he had to rely on were his wits, his endurance, the kindness of strangers and hermits, sparsely located villages, and a second-hand kayak. These days, Brian's expedition would be live broadcast on the Web, relayed to the world from a webcam on his bow via a satellite phone. Brian would have to take pains to keep the sponsors' logos figured prominently in his images. A newspaper in Christchurch published a small story about Brian part way into his trip. That was all the hoopla he got during his daring voyage of 86 days.

Brian started his circumnavigation north in Picton and paddled down the east coast. Compared to the west coast, Brian described the east as being heavily populated. But this is a relative term only. The human population of the island is low, but it is concentrated on the east coast. It was the cows and sheep that grazed along the east coast that Brian saw most. They outnumber humans in New Zealand ten to one. So it was to his great relief when he entered the wild coast of Fiordlands, leaving behind the land changed by human hands. Passage to this coast was paid for by crossing the Foveaux Strait and its five meter swells, one of the roughest sections of ocean on the planet.

Despite being confronted with some of the most forbidding coast in New Zealand, Brian was excited about paddling along a wilderness coast. The grassy hills covered with sheep of the east coast were replaced with the coastal beech and fern forest, a palette of every shade of green, highlighted behind by snow covered peaks. Waterfalls cascaded down the steep forested peaks. Fiordland has a two hundred mile coastline, not counting all the reticulated sounds that penetrate deep into the interior. There would be no towns on the coast until arriving at its northernmost reaches. There are few beaches safe for landing a kayak. There are even fewer outposts where aid can be had in an emergency. If he got in trouble, Brian would have had to rely on fishermen, if any were around, to relay his low power VHF radio signal. Vicious winds rake this coast, driving waves against the cliffs where they reflect back and reinforce others coming in, amplifying their size. Fiordlands lies in the latitudes known as the Roaring Forties, infamous for the gale-force winds that converge there; not exactly the safest place for a solo kayaker. Only a year earlier, a Japanese kayaker, Kazutomi Yoshida, ended his attempt to circumnavigate the South Island here, concerned for his safety.

One of the first sections involved a seventy kilometer crossing from Te Waewae Bay to Kisbee Bay that allowed for safe landings under only the best conditions and, even then, at just a few points. Before starting this section, Brian began his daily ritual with tuning his radio to the 5:00 AM marine weather report on the AM band. The report called

for, "Puysegar Point, northerly fifty," and to emphasize the wind speed so there would be no question about its ferocity, "FIVE ZERO knots." That's 58 miles per hour for you land lubbers, high enough to blow Brian out to sea with nothing between him and Antarctica. Brian sometimes communicates how he feels by uttering an exclamation you might expect to hear in a cartoon or read in a comic book, something like "YEOW," or "YIKES," expressions that describe his feelings more than any words can. As he told this story to me, his reaction to this news was a dejected, "Ugh!" Brian had a choice, stay where he was and run out of food (he could take only fourteen days worth in his kayak, barely enough to get through this deserted coast) or brave the potential high winds and high seas and hope he could land if necessary. He chose to move ahead around Puysegar Point. Brian's knack for luck has seen him through many epics. This time was no different; lucky again. The winds did not arrive. But he didn't know that would be the case; so when he paddled through the Green Islets and their maze of arches and passageways, he could not linger. The seals basking on the rocks silently watched the passage of this strange creature. After seventy kilometers, he landed in Kisbee Bay at one of the few private inholdings in Fiordlands National Park, a lodge whose owner had lost momentum in developing. A lone caretaker nicknamed Peanut tended the place, holding back the incessant pressure of the rainforest to reabsorb the property. Peanut was a sort of hermit here; only a few fisherman and hunters came by. He gave Brian a room with fresh linens. Peanut prepared Brian some savory venison stew, a welcome change from the dehydrated meals that had been the staple of Brian's diet.

"Shot that dear you're eatin' a couple of nights ago. About two in the morning, from the balcony. You shine a big light down near the garden and the deer just freeze. But you gotta be quick with the gun if you want two. After the first shot, the rest scatter."

Deer in Fiordlands are considered vermin. They eat the same grasses as the native flightless birds like the Takahe. DOC would prefer to be rid of them. Hunting permits are easily obtained. On the other hand, fish are different. Brian lingered another day at Peanut's invitation to fish for blue cod. There was a limit of thirty per person per day. They caught forty altogether. Peanut would prepare some for himself and send the rest out to his family on the next occasional supply boat or plane.

The weather caught up with Brian as he neared Doubtful Sound. He landed on Breaksea Island in calm weather. But the next day, sixty to eighty knot winds forced him to remain ashore. There was a DOC hut there, but it was locked. Rocks near the shore made it impossible to perch his tent. For four days, the storm prevented Brian from leaving this uninhabited island. All he could do was huddle in the doorway of this remote hut, shivering and watching the seals go about their business, entering and exiting the water. One seal, to Brian's horror, chose a path to the water that took it straight across the kayak. "YEOW," he thought. It's full-grown, adult bulk managed not to crush the craft and left no damage. Just as Brian was about to break into the hut, the storm relented. The long stretch of the southwest coast here meant that he couldn't carry enough food to make it through Fiordlands. So he made his way up Doubtful Sound to Deep Cove where he hoped he could hitch a ride to Te Anau. After waiting a day in Deep Cove, Bill and Daphne the owners of the kayaking company I was touring with, arrived, attending to their business. They were more than happy to give him a ride to town where he could resupply and recharge himself for the rest of his solo feat that brought, among other things, a hole in his kayak that beached Brian on the sparsely populated, wild west coast.

###

My time kayaking in Fiordlands was considerably less eventful than Brian's. The weather was benign. It's hard to imagine not wanting another blue-sky day, but when I awoke the next day, I was a little disappointed to see the sun. It would have been ideal to see Doubtful Sound in all its moods. Rain not only suits this place, it defines it. I hoped to see mist-shrouded mountains and cascades that had become gushing waterfalls. None of this would be seen on this trip.

Breaking the serenity of the wilderness the next morning, we heard a voice on a PA system coming from the direction of the water. We went to the water to check it out and there was a large ship full of tourists taking a cruise in the sound. Kayaking is not the only ecotourism industry in Doubtful Sound. If ever there was a time I felt like mooning somebody, this was it. Unfortunately my wetsuit was already on and I couldn't get my butt out fast enough.

Even with our bubble of solitude burst by that ship, our second day was peaceful. We sunned ourselves like seals for an extended period on a beach at lunch, listening to the bellbirds' songs. Moving from that spot meant heading back. None of us wanted to leave. To cap off the day, we had wind at our backs on the way back into Deep Cove. With parachute sails, we cruised home.

The boat ride back across Lake Manapouri rattled my bones and threatened to shake my teeth loose. The guide company's boat was not running that day; so they chartered one. Before the boat took off, we were treated to a traditional bit of Kiwi hospitality, tea and biscuits. As always, there was the option to have milk with your tea. That was as much consideration as we would receive. The owner-captain of this boat took particular pride in its speed. The wind had picked up and turned the lake into a choppy mess. No matter to this captain. With a mischievous glee, he opened up the throttle and we took off. He made no attempt to hit the waves at an oblique angle, hitting them head on instead. Our ride was a continual series of freefalls as the boat came off the top of a wave followed by a slam as we hit the trough. We quickly overtook another boat that was following the calmer waters of the shoreline. Our captain looked back at them with a crazed pride as they disappeared into the distance. I suppose if I ferried people back and forth across the lake every day, I would seek something in it to stir my passion too.

A little shaken from the boat ride, I gratefully accepted the key to my single room, a welcome respite from the shared dorms I had been staying in. Two days in a wetsuit took its odiferous toll. A shower was at the top of the list followed close behind by a decent meal. To my delight, the sinks and faucets in the shared bathrooms were what I was accustomed to. I have endured the inevitable idiosyncrasies that you encounter when you travel: toilet paper cozies in the American Midwest; wastebaskets in Mexico for the deposition of used toilet paper, yuck; glacially slow elevators in Europe; the Romanian superstition that any sort of air movement from a fan or breeze from an open window will cause you to get sick, even in a smoke filled room on a hot August day; the inconvenient number of holidays in South American countries that shut everything down. Differences in sinks and faucets between countries might seem like a small point, but as water is

essential to life as its hygienic delivery, the matter of sinks and faucets in New Zealand bothered me.

It seems to me that New Zealanders, as a whole, have either a blind eye when it comes to sinks. Maybe it's some sort of subconscious need for privation to allay their guilt at having so much more fresh water than most people have elsewhere in the world. In any case, their sinks had been a source of irritation. To begin with, they are small, extraordinarily small, Lilliputian. Granted their small size makes efficient use of the frequently small spaces, but I could barely get my hands under the faucets. I bumped my head on the wall more than once when I bent over to spit while brushing my teeth. And the faucets, they too are extraordinarily small, as if there is some code that prevents them from extending past the edge of the basin. To get your hands wet, you have to press them, one at a time, up against the basin wall. I have a fear, probably irrational, about touching the sink's surface. What if somebody spit in it? This fear probably comes from the same place that tells us that drinking water from a kitchen faucet is preferable to that from a bathroom faucet. Additionally, the cold-water faucets uniformly leak, not always just a drip but sometimes a stream. Not even the strongest Maori warrior could apply enough torque to turn them all the way off. I could never resolve the incongruity of this waste of water and the clever toilets they have that let you save water by choosing a half flush. And if that weren't enough, there seems to be no standard as to which side the hot and cold go on. Sometimes two sinks, side by side, have it different. This seems plain sloppy to me and makes me wonder about the plumbing infrastructure. Would only a minor earthquake shake all the plumbing loose? I suppose engineers such as myself think about such things. Anyway, more than once I heard the lament that plumbers are hard to come by in New Zealand.

But the sinks I was now at, they weren't like that. It's hard to imagine the simple pleasure born of the deprivation of a properly designed and functioning sink. The faucets extended well over the sinfully capacious sink basins. They didn't leak, and best of all, each one had hot on the left and cold on the right. All was right with my world.

###

At this point, I was realizing how little time a month is. My original, if vague, plan was to gradually make my way north. I wanted to see the west coast glaciers, the Abel Tasman coast and the volcanoes of Tongariro, dive the Poor Knights Islands, and sail the Bay of Islands. If I all I wanted to do, which is what many people do, was to say I've been to all those places, then I could have done it, spending half a day at each. But I prefer to be in a place rather than watch it through a bus window or a two-hour stay. One of the things I learned from the people I met is that traveling cannot be rushed. Many of them were spending months or even a whole year in New Zealand. Life is not all about work and accumulation. I have frequently lamented that I did not have the means to travel when I was in school, before getting sucked up into the corporate grind, before having a mortgage. But now I had broken the nine-to-five chains and I had the means to spend some time traveling. *What was I thinking not scheduling more than a month?*

Tramping is what I had primarily come here for; so I planned to do the Rees-Dart track back near Queenstown next. I'd be able to do just a little more than that in the South Island if I wanted to do anything on the North Island. Rather than take too many travel

days to get to Auckland from where I would fly home, I booked a flight from Christchurch. It was less expensive to fly than take a bus anyway. I would also stop in Arthur's Pass for a couple of days on my way to Christchurch.

I took the early morning bus to Queenstown. The bus made its rounds of Te Anau to pick up everybody before heading out. At one of the stops, Nadja, whom I had met on the Kepler, got on. I was surprised to see her on the bus because she told me she had bought a car for NZ\$500. A lot of backpackers here for a few months buy an old beater to get around. Hers had broken down and was in the garage on Garage Lane in Te Anau. It was going to take a few days to get the right part in to fix it. Like me, she had exhausted the possibilities within walking distance of Te Anau. She was headed for Queenstown to check out what all the hubbub about it was.

Rees-Dart Track

The Rees-Dart Track follows the Rees River valley up and the Dart River Valley down. I also planned a side trip from the Dart Hut to the Cascade Saddle. I had heard the views from the saddle were magnificent, and I missed them when I went up that trail, surrounded by clouds, from the Aspiring Hut on the other side.

Preparing food for a five-day trip is no small task. There is an inevitable amount of fretting over taking too much or taking too little. You have to carry it all on your back after all. Your caloric need is heightened when backpacking with all the extra energy you expend. The last thing you want is to be hungry. After my trip to the supermarket, I had all my provisions laid out before me on the dinner table at the backpackers, oatmeal, tuna, salmon, canned mussels, crackers, ginger biscuits (*biscuits*, that's what they call cookies), trail mix, tea bags, ramen noodles, Uncle Toby's fruit bars, freeze-dried backpacker meals, and my luxury item, a fancy salt and fat laden genuine Blackball salami, a local favorite. I was getting rid of all the excess packaging and transferring smaller portions to ziplock bags. When I got to the freeze-dried backpacker meals, one of the English girls I was sharing a room with started asking me questions. She had been in New Zealand for two months but had never gone on more than a day tramp.

"What are the hut's like? Do they have bathrooms? What about showers? Is there running water? How do you cook? Is it hard to get to the huts? Are there a lot of people? What happens if it rains?" And then her face twisted as if I had just plopped a possum road kill on the table. "What's that!?" She was pointing with her good hand at the freeze-dried meal I was pouring into a plastic bag. Her other hand was wrapped. She had sprained her wrist falling down, after doing what English girls come to Queenstown to do, carousing late and stumbling home.

"It's spaghetti Bolognese."

"Well it looks like dog food."

I had a feeling I would never run into her at a hut, away from the familiar comforts of civilization.

As with just about every track, I took a shuttle bus to the start. There were four of us in the bus, but for some reason, we were all silent. We wouldn't formally introduce ourselves until that evening at the Rock Shelter Hut. The track began on private ranchland. This is a curious thing about some of these tracks, especially in Mount Aspiring National Park. To get to the park boundary, the only way is through private land. There is no direct road access. Other options include jetboat, helicopter, or plane. There are actually backcountry landing strips in some remote alpine areas. This starkly contrasts with most American national parks which have transformed their protected lands into driver-through tours. Few people ever get out of their cars longer than it takes to purchase an ice cream or Native American trinket made in China. In New Zealand, if you want to see the park, you have to work for it. It keeps the crowds down and the air clean and makes it all the more rewarding for the effort. From what I gather, these parks are also very different from parks in England where they are all on private land. A "park" is simply a designation of an area of private lands and even towns that have a historical or

scenic character. I suppose in a country with no wilderness left, that's about the best you can do.

The Rees River valley is broad and flat, so flat in fact that much of it is a bog. One would think that DOC's trail description or *Tramping In New Zealand* have the courtesy to mention this fact. Bogs are just about the worst terrain to backpack through. What looks to be solid ground is just a spongy surface that gives way with every step, the ground sucking your feet below the muck. Worse yet is when the bog also serves as a cow pasture. You never know if that muck is mud or manure. Bogs have a tendency to close around whatever sinks below the surface. One time a bog sucked the boot of my foot. Sometimes you can pull a Jesus maneuver, walking across the wet surface without sinking. This involves taking quick short steps, never applying enough pressure or lingering long enough to get bogged down. At one point I had no clear path through. Water covered all the grass except from whence I came. My only choice was to place my faith in the Jesus maneuver. I must not have had enough faith because, after two steps, I sank up to my crotch. Fortunately my shoes remained on my feet as I pulled myself out. If they had come off, I fear they would have been lost forever, digested by the bog.

So much for all the effort I had put in earlier to not get my feet wet as I detoured around a stream. Getting your feet wet is like vomiting. Though vulgar, it's not as inappropriate an analogy as you might think. What it boils down to is that, in both cases, it is easier to do it than not. When you are nauseous, you typically fight the urge to vomit, going to great pains to prevent the inevitable. When you finally do vomit, you feel much better afterwards and it's easier to do it a second time without fighting it. Take it from me. I had a twelve year record. During those years, I endured great discomfort until my vomitless streak was broken when a wave at a Black Sea beach caught me unaware and filled my belly with seawater. I'll spare you the rest of the details. It's not like I yearn for the days of ancient Rome, but these days if I need to, I let it flow. It's a lot easier in the end. So what does this have to do with getting your feet wet? The fact is, getting your feet wet is a mild discomfort, but, with a good pair of socks, it's not so bad after you douse them. You can take great pains and make detours so your feet don't get wet, but that takes a lot of energy. If you successfully avoid dunking your feet the first time, then you need to go through more pains the next time you encounter a stream to cross. If you had just gone ahead and walked through the first stream your feet would already be wet at the second stream. At that point it wouldn't matter; you could just walk on through it too. Besides, you always carry a spare pair of socks and some sandals to use at camp or in the hut. Lest I start a new trend where people vomit as they cross a stream, I should point out that if you do feel the urge, leave no trace ethics dictate that you should fight it until well away from the water source.

There is a competitive urge in me that, no matter how hard I try to quell it, will surface at times, especially when I'm not tramping with anybody else. Last time I checked, backpacking was not a competitive sport. While it is true that sports such as adventure racing do involve the carrying of packs, nobody embarks on a tramp like this for the primary purpose of racing. That's not why I was here. However, what's wrong with a little competition on the side after I get all that scenery and serenity crap out of the way? After all, there's nothing wrong with improving one's fitness and measuring it. At least that's how I always have rationalized giving into and even enjoying my competitive impulses. The competition is a race. There is no need for race officials or even physically

present competitors. Nobody else need even know they are in a race. It's all in my head. If there are published or posted times from start to destination, then the race is against the clock. In New Zealand, DOC times vary from conservative to realistic. My goal was always to do it in two-thirds the DOC time. If there were trampers that started earlier than me or at the same time, then so much the better. I could race against them too. Today the DOC times were six hours and there were the three other trampers who were on the shuttle bus. I set out at a good pace, but somebody was on my tail. When I vainly made a detour to avoid getting my feet wet at a stream early on, he passed me. I eventually caught up with him when he took a break to shed a layer of clothing. We exchanged words but not names. From his accent I could tell he was English. We took turns in the lead for a little while after that, both trying to find the best path through the bog. While we were foundering, weaving an intricate path through the least wet sections, another of the shuttle bus contingent, a Kiwi, passed us. Damn! Neither the Englishman nor I said a word about it, but I could tell it bothered him as much as it did me. The fourth backpacker was about five minutes behind. We overtook the Kiwi shortly after that. Once through the boggy section, the first climb started. I thought to seize this opportunity. I live next to the mountains after all. Indeed, I put everybody behind me. At one point on this sixteen kilometer day, I looked back and saw the closest person about one kilometer behind me.

Before I could see them, I could smell that this part of the valley was dedicated to sheep rather than the cattle that grazed the lower valley. It wasn't a particularly sharp smell, but when you are exerting yourself away from the artificial odors of civilization, your sense of smell becomes more acute. The trail flattened out into a pasture. There they were, hundreds of sheep spreading across the broad grassy valley floor, the blue ice of the Earnslaw glacier hanging high in the peaks behind, as if frozen in mid fall. A low organic groan emanated from the glacier followed by a crashing sound as a car-sized block of ice loosened by the midday sun tumbles down. Thinking that I was done with the bogs, my feet sank into muck and I again heard the familiar slurp as my foot moved forward only to squish again with another step. It was a welcome change when the private ranchland finally gave way to the park boundary. Suddenly the track was well graded. No more bogs and track trampled by thousands of hooves.

With about a kilometer left to the hut, I was slowing down to a crawl, having misestimated my energy and water requirements. Looking back, I could see the Englishman gaining on me. With only two hundred meters left, he overtook me. I told myself the hut must be close; so I used my last bit of energy to catch up and keep pace. Rounding a small hill, the hut was in sight. A swing bridge across the Rees River led to it. What could have been a draw, agreed to by gentlemen, was forced into a single winner by the swing bridge with a sign clearly stating that only one person at a time was allowed to cross its fifteen meter length. The Englishman took it first. Damn! Thirty seconds ahead. It took us four hours, two hours less than the DOC time. The others, clearly unaware that a race was afoot, arrived about forty-five minutes behind.

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Sitting on the porch of the Rock Shelter Hut, enjoying the afternoon sunshine, the Englishman and I exchanged a more formal greeting. His name was Richard. As I

thought, Richard too was having a race of his own. My competitive impulses were not unique after all. The gentlemen that we were, we agreed to call it a draw. We celebrated our private victory over the others and DOC, discussing the finer points of the race. If this competitive impulse is an unhealthful thing, then at least I'm not alone with this disease.

By the time dinner was over, we all had introduced ourselves. The Kiwi was an airline pilot. When Richard and I had overtaken him earlier on the track, it was at a fork in the trail. The Kiwi was taking the fork to a different hut that was maintained by a local club and was more primitive. We figured that with his direct, no-nonsense approach to the track's obstacles, he knew what he was doing. There's not much worse than a complete stranger, especially a non-local, asking you if you know where you are headed; so we kept our mouths shut. We never asked him about that navigational error. It must be terribly embarrassing for a pilot to have a navigational error. The fourth member of our non-party was an American medical intern with, putting it as nice as I can, the lackluster personality you might expect from a mortician. He planned on becoming an anesthesiologist. I've always pictured anesthesiologists as having the least interpersonal contact with patients than anybody, no bedside manner needed. What kind of a personality does it take to get all that training to become a medical doctor and then train even more for a specialty and not want to talk to patients? Now I know.

The Rock Shelter Hut was not actually a rock shelter. It just so happens that a rock shelter existed here at one time. This hut, like many others, had corrugated metal walls and varnished plywood floors. The exteriors are painted a tan and green theme that blends in with the surroundings. Stainless steel countertops lined the kitchen. Two sinks supplied fresh water, a precious luxury that greatly simplifies life in the backcountry. None of the huts on this track had propane cook stoves, but the Great Walks huts generally have them. We had to bring our own stoves. You can tell the age of a backpacker by their stove. Backpackers get attached to their stoves. Long after their other gear has worn out, their stoves survive. Even though newer, easier to use models are available, they cling to their old flames. Their stove may have helped them cook warm meals while enduring epic storms, each scratch and each dent may hold a memory of an epic trip. They get an emotional attachment to their stoves. Even though their stoves are beat up and shoot flames to the ceiling when started, they proudly talk of them with a touching fondness. Each stove carries its own stories. Separated from the shooting flames of the old stoves, was the adjoining dining area with solid wood tables and benches. A coal-fired heating stove sat in one corner. A sign admonished us to use it only when the heat was necessary. It's not cheap to helicopter in supplies like coal to these remote huts. Even without burning, the smell of coal permeated the room. Six bunks were built against one wall next to the dining tables. Sixteen choicer beds were located in two rooms in a bunkhouse next to the hut proper. An outhouse with two flush toilets and washbasins stood near the bunkhouse. Private quarters for the warden were in the main building. On the Rees-Dart there was only one warden who mostly stayed at the Dart hut and would occasionally stay here. A UHF radio antenna stretched out behind the hut. Other huts may have had variations on this design, but this hut had a typical layout.

With their utilitarian metal walls and plywood floors, the DOC huts lack the character of the Colorado ski huts. Just a week before leaving for New Zealand, some friends and I spent a weekend at a backcountry hut in Colorado. After ten miles of climbing on our skis we still hadn't reached the hut. The heat we generated while moving

helped stave off the bitter cold. Whenever we stopped for a rest or for much needed nourishment, the cold would seize hold of us. We would have to press on without enough rest. At ten miles, we were almost completely spent, but we had another mile to go up a steep climb. There was no trail and the hut was somewhere hidden in the trees above us. When we finally came on the hut, it was the most beautiful building I had ever seen. Notwithstanding my physical and mental state, the hut really was a beautiful sight. Like most of the Colorado huts, it was built in a log cabin style. This one would hold eight, but even six would be a crowd. In the summer, the huts are resupplied with propane for the cookstoves and wood for the heating stove. Snowmelt supplies the water. A small solar power and battery system provides enough juice for lights at night. This hut, more primitive than many, did not have an attached outhouse. It was located seventy-five yards down a thin path of packed snow. One misstep on either side would dump you into six feet of powder. As at most ski huts, a frozen stalagmite of skier deposits threatened to tickle your hiney (This is why I especially appreciate the flush toilets in New Zealand huts). Unlike in New Zealand, Colorado huts are not in great demand in the summer. Backpackers use tents. This could have something to do with Colorado's dryness. Rain is not usually a problem. Packing up your tent and other gear in the rain can be miserable, especially day after day. Also, there aren't that many huts in Colorado. To get to most places, you need a tent. While there is constant pressure from those who seek to develop wild lands, there is a prevailing ethic about wilderness areas in the US that seeks to keep wilderness wild, without structures, without roads, and without helicopters.

When I went hut to hut hiking in Austria, I was treated with style and luxuries that neither Colorado nor New Zealand huts provide. These huts had that classic Alpine look, dark wood on the outside with carved architectural features, honey colored wood brightening the interior. Roofs were shingled with wooden shakes or tiled with terra cotta. All were perched in a perfect *Sound of Music* setting. Every one I stayed at had a large Gastube where you could be served your choice of beer, a delicious entrée, and an even more delicious dessert of Kaiserschmarren, a caloric concoction of fried pancake batter covered with cream and sugar. One hut even had a heated drying room, and better yet, coin-operated heated showers. As luxurious as they were, however, they uniformly had miserably narrow beds. *Beds* is a generous word. What you really got was, at most, a two-foot wide strip of mattress in a long row of adjoining mattresses all in a characteristically Austrian order. But for all the Alpine character of these huts, none were located in land that I would call wilderness, quite unlike where I found myself at the Rock Shelter hut.

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Keas squawked the wakeup call the next morning as they frequently do. Today's destination, the Dart Hut, lies in the next valley over. The Rees saddle separates the Rees and the Dart River valleys. Knowing that the DOC-estimated time would be too high, I took my time getting going lest I get to the Dart hut too early. I was the last one out of the hut. Being last left ten people in front of me. My competitive urge not yet spent, this provided plenty of unwitting competitors to try to overtake. By the time I reached the saddle, I had overtaken three people and the others had arrived only minutes before me. That competitive part of me satisfied, I decided to take my time with the rest of the day.

The saddle is a narrow edge of hard rock that endured the scouring action of the glaciers that formed the valleys that lie below the steep slopes on either side. The weather was uncommonly sunny, not a single cloud in sight, only a slight breeze. This provided an equally uncommon opportunity to linger at this high vantage, letting the sun warm the bones. The view wouldn't be better than this at any other point on today's track. It was certainly worth savoring.

Having been in the southern hemisphere for two and a half weeks I could still not get accustomed to the position of the sun. The curves of a mountain valley's course frequently throw off my sense of direction. Normally when I climb out of a valley to a place like this saddle, the 360 degree panorama allows me to reorient myself. The sun and time of day are key. I hadn't realized how much of an intuition I had developed about direction based on the position of the sun. The problem here was that the sun was in the wrong place. It was only with great concentration that I could visualize the sun in the northern half of the sky. I was turned around 180 degrees, confused about my direction. Just like the rest of my life. From high school to university to career as a software engineer, I had been on the same narrow track for the last eighteen years. Never had I taken more than a couple months away from that track. Rather than heading towards a dead-end, it felt like I was headed on an infinite track of sameness. I knew it was time for a change; so with an abruptness that startled some, I quit my job and headed to New Zealand. It was my hope that getting out of my familiar environment at home would clear my mind and give me a better sense of direction. By now I was indeed starting to get a better orientation. Meeting so many people taking a break from their careers was reminding me that life doesn't have to be confined to a straight track. It's one thing to know the words. It's another to see people living that ethic. My gut told me it was time to make a change when I quit my job, but it's a scary thing to give up the security of a hard-earned career and to break away from all the assumptions underpinning my lifestyle. *What are the things that are really important to me? What aspects of my lifestyle get in the way of what's important?* At this point I knew that quitting my job was my way of giving myself permission to change direction towards something more fulfilling. Seeing the examples of fellow travelers who had done the same gave me more hope and made me more confident in this choice. But I still had only a general direction, away from the track I had been on. I needed more time to solidify a choice on a new direction to take from this crossroads.

The track to the Dart hut from here was downhill. I came to learn that downhill in New Zealand does not mean easy. This one required attention to each step lest I twist a knee or ankle. I had no mental capacity to spare now about what direction my life would take. All that mattered at the moment was where I would place my next step. Unlike other places I have been, many of these tracks are cruelly steep. By the end of this one, my calves would be screaming for mercy, tortured equally by both the climbs and the descents. I do my best to maintain an illusion that my body is as capable as it was ten years ago and try not to admit that soreness has anything to do with slower recovery due to age. While the steepness of the tracks provides the satisfaction of a difficult obstacle overcome, it is not healthful for the land. Eroded ruts cut deeply into these steep tracks. Erosion in these alpine areas not only creates visual scars, it also washes away precious, thin topsoil to which the fragile alpine plants cling. DOC has done a marvelous job at grading the trails on the Great Walks, but tracks such as this are suffering. With such a

large network of tracks, it is a mighty task to properly grade all of them. The huge increase in the number of trampers in the last few years can't possibly help. It is hard for DOC to get a lot of extra funds for trail construction and maintenance. The meager fees charged to stay at a hut cannot completely fund the tracks and huts. Tax revenue generated by travelers such as myself must play a part. Even with the eroded trails, I feel that I must have received more from it than I put in through taxes and hut fees.

This brings up the central dilemma of wilderness area funding, whether it is here, in the US, or anyplace else. The value of land set aside for recreational purposes or just as a biological reservoir cannot be measured by money alone. Land for these purposes is too vast to manage through use fees alone. For these areas to exist, society has to understand the not easily quantifiable spiritual and ecological value wild lands have to offer. Measuring monetary value alone puts these areas in the red; so it is often hard to get funding for these areas. New Zealand has done a remarkable job at valuing the land with an incredible thirty percent of the country's area being protected. In my eyes, it is a successful balance of wilderness and development.

That night at the dinner table in the Dart Hut, I found myself with familiar faces (in the sense that I knew them from the night before) as well as new faces. During the conversation, it struck me how Buddhist it was. No, as far as I knew, my dinner partners were not Buddhists, although I think everyone out here has at least some of that spirit in them. Rather the conversation, the interaction between people, that's what was Buddhist. Buddhism teaches you to relieve yourself of desire and attachment, not just to the physical but also in relationships. When you are traveling like this, meeting people whom you may never see again, your interaction with them is without attachment. There can be none. What this means is that you can enjoy their company purely for its own sake. Sure you may have some desire to obtain some beta from them on places you have yet to travel, but otherwise you have the simple pleasure of the interaction. There are no expectations you place on these transient companions, none of the attachments of the more complicated relationships you have back home. Think about it. How many relationships do you have at home where you don't place expectations, stated or not, on the other person or where you don't desire something out of it that exists beyond the time you spend together? The relationships here on the track exist only in the present, and hence, that is where your mind is focused. It's really a wonderful experience, even for an introvert like me who tends to otherwise keep to myself.

###

The next morning, I set out for a day hike to the Cascade Saddle. Not knowing if anybody would be ahead or behind me, the competitive demon was, if not exorcised, at least dormant. Just as well because this was a scorching day, leaving me little desire to rush. I knew it would be arduous, but the ranger in the DOC office in town told me it would be well worth it. Local beta is better than the sparse words found in any guidebook.

After a short climb from the hut, the trail followed the Dart River upstream through a relatively flat glacial moraine. Large cairns marked the way through this stark landscape, reminding me of images from Nepal. The mountains in this region are carved out of a dark gray rock, afflicting them with an ominous sere appearance. These could

very well be the mountains of Tolkien's Mordor. The blazing sun glared off the crystals in the valley walls, shimmering as if shrouded by some spell cast to hide their true form. It put me on edge. But there was a stark beauty to it. Accenting this otherwise colorless desolation were the white and blue of the glaciers topping the ridgeline, the milky turquoise of the river, and a few emerald tarns.

Talking with friends who had been to New Zealand, I expected to be walking in the rain for a good portion of the time. But extraordinarily dry weather in this alpine area created arid conditions, my throat parched from the hot sun and dry air. The many glacially fed side streams, the only source of water, made the trek more bearable. I had learned that it is not necessary to carry a full day's supply of water in this region. Even with the dry weather, clean water was abundant. Officially, DOC claims that all of these water sources may contain the troublesome Giardia parasite, but privately the hut wardens will tell you that the water is clean and they know of no cases of anybody getting sick from drinking it. Giardia is not the only parasite you can get from backcountry water sources, but it is one of the worse. Certainly the water purifier companies would have you believe that no water source in the backcountry is safe to drink from without the use of their products. This is also an age where the media sells fear, putting out misleading stories that sensationalize statistically small numbers of events. It's also an age of lawsuits (even in New Zealand) where everybody, DOC included, wants to cover their ass with disclaimers. So it is difficult to wade through all this perceived danger to determine what is real and what is statistically insignificant. At times like this, you need to be reasonable. I and just about everybody else on these tracks reason that the water is safe enough to drink without filtration due to the scarceness of carriers of disease (i.e. humans and livestock) and the freshness of the water source, especially above bushline where there is not much above you and in places where humans, who are most likely to foul the water supply, do not camp. The local beta from the wardens is also an important factor. Nothing is a sure thing. By making a decision to drink unfiltered water, you are taking a risk, albeit small, that you will get sick. You are also at risk of injury or death when you ride in an automobile. But you look at the probabilities. What would life be if you sat around encased in bubble wrap, never leaving the safety of your home?

At this point, you might be asking why all this worrying about the water? Just take a filter. For reasons I've pointed out before, the less you carry, especially if it's not really needed, the better. More importantly, and this really is important, drinking water directly from a stream is a unique pleasure that touches your primitive spirit. Clean water is essential to life. Without being taught this, we know it instinctively. When you are out in the backcountry, away from the security of civilization, finding and drinking from a clear cold stream induces a feeling of safety, a satisfaction that all is right with your world at that moment. These feelings are at a deeper level than your rational mind. At some level, you know you'll probably be OK with or without this particular water source, but at a deeper level, the clean water tells you that the world around you is clean and provident and, therefore, at least in some respect, a good place for you to be. This is a pleasure denied to those content to sightsee from the comfort of the tour bus or even a short hike. It's one of those things that is hard to really understand until you have worked to get yourself into the wilderness, far enough from the trailhead to be enveloped by the

land. Drinking water from a tap or that overpriced wasteful bottled water just doesn't satisfy the spirit. And by the way, I never did get sick from the water.

The trail transitioned to a gradual climb, and then, without mercy, to a sadistic steepness up to the saddle. What looked like a scree field at the terminal end of the Dart Glacier when I was at the level of the river, now revealed itself to be part of the glacier itself. On one side, the glacier carries with it an encrustation of rock eroded from the mountains above. I could now see the ice underneath that I could not from the river. The lower glacier is strangely striped like pulled licorice taffy, the left side covered with dark rock, the right side exposed, a glaring white. Climbing higher away from the glacier, the lifeless rock gave way to tussock grass. I could now see across to the glacier proper. It spanned the entire head of the valley. The deeply blue ice below the frosty surface betrayed the crevasses. Higher up at its steepest, the glacier would intermittently fall in on itself, blocks of ice crashing down.

Just when I thought the trail could climb no more, it did anyway, just to spite trampers for having the temerity to challenge these slopes. Mountains, by their enormous scale, project an illusion that never fails to fool me. In this case, the saddle, which encompassed all but my peripheral vision, appeared so close I could touch it. Yet I never seemed to get there. Climb after climb, there was always another. And then like a demoralizing kick in the gut, when I finally arrived at the saddle, I realized it was too low for a view. One final short climb took me to the spot. The broad slope I had climbed suddenly and surprisingly gave way to a cliff, a dizzying drop to the Matukituki Valley floor. The ranger was right. The effort was indeed worth it.

On this cloudless day (and I mean absolutely cloudless), I could see Mount Aspiring, the southern Matterhorn, across and far above the Matukituki Valley. Glaciers covered the high plateau that served as stage for the tableau of snow-blanketed Aspiring and its lesser neighbors. My eyes traced the cliff line to the pylon. That was the point at which I had been turned around two weeks earlier when I made the climb from the Aspiring Hut only to be surrounded in clouds, today's vista hidden from me. Below the pylon, the black cliffs plunged into the lush green forest rising from the U-shaped valley floor. Closer to me was the saddle's namesake, a cascading stream pouring over the edge. Behind me, the Dart Glacier was in full view. This ranks as one of the most special places I have ever been. It's not just the scenery that makes it special. It's also the remoteness and the effort it took get here. If you could take a bus up here, it wouldn't be the same. Having eaten a few Uncle Toby's fruit bars and a tin of green-lipped mussels with some wonderfully salty crackers for lunch, I reclined on the grass and absorbed the scene for an hour, letting it create an indelible imprint on my memory.

As I lay there, I had an epiphany of sorts. I realized what truly attracts me to places like this. There's the joy of the physical effort; the pristine wildness; the solitude. All of these things draw me, and many places offer them. The Cascade Saddle has all of these attractions. But it also has a rarer quality, for me, its core quality. Vastness. Here, the scale of the landscape, the deep valleys, the precipitous walls, the endless ice, the peaks that rise above the dizzying height you are already at, the vastness makes me small. I get the same feeling when I gaze up at the stars at night in this clear air, my mind pulling away from the tiny spot I'm standing on, past the Southern Cross, past the Milky Way, all the way till I'm perched on the edge of the universe. It makes me small. That is the attraction of places like this. I become insignificant. I am humbled. I am terrified;

terrified of being naked before the world; terrified of losing myself; terrified that nothing I do matters in the vastness of the universe. But it's not terrible. I feel free. A place like this doesn't care about me. The universe doesn't care. I am small. I am free of self-importance. I am free to choose my own path, define my own destiny. I am grounded.

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A strange and welcome phenomenon occurs once I have accomplished the major goal of a trip. On this track, it was the Cascade Saddle. Anticipation of a goal is something to be savored, but at least in my case, the anticipation overshadows other aspects of the journey, dulling them in comparison. The way I look at it, to fully enjoy anticipation, you necessarily have to let it dominate your thoughts, pushing out an acute awareness of the present. I don't believe this is a bad thing. It's just one aspect of the experience. However, your experience is lessened if you always anticipate the future and never fully pay attention to what's around you and how you feel at the moment. For this reason, I like to make sure that a major goal doesn't come right at the end. The track to the next hut, Daly's Flat, was brought into sharper focus having completed the Cascade Saddle. I could distinguish individual voices in the chorus of birdsong. I felt the dull padding of my feet on the soft forest floor. I watched the wind dance across the grass of the not-so-flat Cattle Flat. I felt the painful bites of the sand flies swarming around the Daly's Flat hut. Admittedly, this last experience would have been intensely felt regardless of my state of mind, but it's lessens the discomfort of the memory of the bites they left to put it in an more philosophical context. Another little harmless self-deception.

The last day on this track was a short one. Despite my best efforts, I still arrived at Chinaman's Bluff, the pickup point, an hour early. No matter. It gave me a chance to exchange stories with other trampers I had not yet met as we all waited for the bus. While we were waiting, an SUV sped past us, kicking up dirt and rocks. It is a common courtesy to slow down when passing people on a dirt road. Minutes later, the SUV returned, trailing a cloud of dust. A huffy young American woman got out asking us for directions. She was unable to follow the directions she had been given to the Routeburn Track trailhead. Her tone of voice made it clear that this was all somebody else's fault, that she was born with the right to have everything go her way. Rather than accept any responsibility for herself, she wanted to blame whomever had given her directions, the mapmakers, and the road department. Worse yet, she seemed to blame us too, yes us, for not being able to give her directions. With an angry huff, she rolled her eyes, slapped her map down, slammed her door, and sped away, leaving another cloud of dust. I've seen this ugly attitude before, and every time, and I do mean every, it was an American. I cringed at the thought of the other trampers associating me with this horrible woman. Americans were definitely a minority on my trip. Her example couldn't have come at a worse time considering the stance America had taken on Iraq, against world opinion.

On the bus back to Queenstown, I noticed the person in front of me had a newspaper. I couldn't help but read over her shoulder, my eyes agape at the big story. The war against Iraq had begun. While I had already resigned myself to the war's inevitability, this news jolted me. Here I was in one of the most benign places in the world while an unprecedented amount of firepower was being unleashed on Iraq. I could not help but feel a pain over it, a pain made all the more acute by the contrast of the

peaceful wilderness I just came out of and the conflagration in Iraq. I had met more non-Kiwis here than Kiwis. Everything in my little world of international relations was so smooth; it was all the more difficult to process this news. This was true even knowing that I had been meeting people particularly oriented towards getting along with each other. Travelers are a self-selecting population who seek to meet people from different parts of the world and experience different cultures. I knew I had to resist the temptation to watch CNN every day lest my trip degrade into the news addiction that is usually prevalent at home during times like these. Nevertheless, I was curious about the New Zealand reaction to the war. In a rare move, New Zealand had not joined the coalition forces that included its Commonwealth allies, the UK and Australia. The war was front-page news in the South Island local papers. But the editorial pages were notably thin with reaction. There were a few letters to the editor, mostly against the war. There were even some against the war but also against the Prime Minister's strong comments against the war. The PM had made some acerbic statements and the letters pointed out how New Zealand should be careful to maintain good relations with the US, one of its strongest trading partners. The space devoted for pro-war discussion was mostly taken up by the US ambassador to New Zealand. However, most of the editorial pages were filled with more parochial concerns over the impacts of widening a road or the manner in which schools were run.

Back in Queenstown, I caught a whiff of my feet as I was unpacking at the backpackers. My shoes weren't even off my feet yet. I had contracted what other travelers had complained about themselves, a case of tramper shoe. Before my bunkmates had had enough of it, I put my shoes outside, donned my sandals, and made my way to the nearest gear shop. They had nothing for smelly shoes, but the clerk advised me in no uncertain terms that I should get some Gran's Remedy. Apparently New Zealand has a big enough problem with this that they have their own patented formula. He sent me to the Unichem around the corner. If your shoes or feet aren't already doing the talking, it's not exactly something you want to broadcast to the whole world let alone and especially to the gorgeous sales clerk walking the floor. So I discretely searched the shop for good old Gran's, but to no avail. The clerk was no ordinary sales person. She was tall and had on one of those beauty technician coats like they wear in the department stores, except that she did not need to wear any cosmetics. She was a natural beauty who could pass for a fashion model. I could avoid her no longer. She spotted the consternation on my face and asked if I needed any help. How could I admit to this goddess that my shoes smelled or, for that matter, any other embarrassing affliction one might come to the drugstore for? Well yes, I'm looking for some Gran's Remedy for a foot odor problem. And while I'm at it, would you have anything for my jock itch, toenail fungus, warts, halitosis, and hemorrhoids? Oh and I seem to have caught a case of lice. There was an awkward pause while I considered my options. I could just ask for something innocuous like aspirin instead of Gran's. Having to share space in the backpackers and buses forced my hand. I really had no choice. She found the Gran's for me and had the grace to mention that she uses it regularly in her work shoes.

Easy Days

With the few days I had left before I needed to catch my plane from Christchurch to Auckland, I headed for Arthurs Pass, a small village situated on the spine of the Southern Alps. I had booked a bus up the west coast to Greymouth and then the transalpine train from there to Arthurs Pass. The bus leg took the better portion of a day. No matter, my legs needed the rest and the scenery was pretty enough to satisfy my eyes, but not spectacular. On one side, the ferocious Tasman Sea crashed against the shore. On the other, rainforest covered mountains rose from the thin coastal plain. The higher peaks beyond, including the highest, Mt. Cook, were somewhere beyond today's clouds. The bus stopped only long enough to drop off passengers in the towns of Fox Glacier and Franz Josef. Both of these towns are named after the glaciers that flow at an imperceptible speed out of the Southern Alps. These glaciers have an improbable look to them. That they push down almost to sea level is not the improbable part. Rather it's the appearance of a blue and white icy mass in the middle of what looks like a green tropical forest. The forest is temperate, but, because of the rain these mountains catch from the sea, they have the look of tropical. In any case, it's an otherworldly effect.

The bus dropped me off at my backpackers in Greymouth, Neptune's. Greymouth is not a popular stop on the tourist circuit. The glaciers to the south and the tracks to the north draw most people. It is a small (large by South Island standards) fishing town. Despite this fact and to my disappointment, it was lacking in seafood restaurants. Much of the fish is packed up for export. However, some of the restaurants did have some local catch on their menus. I ordered a pasta seafood medley. Up until now, I hadn't been scintillated by the mid-priced dishes I had eaten in New Zealand, but this dish touched the gourmand in me. It was so perfectly flavored with butter and lemon, I almost cried.

Because of its distance from popular attractions, the backpackers in Greymouth work a little harder at distinguishing themselves. There was one with a Noah's Ark theme and another with an African theme. Mine, Neptune's, had a sea theme. All the rooms were painted a soothing blue and decorated with little painted fish. I had a single room in this converted hotel. They even had bubble baths. Taking full advantage of this comparative luxury, I partook of a bubble bath and went back to my room where I sat reading, naked because I could in my private room.

Greymouth was the first town I had been in that was not primarily a tourist town. There were shops here for Kiwis getting on with their daily lives, a hardware store, a paint store, and clothing stores with everyday clothes. Everything was very tidy. The storefronts mostly had their original facades. A few upscale galleries balanced out the ordinary shops. I had arrived on a Saturday evening and everything was closed. Nothing was open on Sunday either. The streets and sidewalks were empty. I would not have been surprised by a tumbleweed blowing past me like in the old westerns. It felt like a ghost town, except it wasn't run down. Only a few cafes towards the train station were open on Sunday. I passed the time walking along a reified Scrabble word, the quay.

Given the deserted state of the town, I was glad when the train to Arthur's Pass arrived Sunday afternoon. The route had been advertised to be very scenic, but I had

enough of merely watching the scenery pass by the day before. I was keen on getting out in it again. The train's unhurried approach gave me plenty of time to see what there was to see while also engaging my seat companions in conversation. I was surprised to see Ute, a German medical doctor intern, sitting opposite me. We had met two weeks earlier on the Te Anau glowworm caves excursion. The world of travelers here is small. It's not uncommon to run into someone you met earlier in your trip. There's a sort of loose-knit community that you become part of, constantly disbanding and then reforming in the most unexpected places such as this. Even though you might have known a person for a few hours or days, there is a bond created out of sharing an adventure. A chance meeting of a former fellow adventurer is always welcome.

Ute and I stepped across the tracks in front of the Arthur's Pass train station. All that stood in front of us was an empty road. There were no signs and no people to direct us to town. We chose the wrong direction, but we eventually made our way into town, if that's what you would call it. One thing I learned on the South Island was to adjust my sense of scale when it came to towns. When you see a town mentioned as a destination in a guidebook, you have a picture in your mind, an expectation of what it will be like. The book I had read said that it was well worth spending some extra days in this "scenic mountain village." Now this made me envision a town bustling with tourists and crowded with shops, restaurants, and perhaps some cafes where I could sit outside and enjoy the scenery. I should have known better, but I have to admit to some disappointment. Arthur's Pass is just a wide spot in the rode with a handful of businesses, two small backpackers, one café (not open for dinner), a tearoom/food store, and a small lodge with a restaurant and bar. The setting, while in the mountains was not all that scenic either. There were no expansive views of any peaks. Just the lower slopes of the surrounding mountains could be seen. And the train tracks made a black scar just to the north of town. That said, my reaction was mostly an effect of my expectation, although the town was indeed small and did not offer many diversions. But once I got settled in and thought about the next day's tramp up Avalanche Peak, I grew to accept Arthur's Pass for what it was, a small village satisfying my basic needs in a sparsely populated country. If it were any larger or located in a spot with better views, it would spoil the wild beauty that can be seen within walking distance of town.

Like other towns in the South Island I passed through, Arthur's Pass reminds me of what 1940s rural America must have been like. If your car broke down in one of these towns, you might have to wait a few days for the necessary part to come in. You would stay in the town motel and eat at the single café while you waited.

It is yet to be seen what the future holds for New Zealand's small towns. With such a low population density, the South Island is lacking in the comforts of more developed areas. But for what it lacks in civilized comforts, it gains in natural beauty, clean water, clear air, dark night skies, unobstructed views, space, little traffic, and a relaxed pace. In recent years New Zealand politicians have decided that the country needs economic growth. To that end, immigration has been opened up. The logic here is that economic growth cannot occur without more people and economic growth equates to a better quality of life. Whether more people equal a better quality of life is debatable. With an economy heavy on agriculture and tourism and light on manufacturing, economic opportunities measured in dollars is limited. However, growth does not come without a cost. In its current pastoral state, New Zealand has a rare opportunity to learn from the

rest of the developed world and make some considered choices about its future. If it chooses to grow, it will lose some of what makes living here and traveling here worthwhile, different from the rest of the developed world. It would be gratifying to see New Zealand resist growth and retain its character, preferring the intangible things that contribute to quality of life over the tangible dollars associated with economic growth. Not living here it's easy for me to say, but I have seen the cost of uncontrolled growth in the Colorado Front Range and other parts of the state. My quality of life is not better for it. Indeed it is worse.

The next morning I began my climb of Avalanche Peak with Ute and Stephen, an English biochemist, we met at the backpackers. This track was rumored to be one of the finest day tramps in all of New Zealand. It was also known to be one of the steepest. It was definitely the latter. The tramps of the last two weeks had taken their toll. Even with two days rest, my calves were rebelling, moving only with the strongest exercise of will. After 1100 meters of climbing and my ego bruised for having Ute and Stephen wait for me in a few spots, we summited in well under the DOC-estimated time. The views were good, but hardly worth the rating of best day tramp. As we were having lunch at the top, a familiar face came climbing up, his hat flopping in the breeze. It was Richard from the Rees-Dart track. Another reforming of that loose-knit backpacker community. I asked him how long it took to get to the top. "Two fifteen," he replied with a feigned nonchalance. *Bastard!* It took me two hours and forty-five minutes.

Having finished the track with plenty of the day to spare, we took our time coming down. I could tell from a few jestful but snide remarks that Stephen carried a grudge against Americans. He was determined to pick a fight. I frustrated his every attempt.

He started with George Bush. "George Bush has the intelligence of a hedgehog."
"I didn't vote for him."

"I can't believe this war with Iraq Bush has instigated. It's completely unjustified."

My feelings on this issue were complicated, and I didn't want to get into a talk about politics on such a beautiful day; so I stuck to just one point. "I haven't been shown sufficient evidence of weapons of mass destruction to alone justify war. The evidence the US presented to the UN was embarrassingly circumstantial."

He changed to a different tack, culture. "There are McDonalds popping up all over the world. All you Americans work too much and only have time to eat at these tacky places."

"Yes, one of the less desirable aspects of American culture to export. Fast food is a reflection of Americans' drive to work too many hours and not have enough time for the finer things in life." Lacking the energy for verbal repartee, I didn't instead say something insulting like, "I don't think there is any danger of anything, not even MacDonalnds to encourage Europeans work more. You have the EC to protect you from that."

"Your lawsuit happy society is catching on in the UK."

"Yes, it's an unfortunate aspect of our culture that many Americans do not take responsibility for their own actions." That was true enough statement of how I felt. An American traveling abroad suffers from the world's perception of Americans being sue happy. Like many things reported in the media, big money lawsuits are sensationalized.

Still, we do have a problem, but in discussions with other travelers about this (It comes up frequently), I came to realize that it is not simply an issue as people not taking responsibility for themselves. The US relies on litigation as a form of regulation. Whether this is good or bad, I can't say, but it is an interesting reflection of the US style of capitalism. In the US, market-based solutions to regulation are seen to be more efficient than the heavy hand of government. I probably wouldn't have thought about this point had I not met a traveler from another country.

It is true that American ideas and cultures get exported. Sometimes, but not always, it's what I think of as the least desirable parts, but many people fail to understand or at least acknowledge that nobody is being forced to consume it. Without willing consumers, McDonalds would not be able to sustain a store. But I did not want to get into it. The panorama of the craggy mountains on either side of Arthur's Pass was too nice to worry about these issues. I think Stephen realized this too and relented.

That night, Ute and I were sitting in the lounge at the backpackers discussing cultural differences. She told me that she had stayed at a backpackers that had a sauna. Wearing nothing but a towel, she entered the sauna. Just as she was about to drop her towel she realized the other people in there were wearing bathing suits. Her towel stayed on lest she make everybody feel uncomfortable. In the US and, from her story I suppose, New Zealand too, nudity is generally viewed only in a sexual context. It would cause embarrassment and titillation (or at least I would have been titillated) to have a young German woman with milky smooth skin reveal her every curve in the sweltering, close confines of a sauna. She explained that in Europe, people would be uncomfortable if you didn't disrobe. Maybe it's a reflection of not getting enough, but I think I would have a hard time getting used to a more European attitude about nudity.

One cultural difference that I noticed, but had the sense at the time to keep to myself, is a difference in standard of beauty when it comes to feminine facial hair. American women do not generally have a lot of facial hair. Whether it is a result of selection through many generations or the predominance of facial hair removal products hawked on late night TV, I cannot say. A much higher proportion of European women traveling in New Zealand have enough facial hair to give pause to an American male who has been conditioned to a different norm. If advertising material is any indication, Americans view most things European to be superior in function and style. All someone has to do to sell anything from a salad spinner to sunscreen to, ironically enough, hair removal products is to say, "Until now, available only in Europe." But one European thing Americans, males especially, do not have a europhilia for is female body hair. It's enough to make them run to a Finnish sauna and flagellate themselves silly with birch branches. But I think I could manage to get over facial hair (at least if not too hirsute) and even the euro-style armpit hair. It is natural after all. I think that my hormones make it easier to get over than other cultural conditioning like the consumption of calf brains and cow tongue. However, there was one woman (at least I think it was a woman) who had cultivated a growth of hair beyond any western standards. It was in Te Anau where I was staying in a single room that was part of a three-room suite that had a common living room, kitchen, and bath. After dinner one evening, I came back to a darkened living room. As I was fumbling for the light switch, somebody abruptly opened one of the bedroom doors. All I could make out of this person was long hair sillouhettted against the light of the bedroom.

It blurted out, "Right! Can you find the light switch in 'ere. I couln't find eet."
"It's right here by the door," I said matter-of-factly as I flipped it on.

But I should have kept it turned off. I did my best not to make a face. Before me was, to the best of my reckoning, a woman. Her voice was a bit deep and she was emaciated enough not to appear overtly feminine. But I could make out the bumps of her breasts and her slightly wide feminine hipbones. What took me aback was a braided strand of beard growing out of a mole on her chin. It hung a full ten inches! As far as I knew, there was no circus in town.

I stayed another day in Arthur's Pass to do another tramp. It turned out that the numerous day tramps around here were not within walking distance. I hadn't yet hitchhiked, but I was without a car and had no choice. Positioned just outside of town, I stood for twenty minutes. This was on the major road linking the east and west coasts between Christchurch and Greymouth, but in those twenty minutes only three cars came by. One was a backpacker's special, a cheap car on its last leg that backpackers purchase to get around the country. I thought for sure they would pick me up. I was one of them after all. They passed me, puttering up the hill to the top of the pass barely faster than I could walk. Nobody picked me up in those twenty minutes. It's not surprising that all the successful hitchhiking stories I heard were all told by attractive women. I gave up and did one of the more forgiving walks just outside of town. My calves were still killing me anyway.

Those were the last walks I would do in the South Island on this trip. Had my legs not pained me so, I would have been disappointed. Still, I boarded the bus to Christchurch, wistfully thinking back on the time I spent on those tracks and the camaraderie of the huts. The motion-sickness-inducing curves of the road wound through the drier eastern slopes of the Southern Alps. The dryness enhanced the unspoiled air's clarity. Undistorted by any haze, the late afternoon light played off the tawny grass-covered foothills with the subtle intensity of a landscape painting. I have experienced this lighting effect before on other trips on unusually clear days. Somebody in the party will declare how it feels like they are in a painting; that it doesn't seem real. Landscape painters capture what we think of as an artificially idealized version of what they see. To the contrary, I believe these artists have the ability to see the essence of a place. Their minds' eyes can strip away the haze that obscures a landscape's purest form, a form that is revealed to the rest of us only at rare times. New Zealand's clear air frequently confers the gift of the artist on those who care to look.

The bus driver dropped me off at my backpackers, just before the sun went down. The last rays of the sun tinged the yellow paint on this renovated house orange. The scrolled Victorian woodwork lining the verandah cast patterned shadows on its floor. The detail inside and out showed the great care taken in renovating this old house, uncommon for a backpackers. A scrapbook in the lounge proudly showed pictures of the project. It was a welcome exception to overnight in artful surroundings.

North

I awoke early to get a jump on the day. I got to town too late last night to get to the information center to book a bus out of Auckland to Whangerei. So I thought I would get to the information center first thing. It didn't open until 8:30. I was early; so I enjoyed a uniquely Kiwi breakfast, a toasted bagel sandwiching striped bacon and bananas with maple syrup on the side. This sounded like a strange yet enticing combination. Indeed it was. I gobbled it up too quickly. It was only 8:00, half an hour before the information center opened. Fortunately they were playing Jack Johnson's CD and "Bubble Toes" was coming up. I lingered until it was over, and with that tune in my head and a good breakfast in my belly, I left with bubbly toes myself. 8:05. Hmm, what to do now?

I've learned that, when depending on public transportation (even at its best), to allow some slop in my schedule. My plane was scheduled to depart at 10:40, and I wanted to make sure I didn't miss it. So I elected to catch the 8:15 bus to the airport. It was a morning filled with low clouds. I didn't think anything of it until I got inside the airport and all the check-in counters were closed. The low clouds had closed the airport.

Some of the charm of the South Island derives from its small population. The flip side is that things you come to expect, especially from an international airport, from more developed places do not exist. Low clouds prevented any planes from landing. This type of weather would not faze operations in other places I've been. In any case my plane was two hours late.

This story is just a round about way of saying that, because my plane was late, I missed any chance of catching a bus out of Auckland for Whangerei. I was forced to overnight in Auckland. After spending the last three and a half weeks in the backcountry or in small towns, Auckland was a shock to the inner core of my being. It's a big city full of big city things, lots of concrete, tall buildings of cold glass and steel, crowds of people, and loud traffic. Compared to where I had been, this seemed to be a thoroughly unhealthful place. Where did all these smokers come from? It seems like city life fosters an unhealthful lifestyle. I was like an alien here, the only one with a backpack wandering among throngs of city people.

When I found the backpackers hostels downtown, I was disappointed to find them in the middle of a conventioneer's paradise, strip clubs and massage parlors. This was too much. I couldn't bear the idea of staying at one of these seedy places, and to top it off, I felt like I was coming down with another cough (thanks to the coughing tramper that slept across from me a couple nights before). So breaking with backpacker style, I decided to find a hotel room. Tired and repulsed as I was with the city, I walked into the closest decent looking hotel, hoping the rate would not be too dear. The clerk said it would be NZ\$165. With the most pitiful expression I could muster, I asked if that was the best he could do. As in negotiating with a car salesman, he had to consult his manager. He came back with NZ\$135. I would have paid the NZ\$165 but so much the better. It never hurts to ask. So much for the savings I gained from flying to Auckland rather than taking the bus. Still, it didn't break the bank. I took advantage of this room to its fullest. What luxury, a queen-size bed that was long enough for my feet not to hang off the end

and my own TV. I took two showers and used a new towel each time, cotton towels, not the skimpy synthetic lightweight towel I had brought with me. My gear was sprawled all over the room simply because it could. I did not have to share this space with anybody else. As luxurious as it was, it was stifling. Already, I missed the fresh air. Every night in New Zealand before this I always had stayed in a room with windows open to the fresh air. Here I was sealed in, separated from the outdoors, breathing recycled air.

After getting settled in, I came to realize that, as cities go, Auckland was actually reasonably nice. The semi-regular Link bus cycles through downtown and the less central neighborhoods. In theory, a Link bus will come by every ten minutes. Outside downtown, the neighborhoods are full of attractive, if often run down, historic homes, many painted in a horribly bland white. Upscale home decoration shops and trendy looking restaurants reflecting a particularly Asian influence are packed in the business districts. Many places have views of the bay. But unlike downtown, at least in my admittedly brief time here, there was an eerie lack of bustle, few people walking the streets or patronizing the shops.

While I am able to temporarily enjoy the attractions of a city, I never seem to be able to completely relax in one. In a city, I never feel like I can be outside, even when I am outside. I feel enclosed by the streets, traffic, and buildings. Even the view of Auckland's expansive waterfront could do little to assuage my uneasiness. But I had no disappointment about this. I had not come to New Zealand to see the city.

###

I managed to see two extremes of weather during my time in NZ, the extreme dryness of the last three and a half weeks, and today, a deluge that disrupted all parts north of Auckland. There was no weather in that middle ground that makes me feel like the world is behaving as it should. At least I was in a bus, not out in it. At some point on that bus ride, I became aware that my mind was clear of worries about the future and troubles of the past. I realized it had been this way for a couple of weeks. It is a Zen state of mind that I had struggled to achieve in times past. This time, it stealthily overtook me without, but not against, my will. This is one of the gifts of travel, but it can't be achieved with a one week trip that's already finished in your mind before you start. I think you have to be traveling for long enough to not be able to envision the end of the trip or what comes after. With my realization, I could not suppress a smile as I looked out the window at the many shades of green streaming by.

When I got into Whangerei, I found the downtown pedestrian mall crowded with kids. The weather had cleared. I had almost lost track of what day it was (that's a good thing), but I was pretty sure it was a school day. The torrential rains caused flooding that closed all the schools. My luck about rain held up. I had yet to be rained on and would never be for the rest of the trip: I was already cozy in the hut on the only two days of rain I had in the South Island; I was in a bus for the duration of the rain I saw in the North Island. I thought I might send the tourism board a nice letter thanking them for arranging the weather so conveniently.

Whangerei is not a big stop on the backpacker circuit. Its chief attraction is its proximity to the little town of Tutukaka where dive boats depart for the Poor Knights Islands, my destination for the next day. Otherwise, there's not a lot to do. So to attract customers to my backpackers, the proprietors offer a shuttle service from the bus station

to the hostel. They have also taken great care in making it homey. It feels like what your parents' house might feel with extra bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms. It came complete with china cabinet, two dogs, a piano, and shelves lined with mementos. Indeed it is Peter's and Noell's, the proprietors, house. They both had the remarkable ability to remember the names of each one of their thirty or so daily visitors, a touch that made it feel even more like home. Peter's drawings lined the walls, portraits capturing the essence of his subjects. Knowing that I was a diver, Noell showed me her diving memorabilia from the past thirty years.

Noell shared me how she had taken part in the creation of the Poor Knights Islands Marine Reserve. One day while diving the Knights, her friend from the local dive club speared a big eel and brought it up on the boat. He didn't want the eel; nor did she; nor did anybody else; so he threw it back in the water. The thought of taking that animal's life for nothing hit her in the gut. She looked out at all the other boats, their anchors heedlessly dropped onto boulders encrusted with life and their passengers all fishing or collecting specimens for their aquariums. She realized this was too much. Every day the waters surrounding these islands would be mobbed by these boats, stressing the ecosystem beyond its limits. It could not be sustained. Spurred into action, she helped organize the successful lobbying effort to get the Poor Knights designated a marine park. This area is special enough that Jacques Cousteau rated the islands as one of the top ten dive sites in the world.

The next morning I found myself on a too-early shuttle bus winding through a very green countryside of fruit orchards and pastureland on the way to Tutukaka. This could very well be the home of Tolkien's Hobbits with their houses burrowed into the hillsides. The hour was early. I was still sleepy, but I was excited to dive. The twenty-two kilometer boat ride out to the Poor Knights was rough. Five of the nine passengers got sick. I was spared, but if had been sick, I surely would have taken my own advice and not resisted the loss of my breakfast over the side. The sea calmed when we reached the islands, protected by their rocky masses.

The Poor Knights are the remnants of four million year old volcanoes. Their rocky cliffs descend into the sea where the walls are covered with soft corals, coralline algae, and invertebrates. Topside, these remote islands provide a haven for migrating birds. In the summer there are 2.5 million Buller's shearwaters that breed here, all in a total of around 500 acres. I couldn't help but get a chill at the thought of birds in such Hitchcockian numbers. It's also remarkable that only 100 pairs bred here in the 1930s after which pigs left by the Maori were removed. They were eating the eggs it seems. The islands are now so protected that you need a permit to set foot on them.

Warm tropical currents brush the Poor Knights. Still, the water was a chilly 20°C. The dive shop issued us five-millimeter wetsuits to keep us warm. The captain warned us not to pee in them. Water transports heat away from your body 25 times faster than air. When your body gets cold, it draws fluid away from your extremities. The only place for it to go is your bladder. There is an old divers' joke that there are two kinds of divers, those that pee in their wetsuits and those who lie about it. True enough. Our captain wanted to make sure we held it in and threatened us with a stigma of permanent marker on our forehead. The dive master paired me up with Peter, a German student studying English in Whangerei.

With tourism being such a large industry, many people in New Zealand get in on the action. People offer a spare room for longer-term stays, or as they say, *homestays*. The storm of the day before had brought down high-voltage power lines at the farm where Peter was doing a homestay. The farmer didn't know this when he saw one of his cows keeled over in the rain. He went out to check what had happened. The cow had been electrocuted. Then so was he. We saw the story on the television news the night before, but here in the flesh was poor Peter, having become, at least in a small part, part of the farmer's family and now witness to the tragic accident. But for Peter, a student ever concerned about budget, money came before grief. He felt he had to dive that day lest he lose what he had already prepaid.

Overloaded with twelve kilograms of lead weight the dive master had misestimated I needed to counteract the buoyancy of the thick wetsuit, I took a giant stride off the back of the boat. The rush of chilly water surely tested my bladder control. We descended to the boulder-strewn bottom. Seaweed obscured much of the floor, but not the walls, the islands' foundations. I really hate that word, *seaweed*. It's not a weed to be rid of. Rather it is something integral and beautiful. Being shallow, the light did not shift to the blue of deeper dives. Every surface was covered with rich color, reds, oranges, yellows, and pinks. There were even soft corals that absorbed light at a lower frequency and emitted it at a higher frequency as a fluorescent purple. The fish sported wild Mardi Gras colors. Best of all were the numerous clown nudibranchs, numerous as nudibranchs go anyway. Aside from the adolescent thrill of saying "nudie," I cannot help but to marvel at these tiny slug-like creatures. No larger than your pinky, they make up for their size with gaudy colors and patterns. Orange spots adorn the clown's translucent white body. A crown of wavy spikes on one end serves as its gills. On each of the two dives, I managed with much discomfort to avoid the captain's mark of the incontinent on my forehead.

Diving always puts me in a welcome mellow mood afterwards as if I'm still floating weightlessly under the waves. I would like to think it was a meditative state from having been immersed in an environment so rich in life that it made me forget about my own body. More likely it was the fatigue of having the heat sucked away from my body by the water. Whatever the case, it feels good. Reflecting on the dives, I would clarify the top-ten designation of the Poor Knights. Being dependent on tourism dollars, advertising of attractions in New Zealand is not immune to hyperbole. A concerted marketing effort has also been put forth to get the top-ten message across. Everybody I talked to about diving here mentioned that it is one of the top-ten dive sites in the world. But most of them had been here. Their information came from a brochure or a mention in a guidebook, all repeating the same message. I don't know the context in which Jacques dubbed the Poor Knights among the best, but I have to say that I've been to ten more visually stunning sites with more fish in the Caribbean. Maybe as a representative of temperate-water diving, the Poor Knights could be said to be among the top ten sites in the world. That said, I thoroughly enjoyed the dives. It was wonderful experience that any diver passing through should not miss.

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My final destination for this trip was the town of Paihia, north in the Bay of Islands. The Bay of Islands' name is as alluring as its reality. 144 small, green islands invite exploration: hidden beaches; tidal pools; arches; overlooks; penguins; seals sunning themselves. Persistent but gentle winds make it a Mecca for sailing. This area is also blissfully absent of sandflies. My festering bites

To some people, part of the travel experience is to steep themselves in the human history of a place. Up to now, my journey through New Zealand had been focused on the landscape. But this area has a particular historic significance that bears mentioning. Just north of Paihia are the Waitangi treaty grounds. This is where the treaty that established an outline for Maori and British (British and other whites are known as Pakehas) colonial rights. It is considered to be the founding document of New Zealand. The treaty, signed in 1840, gave the Maoris the protection of the British crown and outlined land rights. It was signed by Maori chiefs at Waitangi and carried around to the fractious tribes throughout the North and South Islands to gather more chief's signatures. It was not a case of the Maori perceiving and caving into the overwhelming power of the colonial newcomers. Rather a state of chaos existed over land rights. The Maori were actually selling land to the Pakehas and wanted to establish some rules defining their and the colonials' status. It turns out that there were two copies of the treaty, the original English and the Maori translated version. The English version established the right of the Maori to their land and the ability to sell it to the crown. It also made the Maori subjects of Queen Victoria and gave them the same protections as any other subjects of the crown. Some of the language used had no direct translation to Maori. The Maori believed they would receive protections from the crown but that the chiefs would retain rights of governance. Additionally, any lawyer today would be disbarred if they had allowed their Maori client to sign an agreement that did not define what land they already owned. The English translation of the Maori version of the treaty has only two short articles. Much unwritten was assumed to be understood. This combined with typical colonial chauvinism resulted in numerous grievances and even war, in some ways similar to the history of Native Americans in the US. In the Maoris' case, they started from a much stronger bargaining position than Native Americans. In 1975 the Waitangi Tribunal was established to work out grievances. Today, grievances persist as a thorny issue.

Across the bay from Paihia is Russell, the oldest town in New Zealand. But it has not been continuously settled. The years following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, Chief Hone Heke, the first Maori chief to sign the treaty, had become disillusioned with British presence. He focused his ire on the flagpole in Kororareka (Russell). Hone Heke had made a gift of the flagpole so that the flag of the United Tribes could be flown. This flag had been presented to them by former Governor James Busby. The British had taken to flying the Union Jack there instead. Heke could not bear this symbol of British sovereignty and cut down the flagpole. The British erected another flagpole and Hone Heke chopped it down again. Governor Fitzroy issued a £100 bounty for Heke. Heke responded with the same for bounty but for the Governor. A third flagpole was erected. Hone Heke chops that one down too. The British reinforced the troops in the town and added. The Maori were skilled in the art of war and known to be fierce warriors. With a diversionary attack and two other coordinated attacks, Hone Heke captured and chopped down the flagpole a fourth time. This was too much for the British who then abandoned the town. It is said the Maori had no intention of sacking the town, but with it abandoned,

they did just that and then burned the town to the ground. Not only were the Maori skilled at fighting, they were also skilled at frightening their opponents. They even ritualized a battle face for this purpose. Starting with a face scribed with tattoos, they dilated their pupils, and grimaced with their tongue sticking out, stretched down to their chins. Today with all the images a person is exposed to, not much in the way of looks is surprising. But to a contemporary of the 1840s, this insane look must have been terrifying. The cannibalism practiced by the Maori was also well known. With this reputation, I certainly would have been convinced to abandon the town.

Paihia is the main jumping off point for dive trips to the wreck of the Greenpeace flagship, the Rainbow Warrior. On July 10, 1985 while preparing for a voyage to the Muroroa Atoll to protest French nuclear bomb testing, she was sabotaged by the French Secret Service. French agents placed charges intended to disable the vessel. Greenpeace photographer Fernando Pereira was trapped in the ship in the subsequent explosions and drowned. It did not take long to discover who was behind the plot. Two French agents were apprehended. Others got away. The French government denied they were behind this terrorist act. But as mounting evidence made it clear, the French Prime Minister was forced to admit the French Secret Service's involvement. New Zealand had previously declared itself as a nuclear free zone so there was significant sympathy for Greenpeace's cause. On top of that, this act brought international terrorism to New Zealand's shores. The two agents that were caught were sentenced by a New Zealand court to ten years for manslaughter and seven years for arson. The embarrassment wasn't enough for the French. They had the gall to try to get their agents out of New Zealand. Faced with poor relations with France that threatened trade, New Zealand agreed to a settlement that included handing the agents over to the French government. Many viewed this as a sell out. The agents supposedly were to remain in a French prison in French Polynesia for three years. Both agents ended up repatriated to France shortly after their release from New Zealand, one of them immediately and another just months later. Ironically, France's actions served to garner more publicity for Greenpeace's cause than the Rainbow Warrior's trip to Muroroa could possibly have gained. The ship could not be repaired and was towed to an area north of the Bay of Islands where it was given a Maori burial. It now serves as an artificial reef, an important part of the area's ecotourism.

Because of my unexpected night earlier in Auckland, I was left with only a day and a half in the Bay of Islands. I was faced with the dilemma of how to spend my time. I stood in front of the dizzying array of brochures covering the wall in the backpackers lobby: sea kayaking; diving the wreck of the Rainbow Warrior; jet boating; river rafting; bus tours to the beaches of Cape Reinga at the tip of the North Island; sailing. Tour operators have worked out a system that pays commissions to other businesses that book trips with them. All backpackers hostels can book any local tour that can be booked at an information center. I found that, most of the time, the staff at the backpackers could provide better recommendations than the information centers. This was the case at my backpackers in Paihia. Garreth, who managed the place with his wife, saw me standing uncertainly in front of the bewildering array of brochures. He noticed that I was hovering over the section containing the non-motorized activities. Having done many of the activities, Garreth had valuable first-hand knowledge. On his recommendation I selected a sailing trip on the Phantom, a fifty-foot racing yacht converted to a home for a family of three. This sounded much better than a ride on a jetboat packed in with thirty other

people to see an overhyped Hole in the Rock, one of many natural arches found in offshore islands anywhere there are little islands like here.

Robin, Rick, and their son Jack live in the cramped quarters of the Phantom. Rick is from New Zealand and Robin is from New York, her accent now one of those strange, indistinct amalgams that expatriates often have. Their weathered skin told a history of years in the sun. I have always been intrigued with the idea of living on a sailboat: simplifying my material world to what would fit on a boat; sailing to wherever the mood strikes; swayed by the sea's moods, her winds, her tides. So I was anxious to see how this family got on. The living space consisted of the aft cabin that contained a desk and a Jack's bunk that doubles as a storage space for our gear. In the middle were a tiny but functional kitchen and a six-foot long "living room" with benches on either side. The mast thrust up through the center. A Spartan bathroom sat off the short hall leading to the master bedroom in the bow. The curving hull at the bow constrained the bedroom, cozy with little space left after the bed. While having a nautically attractive interior, the confinement must encourage the vessel's occupants to enjoy the outdoors topside even more.

Before having Jack, Rick and Robin sailed the Caribbean, mostly around the British Virgin Islands. They brought the boat through the Panama Canal and sailed it across the Pacific to New Zealand. They have sailed to Fiji and New Caledonia. They have even taken the Phantom to become part of a flotilla protesting the transport of nuclear materials in the Tasman Sea. But the realities of having a growing son in such a small space was forcing them to find a home, for at least part of the year, on solid ground.

It struck me that Jack enjoyed a remarkable level of trust from his parents. He was free to run over the deck, climb over to the dock, and dive into the water with his friends, all unsupervised. He moved with confidence; greeted the guests and showed them onto the boat with equal self-assurance. No fears had been instilled in him by overprotective parents. His conduct reminded me of the freedom I had at that age to wander near and, without my parent's knowledge, sometimes far, frequently exploring the woods, my sanctuary.

This was an easy day. A short ferry ride took me across to Russell where the Phantom was docked. The bay's consistent breezes powered our tour around the islands. There were an uncrowded six passengers that day, including me. We got to take turns at steering the boat. For an unfamiliar hand such as me, it was a thrill to control this long, sleek boat. Through the wheel, I could feel the opposition of the rudder against the force of the wind, a tension that drove the boat forward. The Phantom had won many races before Rick bought it and Rick has won many with her too. Even in the gentle wind that day, she easily cruised past the other boats. I could feel her restrained power waiting to be released by a strong wind.

The aerodynamic lift effect that allows modern sailboats with their triangular sails to sail into the wind was not available to the early explorers. Captain Cook explored the bay in 1769. His Endeavor was a square-rigged vessel that could tack into the wind only at wide angles, zigzagging her way up wind. She was really designed to be pushed by the prevailing winds. Yet Captain Cook and those like him managed to circumnavigate the globe, discovering and exploring as they went.

After what could not have been a better day of sailing the bay, we docked back at Russell. I had read and heard that Russell was a great place to visit with its historic

buildings and waterfront views. Indeed it was pleasing to look at. Green hills flowed down into the historic section along the waterfront. The clean white paint of the colonial buildings made them proudly stand out against their verdant surroundings. To my disappointment I finished walking the quiet two blocks of the historic area in fifteen minutes. The town felt empty of people. I would have even welcomed a tour busload of people ambling about gawking at the colonial scenery. Nevertheless, I lingered under the shade of a tree on the waterfront before I caught the ferry back to Paihia.

Russell was not always so quiet. In the 1800's, Russell was known as the "Hellhole of the Pacific." It was said to be full of brothels and grog shops that served the whalers, adventurers and escaped convicts. Felton Mathew, the country's first Surveyor-General, called it "a vile hole, full of impudent, half-drunken people".

That night in the lounge at the backpackers, I ran into the Australian (I never caught his name) who was on my sea kayak trip in Doubtful Sound. This was quite a coincidence considering that Doubtful Sound, way down in the South Island, is about as far from Paihia, way up in the North Island, you can get. Here again was an example of how small yet distributed the community of backpackers is in New Zealand. I've heard of the accidental traveler. This was more the case of the coincidental traveler.

With reluctance, I checked out of the backpackers the next morning. This would be my last full day in New Zealand. My plane left from Auckland the next day. I had a seat on the afternoon bus; so I still had some time in the morning to absorb the subtropical air of the Bay of Islands. I hiked up a track above Paihia to take in my last view. When I reached the top, I gazed out on the bay and its tree-covered islands. High clouds spread out above, obscuring the blue sky, reflecting the sunlight in an ethereal glare. A haze grayed all color and softened the view as if to appear as a distant memory.

A Map in Flux

My trip to New Zealand was done, but my journey continued.

A month passes at home without notice. The every-day routine of home and work creates a sameness that blurs the boundaries between days and weeks. Each day is the same as the next. When I returned, my friends remarked, “Has it been a month already?” But while they passed their month with an unmarked daily routine, my month was full. I experienced every day with an intensity I had not felt before I left on my trip. I could remember what happened, who I met, what I saw on each day of my journey. Even though a month is long enough to only sample New Zealand, it did not feel like too short of a time to be traveling. Nor was it too long. Because I was free to choose my direction, mostly free of a schedule, I was able to take each day as it came, never worrying much about the next day. It was a time spent in the present, a state I hope to carry with me always.

If I were to take a longer trip or have a new adventure every single day, I don't know if my brain would have the capacity to remember my experiences with the same clarity as my time in New Zealand. But I do know that it has the capacity to get into that state of mind that holds the present in focus. It didn't take long being back at home before I also said to myself, “Have I already been back a month?” I couldn't remember what I had done with my time. It's like I wasn't present during that time. What had happened to that mental adjustment that came to me so effortlessly in New Zealand? I had bills to pay, tenant problems, potential medical issues with my aging dogs, and a host of other worries. How was I going to weather all of it without a job, without the financial security it provides to guarantee everything would be taken care of? It was clear to me that I still had some work to do on preventing worries about future problems from keeping me grounded in the present, enjoying my time off. I realized that the ease of my adjustment to the present in New Zealand was due in no small part to the fact that I gave myself permission to not worry about what would happen after my trip. The trip was an excuse to give myself that permission. But why did it take a trip for me to do this? I think it had something to do with the fact that when you are away from home, especially half way across the world, you don't have the ability to effect plans for the future. You have to place everything on hold. This makes it easier to put your worries on hold too and experience the present.

Giving up my worries about the future while traveling not only helps me focus on the moment, it also helps filter out the trivial ones. It's part absence of worry and part travel that filters out the unimportant. Over time, trivial concerns fade away when they are not reinforced every day by the unproductive thoughts they create. Travel, on the other hand, shines a light on alternate modes of living, causing unimportant concerns to shrivel away. All those concerns predicated on cultural assumptions about how I should live my life seem less important in the light of the experience of how other people live, their cultural norms that affect their lifestyle. The culture in which I live has an insidious way of affecting my view of how I should lead my life. This external influence becomes stronger than my internal desires. When traveling, I am exposed to the culture of my

destination, and through meeting other world travelers, the culture of their homes too. It is one thing to know that people outside my familiar culture lead their lives differently and have different priorities. It's another thing to experience it first hand. It is this experience that breaks the chains of my own culture that bind me. All my concerns based on cultural expectations become less important.

I also realized that my life up until quitting my job had been optimized for American cultural norms, a married life, a life with children. Many of us follow cultural norms as a template for our lives. And why not? Cultural norms define a way of living that works. If we were to ignore them, not only would we cause friction with the society in which we live, we would also follow many dead end paths, ways of living that don't work. But the assumptions on which these norms are based, did not apply to me. I was not married. Nor did I have kids. I had optimized my life for a conservative stability. I had a family-size house but no family to fill it, two dogs but no kids to play with them, a job that required many hours to pay me a family-size income but no family expenses. Regardless of my desire to have a family or not, my life was optimized for one even though I didn't have one. I had some awareness of this before I left for New Zealand. The malaise I had at work for the previous two years was not just about my job. It was a symptom of a deeper dissatisfaction, a desire to break away from the suburban expectations society had placed on me. But it wasn't really until New Zealand that these facts were laid out so clearly. New Zealand seems to be a nexus of alternatives. So many people who visit there are at a crossroads or are simply nomads at heart, always traveling a different road. Their lifestyles are anything but suburban: working in the isolation of a research station in Antarctica; sailing the South Pacific, funding their travels with boat charters; doing biological research on Stewart Island, surrounded by wilderness; extended wandering funded through varied and temporary jobs while on the road. I knew there was a richness of experience, a variety of lives to be lived, if only I could break the shackles of my suburban life.

What a scary thought. Give up my comforts, my engineer's income, my roots. What about all the experience and knowledge I have gained in my career? Can I live on less? Will I gain more if I leave it all?

Security has a cost. It makes you spend a lot of effort on planning for the future. It takes your focus away from living now. You are always worried about how you will live in the future.

Freedom is scary. It represents unfamiliar possibilities. I've seen far too many people who have stuck with the familiar even when they are unhappy, unfulfilled, or even moderately satisfied but unable to reach their potential. I've seen it in myself. The familiar, as unfulfilling as it sometimes is, is more comforting than the thought of change, the unfamiliar possibilities. Freedom to pursue those possibilities is also freedom to fail. That's scary.

This trip solidified the resolve I needed to fly from my comfortable nest. For over a year I had been thinking about what specifically I would do when I left the confines of my safe world. I had felt like I was on an endless plateau as far as my professional skills went. But I was not yet ready to leave all my engineering skills on the side. There is a certain joy in exercising a skill that you have refined, a skill that has become intuitive, focusing your efforts in a sort of meditative state like a musician performing an intricate song that can only be mastered with practiced motions unimpeded by the noise of

extraneous thoughts. Yet I needed to break away from the drudgery of work in an office and the constant schedule pressure that created a culture of guilt about taking time away from work. I had finally found a road through the tangled map of possibilities, a road that promised to satisfy my need to exercise my hard-earned skills while allowing me the freedom to explore the word on my terms, a road that would allow time for work and for significant amounts of time for travel. That road was to become an author. I wanted to write books about something I knew and was good at, software development. I wouldn't need an office. I could do it anywhere and at any time I wanted. It would be a risk turning onto this unknown road. But, then again, I would forever wonder if I could fly until I tried.

It was the exposure to alternative lives that I saw in the people I met in New Zealand. That is what gave me the resolve to make my career change and open up new roads that I could not otherwise access. But I had a small detour to make first. A seed planted in me on the Rees-Dart Track had started to grow. The seed was a discussion my friend Richard whom I had met on that track, and I had about travel writing. We had both read Bill Bryson's travel writing and had the same impression of it, very entertaining, very witty, but at its core, simply a description of *I went here* and *I did that* and, sometimes, *it reminded me of such and such*. And people love his books. They are interesting even without having any heavy adventure in his journeys. I knew I had neither the wit nor the skill of Bryson, but I had always harbored a fantasy of publishing writings about my travels. Our deceptive oversimplification of his writing planted the seed. Richard and I joked about how we would see each other's book in bookstore. By the time I got back from New Zealand, that seed had grown into the fool idea that I could write something interesting enough for others to read, maybe even get a book about my journeys published, maybe not this one in particular, but I had to start the exercise somewhere, develop my skill. It would be my own voice, not Bryson's, not Theroux's, not any other of the well-known travel writers. This detour would have to come first, before heading down the technical book road proper.

Besides inspiring me to take the leap into a new vocation, my time in New Zealand also inspired a wanderlust for my own back yard. New Zealand's landscape is arguably impressive: glacially carved valleys; sharp peaks; blue glaciers; lush rainforest; wild ocean; fiords; sweeping grassland; clear rivers; deep lakes. It was the landscape that drew me to New Zealand, but it was the experience of travel, the meeting of people that made the trip. But after having seen what I had dreamed about for so long, I came to realize the New Zealand landscape is no more impressive than what I have in my back yard. Indeed, Colorado and the vast American West are more impressive to me. What they lack as a crossroads for international travelers, they make up for in variety and scope: the profusion of color offered by the wildflowers Colorado's high alpine meadows, at times so beautiful it hurts my eyes; the red sandstone canyons of the Southwest; the mostly intact wilderness areas where you still have to beware of bear; the deeply blue sky of the high mountains and the subtle reds of the desert skies at sunset. I realized that I didn't have to escape to somewhere half way across the world. Certainly international travel has its attractions, but there was plenty at home within driving distance to satisfy my wanderlust.

Camper vans are a popular mode of holiday travel in New Zealand. People would buy or rent these compact, self contained, mobile camps and travel wherever and

whenever they wanted. That kind of freedom appealed to me. For me, part of the New Zealand travel experience was traveling on buses and staying in hostels, meeting people all the way. But this type of travel is not available in the US, at least not in any significant amount. The US has a distinct orientation to the automobile and private accommodation. These vans got me to thinking about doing the same in the US. It's not like this is an unknown thing in the US. There are plenty of RVers that wander the roads. RVs had always seemed too big, too awkward, too imposing. They offer all the comforts of home, luring and trapping their occupants into their cavernous interiors with their satellite dishes and VCRs, preventing their occupants from participating in the environment that they have come to see. The size of most RVs seems almost obscene to me, their bulk restricting the mobility and simplicity I seek from travel. So it was the abundance of smaller, more modest camper vans in New Zealand that led me to start fantasizing about joining the smaller group of people who journey the American roads with their more modest camper vans, finding a simple home wherever they park.

My trip to New Zealand was more than just a vacation for me. It marked a point when I had made a conscious choice to leave my cocoon. It inspired me. It gave me the resolve I needed. The landscape I had sought had little to do with it. It was the examples of the people I encountered that were the source of the new directions that extended from the crossroads I was at under the stars of the Southern Cross. After I returned home, I sold my car, bought a camper van, and set out across the roads of America with my camping gear and a laptop computer I would use to write. I was following the new roads I had added to my map, a map no cartographer could have drawn.