



West Coast Wilderness



Tour Summary

Tour name: West Coast Wilderness

Days: 11 days

Tour Highlights

Hike through beech forest, past limestone sinkholes and across tussock-covered mountain slopes in Kahurangi NP. Watch the antics of NZ fur seal pups at a breeding colony. Hike through lush rainforest in a limestone canyon, wade across crystal clear rivers, and explore glowworm caves in Paparoa NP. Take a guided walk on the spectacular Franz Josef Glacier and marvel at its crevasses and ice caves. Kayak the tranquil Okarito lagoon and watch native birds feeding in the shallows. Hike through podocarp forest to natural hot pools surrounded by mountain peaks in Westland NP. Watch for dolphins while strolling along isolated beaches.

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. Join tour in Nelson - 11km/4 hours hiking

Your tour begins in Nelson, in the north of the South Island. After collecting food supplies, we drive to Motueka and up to Flora Saddle (1000 metres). We have an early lunch and organise our packs for the first hike. Leaving our vehicle behind, we hike through beech forest, following a stream, to the tussock-covered tablelands of Kahurangi National Park. Gold was discovered here in the late 1850's and tracks began to be laid, and in many areas gold finds weren't as rich as expected. Scientists were attracted to the unique flora of the Heaphy area and conservationists managed to get this area made into a scenic reserve in 1915. Tonight we stay in an old goldminer's rock shelter, a great place to get to know each other with introductions around a cosy campfire.

Day 2. Buller Gorge - 15km/7 hours hiking

We have an early start this morning, and after a quick breakfast we continue across the Tablelands to explore a karst landscape of sinkholes and caves. This whole area is of geological interest as it is in a range of marble and limestone hills, the interior being riddled with potholes. We climb up through mossy forest to the bush line and then onwards to Gordon's Pyramid (1489 metres). We continue across a basin of the crystalline marble karst of Mount Arthur (1795 metres) and, if weather and time permit, fitter members can trek to the summit for panoramic views of the Nelson region. We return to Flora Saddle, meet up with our transport and drive to a camp at Owen River next to the Buller Gorge.

Day 3. Paparoa National Park - 8km/4 hours hiking

This morning we head out to Cape Foulwind and visit a breeding colony of New Zealand fur seals – once almost hunted to extinction. We then turn south to the old gold-rush town of Charleston for lunch at a beautiful cove. This pretty town used to boast over 80 hotels in the late 1860's! After relaxing here for a short while, we begin our hike up a spectacular limestone river canyon in Paparoa National Park. Established in 1987, it covers over 30,000 hectares. It has natural attractions including mountains, limestone cliffs and caves, rivers and wilderness areas. During our hike we learn river-crossing techniques, so prepare to get your boots wet. We collect firewood along the way and set up camp under the massive Ballroom Overhang.

Day 4. Punakaiki - 12km/6 hours hiking

Today we have a chance to explore the nearby limestone canyon and caves (some people may want to swim) with stalactites, and stalagmites, cave wetas (large wingless insects), glow-worms and the tallest moss in the world (*Dawsonia superba*). We then hike along the historic Inland Pack Track to Bullock Creek, and arrive back in Punakaiki by mid-afternoon. Optional stroll along the coast to check out sea caves that were once used as shelter by early Maori. Tides permitting, you can climb on to a headland and watch the sunset over the Tasman Sea. Return to camp/cabin accommodation.

Day 5. Okarito - 5km/2 hours hiking

After a leisurely breakfast we visit the Pancake Rocks. These 30-million-year-old limestone rocks have formed into what look like immense layers of pancakes. When the tide is high, or the weather rough, the water surges into caverns below the rocks and squirts through mighty blowholes, bearing a great resemblance to natural geysers. Driving south, we follow the coast to Greymouth, arriving late morning. Here we stock up on food and drop off/meet fellow hikers before continuing on down the coast to the peaceful coastal village of Okarito, where the rainforest meets the sea. For dinner tonight we enjoy a hangi feast (the traditional Maori way of cooking food in an underground earth oven) and everyone can be involved in the preparation. A relaxing evening spent sitting around the beach bonfire listening to the pounding surf. Camp by the beach.

Day 6. Okarito - 10km/4 hours kayaking

This morning there is the option of taking a guided kayaking trip (\$80) to catch the in-going tide into the Okarito Lagoon (the largest unmodified wetland in New Zealand) to see birdlife – including white herons, black swans and tui. We explore a river delta and channels into Kahikatea (white pine) forest, our tallest forest species – it can grow up to 60 metres high. For people not kayaking there is an excellent four-hour coastal hike (unguided), with dramatic views of the Southern Alps. Free time in the afternoon to wander the remote beach or hike to a viewpoint of this World Heritage Park, with snow-capped mountains, rainforest and coastal wetlands. Spend a second night camping in this special location.

Day 7. Fox Glacier - 18km/7 hour hiking

It's just a short drive this morning through to Fox Glacier, one of the few places in the world where glaciers extend down into the rainforest. You have the option of taking a guided hike (\$89) on this dynamic glacier where you will explore seracs, ice caves and crevasses. Stunning views of New Zealand's highest peaks dominate the vista at the head of the glacier. Free time in the afternoon to relax in one of the local cafés in this charming village. There is also the option to join the guide for a 2 hour hike around Lake Matheson or taking a stunning helicopter flight (additional cost) over the glacier and surrounding mountains and out to the coast. Stay in local cabin accommodation.

Day 8. Welcome Flat - 18km/7 hour hiking

Starting early, we drive south for an hour before hiking up the Copland Valley, through podocarp forest (relatively unchanged in 70 million years). Our hike will take us across swing-bridges and mountain streams, and we often sight the endangered and very primitive blue duck. Our pleasant hike through the forest and beside the river finally ends at Welcome Flat, where we stay in a mountain hut. We have the opportunity of relaxing our weary muscles with a soak in natural hot pools with views of 3000 metre peaks – the best in New Zealand!

Day 9. Welcome Flat - 8km/4 hours hiking

Today we can either rest or explore this alpine valley. A short off-track hike, with some boulder-hopping, takes us up to beautiful waterfalls high in the alps for a refreshing shower. On our walk there are great views of Mt. Cook (3754 metres), New Zealand's highest mountain. We return to the hut via Welcome Flat's alpine grasslands. Tonight we prepare dinner and afterwards spend another evening immersed in these incredible hot pools – one is too hot, one just right, the other just warm!

Day 10. Moeraki - 18km/6 hours hiking

This morning we hike down the Copland Valley and drive south through this remote West Coast region to Moeraki. On the way we visit Ship Creek to look for Hector's dolphin and take the opportunity to walk through the coastal ecosystem of dunes, swamp and podocarp forest. Again we camp at an isolated site, enjoy a swim in refreshing, crystal clear waters at the nearby river. Spending the night at this ideal location we exchange stories around our beach campfire.

Day 11. Tour ends in Queenstown - 3km/2 hours hiking

Today, our final journey, Turning inland, we drive over the Haast Pass, snaking along beside the wide Haast River. The pass was only opened in 1965. We stop at Lake Wanaka for lunch, a swim and a clean-up of our vehicle. This lake is so deep that, though its surface is at an altitude of 345 metres, its bottom lies 65 metres below sea level. After this enjoyable break we head over the Crown Range to Queenstown, arriving early evening where the tour ends.