



Volcanoes and Rainforest



Tour Summary

Tour name: Volcanoes and Rainforest

Days: 10 days

Tour Highlights

Hike through Jurassic-like podocarp rainforest and follow a river through a beautiful gorge in Whirinaki Forest Park. Kayak across the enchanting Lake Tarawera and soak in thermal streams surrounded by native bush. Hike through a spectacular volcanic wonderland in Tongariro NP and climb to the summit of an active volcano. Find glowworms, waterfalls and limestone formations in a hidden cave. Hike into Mt Egmont NP and climb Fanthams peak at dawn for stunning views of Mt Egmont/Taranaki and across to the distant mountains of Tongariro NP.

Hiking and Fitness

Grade: Medium

No previous hiking experience is required, but you need to be reasonably fit and enthusiastic.

Hiking per day up to 7 hours - average 4-5 hours

Pack weight up to 12 kg

Altitude gain per day up to 700 metres - normally 200 metres

Terrain mostly tracks. Some may be slippery or rough; some off-track hiking and river crossings.

Tour Itinerary

Day 1. Wednesday. Join tour in Auckland - 7km/2 hours hiking

We have a short briefing by our guide before driving south to Rotorua where we do a big food shop. Rotorua is also an optional pick-up point - by arrangement. A little further south we stop beside a forest lake for picnic lunch and to organise and pack our backpacks for the hike into Whirinaki Forest Park. This Park covers an area of 60 000 hectares and is famous for its Jurassic-like rain forest - these podocarp trees are an ancient off shoot of the conifer family and evolved before flowering plants. It is thought that forests like this once covered the super-continent of Gondwanaland over 150 million years ago. Our first afternoon of hiking is an easy one, on a track through native beech forest, to a simple forest hut beside a river. While we cook our meal there is time to relax and your guide will brief you on what to expect over the next 9 days. Its also time to introduce yourselves and be amazed at the talents of your fellow travellers.

Day 2. Thursday. Whirinaki - 14km/6 hours hiking

This morning we continue along the easy valley track for 1.5 hours. From here we hike up a side river through a beautiful gorge (learning river crossing techniques) to the next hut/camp. We stop for lunch on the way and often have a quick swim in the cascades - crystal clear water you can drink. This remote wilderness is completely off the tourist trail. We often see rare blue duck, robins, and hear kaka (a large bush parrot). An evening campfire, and time to enjoy the sounds of the bush and the feeling of being a million miles from anywhere...

Day 3. Friday. Whirinaki - 10km/5 hours hiking

Our hike takes us out through cascading creeks on a rougher trail. We hike over a small pass into the world-renowned Whirinaki rain forest of weeping ferns and forest giants. We are met at the track exit at mid-day before driving to the Rotorua area. This amazing area is festooned with thermal activity. On the way we have a swim in a natural hot river hidden in bush - complete with a small hot waterfall. Arriving at our accommodation/campground we have time for a shower before we turn in for the night.

Day 4. Saturday. Rotorua - 15km/5 hours kayaking

Up early to kayak (NZ\$80) on Lake Tarawera, an ancient crater lake with beautiful sand beaches surrounded by forests. This area is rich in Maori history. We paddle past the site of a Maori village that was buried under the ash from the 1886 Mt Tarawera eruption. There are numerous steaming thermal springs along the lake edge that we paddle through. At lunch we soak in a hot stream in the bush. We drive south to a thermal area before vehicle camping beside the impressive aqua-blue waters of the Waikato River.

Day 5. Sunday. Taupo - 5km/1.5 hours hiking

A leisurely breakfast before heading a short distance south to the clear waters of Lake Taupo for some swimming and relaxing. Lake Taupo is the largest lake in New Zealand - a 600 sq km volcanic caldera crater created when the largest volcanic explosion known to human-kind erupted in 186 AD. After lunch we drive to Tongariro National Park. Established in 1887, it is New Zealand's first National Park, gifted to the people of New Zealand by a far-sighted Maori chief who saw this as a way of protecting the tapu (respect, sacredness, preciousness) of this land - in particular the summits of the active volcanoes. We have an afternoon hike across alpine grasslands between these smoldering volcanoes to a hut set in native beech forest beside a stream (in warm weather we usually camp nearby).

Day 6. Monday. Tongariro World Heritage Area - 7km/3-6 hours hiking

We explore this area of beech forests, springs, and desert landscapes before hiking to the next hut/camp on this remote side of Tongariro National Park. The volcanoes in the park rumble from time to time: the most recent was in September 1995 when Mt Ruapehu, the highest mountain in the Park at 2797m spewed clouds of ash and steam. Another much younger volcano, Mt Ngauruhoe is almost perfectly symmetrical and stands 2291m. All around this scarlet moonscape are turquoise and green-blue crater lakes, adding their surreal colours to the landscape.

Day 7. Tuesday. Tongariro National Park - 15km/6 hours hiking

We hike gently up through a moon valley of contorted lava flows and ash fields before climbing up the last steep section to the emerald lakes - our usual lunch stop. We cross this volcanic plateau, complete with lava valleys and steaming explosion craters before descending on the western side. In good conditions, there is an option to climb one of the volcanic peaks. A short drive takes us to an excellent wee lodge in a sleepy little farming town. It is just our group here and we relax in front of a fire and cook up a big meal after having glorious hot showers. Sometimes we check out the classic kiwi "gumboots at the door" rural pub down the road.

Day 8. Wednesday. Waitomo - 1km/1 hour caving

After an early start we drive 2 hours westwards through a hill country-farming region to the Waitomo Caves area. The name Waitomo comes from the Maori wai (water) and tomo (shaft). This limestone area is famous for its thousands of caves. We explore a secret river cave with glow worms, waterfalls, stalactites and stalagmites. No other groups go here which makes this place even more special. Later we drive through the remote Waitomo backcountry to the wild west coast, stopping on the way to check out some amazing limestone rock formations. We camp at a great little spot miles from anywhere. It is an interesting place with a lovely river, a rocky headland and a tunnel leading to a hidden beach. Time to relax, wander and swim before cooking our dinner in a traditional beach hangi (Maori earth oven). In the evening we light a fire on the beach, watch the sunset and listen to the waves crashing.

Day 9. Thursday. Mt Egmont National Park - 3km/1.5 hours hiking

We spend the morning at the coast; clambering through the bush and exploring the cliff top site of an ancient Maori pa (fortified village) that has been overgrown with bush. After relaxing, swimming and exploring the cliffs and beaches we drive south to Mt Egmont National Park. This dormant volcano stands at 2518m. Its last eruption was in 1755 and it was smoking when Captain James Cook (British explorer) sailed past in 1769, naming it after the Earl of Egmont. Maori know the mountain as the spirit/god Taranaki. It is considered a sacred place and the rocks represent his bones and vegetation represents his hair. We do a late afternoon hike through twisted moss-covered forest to a cosy alpine hut high on the side of the volcano. From here, there are spectacular views of Mt Egmont /Taranaki and across to Tongariro National Park.

Day 10. Friday. Tour ends in Wellington - 6km/2.5 hours hiking

If the mountain conditions are reasonable, we get up early to climb up the side of Mt Egmont/Taranaki as far as Fanthams peak. There are commanding views from the summits of this solitary volcano. Late morning we descend on ancient lava flows covered in goblin forest back to the minibus. On the way south we stop at the wild Wanganui beach for lunch, a big gear sort out and a swim. The drive to Wellington takes us through New Zealand's flattest plains - it doesn't last long! We arrive in Wellington between 5 & 8pm, dropping you off at your hostel or preferred accommodation. Then we head out for an evening meal and farewell drink in our capital city.