

New Zealand 4: From Milford to Routeburn

A fortnight has gone by since I left you at the end of the Milford tramp and, needless to say, it looks like ancient history now.

Right after the boat brought us back to civilization at the end of the tramp, we boarded a cruise along Milford Sound - a touristy "must". Alas, it left us a bit listless. The thing is that the weather sucked and even though the view was remarkable (a lot like the fiords in Norway), we were quite saturated at that point from those "remarkabilities", and preferred to stay in the cabin and chat with Trevor and Satti, an Australian couple from our Milford group.

The next day we boarded the other "must" cruise of Fiordland, the one along another sound called Doubtful Sound. This time, the weather was heavenly and the views, which were quite different from Milford's, were simply superb. The touristy package began by sailing across Lake Manapouri during which we kept "Wow"ing at the phenomenal landscape. Then we got on a bus ride towards the sound and double-"Wow"ed, especially when we got to see the first sneak preview of the beautiful curvy sound. And then came the cruise along the sound that is much wider than Milford and has many side branches, all the way out to the Tasman Sea. Triple Wow. (I know that this last paragraph was not very descriptive; everyone can just write "Wow", right? Right. But until I post pictures, please try to use your imagination.)

Our next destination was the city of Dunedin, in the south-east corner of the South Island. To that end, we had to traverse the island from west to east. Following a poor advice of a friendly and otherwise helpful tour agent, we did that along the southern coast scenic road. That area is called The Catlins and it is one of the least traveled areas in the island. Indeed, we saw almost no living soul, it had an eerie feeling of "the end of the world", and the weather was, again, terrible. At noon I told Jaffa that as much as it has its own beauty, "less traveled" areas are usually "less" so for good reasons. Hence, we abandoned the scenic road and headed northeast, Dunedin-bound, as fast as our good vessel could carry us.

That charming Victorian city offered a refreshing change after the nothingness and nowhere-ness of The Catlins. It is a pleasant city, with a live urban scene, situated on a bay and along a beautiful stretched peninsula. We managed to take the last tour of the day in a colony of royal albatrosses that come this time of the year to nest after their long and incredible journey around Antarctica. We watched those majestic birds from great proximity as they soared and showed off their amazing flying skills. Then we visited a nearby colony of yellow-eyed penguins that were just cute, not soaring and not showing any particular skill.

We spent that night with a 26-year old Israeli guy called Ran Shapira who lives on his own in a 30-room mansion in a large empty neighborhood in one of the best locations in the peninsula. His father bought that neighborhood and left his first-born to manage the construction of 40 residential units there. We got a whole floor in his mansion (for 30 NZD...) and then sat down to chat endlessly with the intelligent, amusing and friendly host that we found serendipitously.

The next morning, after inviting Ran to brunch downtown, and after going to Baldwin street, the Guinness-book-of-records steepest street in the world (think Lombard street, only slightly steeper, and straight, no zig-zags), we began our long drive towards Glenorchy, a tiny village which is the gateway to the Routeburn tramp.

While Milford is hailed as "the best tramp in the world", the Routeburn is considered by some to be "the best in NZ" ☺. It traverses 33km of Mount Aspiring and Fiordland national parks and it is usually walked in 3 days/2 nights. Due to heavy snowing in the preceding days, the park authorities decided to perform a series of explosions in order to trigger avalanches. Hence, the highest part of the track was closed for hiking. That did not interfere with our plan to hike the first 10km back and forth (i.e., a 20km RT).

The way by car to the beginning of the tramp (along which I took the ultimate sheep-and-alpine-view picture) and the walk itself were nothing short of breathtaking. The basic ingredients are like those of the Milford: you know, forest, snow-capped mountains, pristine lakes and all that jazz. However, it was different. While Milford was very wild and untamed, Routeburn's beauty is much more serene and tranquil. The landscape may be described as something between the Swiss Alps and Wyoming's Grand Tetons (large steep dark mountains that rise up directly from a flat valley floor, and covered with snow in a way that makes them look like giant chocolate cakes; but while The Grand Tetons consist of only one ridge with 3-4 peaks, here there were several ridges with a much greater number of peaks.)

That awesome landscape, in the amazing weather that we were so fortunate to have that day, had a significant phlegmatization effect on us. When we got to the second hut along the track after walking for about 4.5 hours uphill, we just lay down on the wooden floor in the balcony, that radiated the warmth of the sun rays absorbed in it, under the blessed sun, in front of that "I-can't-believe-it's-not-a-postcard" view. We were then slowly put down to sleep by a hypnotizing show that was given by the fluffy white gradually vanishing clouds.

When we woke up, we decided to continue for additional 1.5 hour to the highest point in the tramp - The Harris Saddle. We decided to play dumb and ignore the clearly written instructions not to proceed beyond the hut, due to the explosions that took place that day, because we didn't hear explosions for at least two hours, because the day was so beautiful, because we were all pumped-up with energy after our nap, and because we could actually hear the Harris Saddle whispering our names with a seductive lure. But then, when we got to a point from which we could actually see the saddle 1.5km ahead and almost imagine the sight of the Milford sound some 40km to the west, we saw a helicopter standing on the saddle and two people, probably rangers, next to it. Not wanting to create another NZ-Israeli diplomatic crisis, and not wanting to be buried in an artificial avalanche, we only looked at the Promised Land from afar, and then began our long way back. I can only say - "Hasta la vista, Routeburn."

Our next destination was the realm of glaciers further up north. Until then, "no worries" as they say here.