



Picture: Cameron Wilson

fact file

- > Qantas, United and American Airlines fly daily to Los Angeles; connect from there with Southwest Airlines (www.southwest.com) to Denver, Colorado. Collect a hire car or take a shuttle bus from the airport or downtown to Grand Lake, 120km northwest of Denver — a web search turns up lots of ground transportation options. See www.southwest.com.
- > The vehicle entrance fee for Rocky Mountain National Park is \$US20 (\$23), good for one week's entry. The fee for pedestrians is \$US10, (\$11.60), and a free shuttle bus services the various trailheads throughout the day from June-September. Park information, including hiking, climbing, safety, flora and fauna, and to book serviced and back country campsites (essential from June-August) is at www.nps.gov/romo.
- > Shadowcliff Lodge is open from late May-September; prices range from \$US23 (\$27) for a dorm bed to \$US175 (\$204) for a six-bed cabin; double rooms are also available. Go to www.shadowcliff.org.

Cautiously poking my head outside, I was astonished to discover six elk, one a huge male with trophy antlers, munching away on the grasses around my campsite. They seemed to regard the tent as part of the landscape, and the moment I pulled aside the flap for a better look all six stopped and stared at me.

Wanting them to stick around, I froze. After about a minute, they seemed to forget about me and returned to their grazing. For the next half-hour, I sat and watched silently and joyfully. Every time I shifted my weight, the animals were again startled but quickly settled.

The North Inlet trail completed the loop hike back down to the trailhead and I found it hard not

to trot as my oxygen and energy levels soared with the drop in altitude.

Back at Shadowcliff Lodge, I found a lively pre-dinner gathering of folks trading tales of hiking, climbing or driving Trail Ridge Road which runs between Grand Lake and Estes Park, providing several stunning alpine vistas.

A young Swiss couple were lucky enough to spot a group of Rocky Mountain sheep, and showed off photos of a pair of rams with massive horns. As I related my own tale of the most exhilarating hiking experience of my life, I wondered anew at the way the travel gods seem to reward you that little bit more when you choose a destination for hardly any reason at all.

A walk on the wild side to test your hiking skills

Martin Stewart gets immersed in New Zealand's high country

It was just too inviting. Instead of wading through the cold river, still clad in boots and gaiters, the ragged line of boulders was beckoning. After all, we had just set off from our hut and the early morning frost made the thought of wet socks for the rest of the day a rather chilling prospect.

My three companions had already marched across, and in that split second of false confidence that we live to regret I set off.

Four days into New Zealand's St James Walkway, in the high country near the South Island's Lewis Pass, had convinced me that I was still as nimble as years before. Pride before a fall. I was dancing from one rock to the other when I noticed that not only was the next boulder wet but also frosty. My 20kg pack took over, I skidded off the rock face down into the flowing river, with a glancing blow to knee and temple. My pack was pinning me in an inelegant position, head under water and legs draped over a rock. I couldn't move, and was losing the argument about not panicking, when suddenly I was on my feet, spluttering and looking at a beautiful, azure sky.

Walk leader Kate had waded back in, grabbed my pack and stood me up in one swift motion. Thank goodness, they make these Kiwi lasses strong.

That morning crossing a tributary of the Waiau was a lesson in heeding the advice of people who know the country you are hiking, sorry tramping, through.

I had flown to NZ with the idea of renewing my contact with the mountains. Distant relatives in Christchurch suggested I join their annual walk and they had decades of experience in New Zealand's alpine

country. St James Walkway is billed as a comfortable walk for five days. What changes this whole equation, of course, is how familiar you are with your ever-present companion — the backpack. An ascent of a couple of hundred metres is a breeze with a day pack but when you have to carry food for six days or more, tent, sleeping bag, stove, clothes etc, after a few hours every hillock can be a challenge.

In other words, I wasn't really prepared for the physical demands of even St James Walkway. Cycling and walking the dog round the river doesn't really work; the legs are only part of it. You have to begin with a few days of wearing your pack to get your back and neck muscles into gear. Track fitness is the difference between enjoying and enduring your time in the mountains. As is having the right clothing.

St James Walkway is in the Lewis Pass National Reserve and passes through the St James Conservation Area and Lake Sumner Forest Park. It was the first walkway set up in the sub-alpine area of the South Island and boasts a string of good quality huts that make each evening such a pleasure after the day's efforts.

These huts vary from the main 14-bunk huts such as

Christopher, Anne River and Boyle Flat, to the more basic, four-bunk hut at Lake Guyon, which we found to be an inspiring, one-day addition to the main walk.

All had mattresses, efficient woodstoves for heating and cooking, and toilets. The fees are generally around \$NZ15 (\$12) a night for the better huts, which helps keep them maintained and stocked with firewood. It is best to pre-pay for the huts.

The conservation area was formerly a huge grazing property, St James Station, which was only recently purchased by the New Zealand Nature Heritage Fund. It is due to be completely destocked by next June, encompasses three mountain ranges and contains the headwaters of the Waiau and Clarence rivers. It is an area that is rich in grand scenery and biodiversity, with about 430 indigenous species of flora and 30 types of native birds.

The walk is 190km from Christchurch, off Lewis Pass Road. Boyle Outdoor Education Lodge offers secure parking and a drop-off service, which we used so we could start the



The St James Walkway on New Zealand's South Island.

Picture: Martin Stewart

walk at the top end of the pass. We signed the record books at Boyle, indicating when we expected to return and some of the descriptions in the hut books about being trapped by bad weather make it clear that rapidly approaching storms can make St James Walkway a very wet or icy proposition.

After our six days on the track, we picked up our car again and set off on an hour's drive to the old mining town of Reefton, to reacquire ourselves with hot fresh food and cold beer. After a good night's sleep at the backpackers, the old nurses' quarters, we set off for the highest hut and steepest hike of our eight days. The path was one of many cut in the boom days of the 1890s for mule trains.

It is a good track but is a steady 1000m climb, with the odd scramble over small rockfalls caused by falling trees.

The reward for the day's walk up through ancient beech forests is a view that is hard to beat, a panorama over the Victoria Forest Park, which is the biggest forest park in the country and probably the least visited.

After a day in this lofty perch, we made our way down the mountain, and the road back to Christchurch, feeling stout of limb and lung, hungry of body but nourished in the soul.



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