

New Zealand 3: Milford

Milford is the best-known trek in NZ, partially because it is a UN world heritage area and it is hailed as "the finest trek in the world". Even though that coronation may be arguable, it is an awesome 4-day walk through rain forest, alpine meadows, ice-fields and caves, and zillion waterfalls, including the third highest in the world - the Sutherland fall. As a result, over 10000 trekkers cross the trek every year. Consequently, it is the most expensive trek in NZ and the most regulated one. We had to order it and pay for it already in August. There's no room for improvisation and flexibility. There are 3 huts with 40 beds along the trek, and each group of trekkers that start walking in the same day must spend together all 3 nights, one in each hut. But despite all that, when you walk you rarely see the other people, whence the sense of a private rendezvous with Mother Nature is not marred.

The trek starts at the north point of Lake Te Anau and ends after 53.5 kms in the south point of Milford sound, one of the many sounds (fiords) that the Tasman sea sends into the south-western shores of NZ.

This tramp ('tramp' is 'trek' in the local English) is moderate. However, two factors make it harder. Do you remember the song of Supertramp called "It's raining again"? Well, that's the theme song of this super-tramp. Showers, rains, drizzles, floods, strong westerlies, cold southerlies and even snow are the common words in the weather reports (that's summer, don't forget). Hence, there's no way of avoiding walking in the rain, in muddy terrain, soaked inside and out. The other thing is the backpack. You must carry a sleeping bag, cloths, food, dishes, water, your rubbish - everything, in your backpack. That makes it feel as though you have a non-legged Siamese twin on your back.

Day 1:

The day the trek began we finished packing our backpacks and, despite all our efforts, they remained terribly heavy. Putting them on while still in the comfort of the youth hostel, we felt that there's no way we could carry this for 4 days, uphill and downhill in pouring rain. During the bus ride and the following boat ride towards the starting point of the trek, the usual pre-trek blues hit me. Big time. I was depressed and worried. Seeing how angry was the sea that day and how equally gray was the sky, all I wanted to do was to go back and crawl under the blankets in bed. But suddenly the boat journey ended and we were all kicked-off to the shore to face our destiny.

The minute we stepped on land and began walking in the wide path that looked like gateway to Heaven, all worries and weights were forgotten. The view of the rain forest that welcomed us with a well-tempered weather was really spirit lifting. Another thing is that the first day consists of 5 easy kilometers that were completed in no time. The rest of the afternoon and evening were dedicated to socializing and getting to know the rest of the gang. Great, friendly, interesting people from all around the world, mainly from the English-speaking part (NZ, Australia, USA, UK, Ireland) and few from Europe (France, Germany, Switzerland) and Israel (us and another couple). At night, after preparing the easy-to-cook meals, we went to see glow-worms (worms that glow, as you can guess) and went to sleep very pleased.

Day 2:

The second day was much more rewarding. It took us out of the forest to an open alpine meadow between dramatic walls of incredible heights with numerous waterfalls falling from the top of those walls or breaking out of them like the cannon-shaped water jets near Tour Eiffel in Paris. Those waterfalls were the result of a long run of rainy days. Fortunately, our day was crystal-clear. Add to the picture the lush vegetation, snow and ice, water in its proper form (i.e., lakes and rivers and not rain or puddles) and you might agree with me that my usage of the word 'Heaven' earlier was not exaggerated. After a steep climb we got to the second hut. And then it began. The Rain! Volleys of water were bombarded on earth incessantly. The rain kept falling heavily all night. I, keeping a surprisingly high level of optimism, thought to myself that it is good that the clouds drop their entire load during the night in order to rest for the next two days and allow us to complete our tramp with ease and dry comfort.

Day 3:

Instead of seeing a dove with an olive branch, what we saw in the morning was a sign "Do Not Leave The Hut!" And more rain. Same vigor, same persistence. The ranger brought the bad news at 9AM. The people from the third hut, ahead of us, could not walk their section of the trail due to the floods. Hence, they were stuck. Therefore, so were we. Consequently, so were the people behind us in the first hut. As a result, the people who showed up that morning all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed to start their tramp after ordering it months in advance, were sent back home, refunded but disappointed. They will probably not do it this year.

So we became prisoners for one day in that golden cage. The food for the next two days had to last for an additional day. Like in the first years of Israel's existence, we had to count every slice of bread and tea bag. I, already at 9:15AM, raised the question who among us will be eaten first. During all that day and the night that followed we were stuck in our arc, reading, talking, sleeping and hoping. Every now and then we went outside and looked on the amazing cliffs around us with the numerous waterfalls that were gushing with determination and almost fury. Those waterfalls began very high, as though they are pouring from the sky, and they were all around us. Every lull in the rain that we thought as perhaps the herald of blue sky turned out to be just a time-out that was used by the evil clouds to recharge before resuming their wet assault. 220mm of rain in 24 hours! (Yes! I got the number and the unit of measurement right! That is 22cm in a day!) We went to sleep worried.

Day 4:

The dove arrived in the morning. Like in 'Rashomon', where the rain finally stops at the end and clears the way for good will and brotherhood among humans, the stopping of our rain had an overwhelming effect on our spirits. One after the other we were catapulted from the hut to what turned out to be the hardest and best day. We began with a steady climb to the highest point in the tramp - The MacKinnon Pass. We knew that we might be facing freezing winds up there that would make our stay there bitterly painful. However, when we reached the large monument that marks the pass we were greeted by most tolerable weather and a view that was a feast to the eyes. A superb panorama of rain forest, ice and snow patches, giant cliffs, deep valleys and slowly floating clouds well beneath us. We were about eight people up there, intoxicated by this overdose of beauty. After 30 minutes of pure bliss (and close encounters with keas, large mean-

looking NZ parrots), we went on. I encouraged Jaffa by telling her "That's it! No more climbs". And then we continued to climb for additional 20 minutes! It turned out that the monument did not mark the real pass. It was just a faux-pass (do you still manage to process puns at this point? ☺) The view from the real pass to the other side, onto the giant valley in which we were about to walk during the rest of the tramp, dwarfed everything that we had seen thus far.

The rest of the day consisted of an endless descent on muddy and rocky terrain. The toll on our legs was felt for days afterward. The wet reward came in the form of the Sutherland Fall - the third highest fall in the world. That is a 580m tall mighty pillar of water. The roar of the water was heard from afar. Already 200 meters from the fall the air was filled with drops. We left our cameras on a tree branch and approached that volcano of water. We became totally soaked in no time. It was impossible to stand near the river across from the fall for more than one minute because of the aggressive splash. We were engulfed by this extravaganza of water that penetrated us through all five senses. Wild!!

Day 5:

That day we had to walk 18kms before reaching the final point of the tramp and catching a boat at 2PM. Not wanting to take any chances, we were already walking at 7:02AM. The menu du jour offered rain, forest, rain forest, waterfalls, rivers, lakes, mountains and other deja-vus. The walking pace was fast and already at 12:30 we reached the final point of the tramp - Sandfly point (just a word of clarification: the 'fly' part in 'Sandfly' is a noun, not a verb. Loathsome creatures!). All of us were sitting in the miserable looking hut, waiting for the boat, sheltered from the rain and the bloodthirsty sand flies.

That was the end of the Milford tramp. We were all "tired but content"! Bravo!