

DOIN' THE DUSKY

"THIS IS FINE COUNTRY FOR THE WATERPROOF EXPLORER!"

It's late Australian summer, waterrestrictions are in place, and most people already forgot what rain is, or how wet grass underneath your feet feels like. (Well, actually, it's not really that difficult to get that feeling – the lawns around the war memorial are watered every single evening, but that's another story...) Hiking around Canberra usually means bone dry soil, blue sky, burning heat, and no water except the water you bring in. Time for something completely different...

*It rained and rained and rained and rained,
The average fall was well maintained,
And when the tracks were simply bogs
It started raining cats and dogs.*

*After a drought of half an hour
we had a most refreshing shower,
then the most curious thing of all:
a gentle rain began to fall.*

*Next day was also fairly dry
save for the deluge from the sky
which wet the party to the skin:
and after that, the rain set in.
(Anon, Fiordland Trampler)*

That's at least what I thought when Madeleine told me, that she still has this ticket to New Zealand, which would expire soon, and if I wouldn't like to go hiking somewhere in NZ. Remembering my last trip to the South Island, it didn't take me long to decide. A quick chat with my supervisor about two and a half weeks of holidays end of march, some internet surfing to Pacific Blue to book a flight, and it was all set. Well, almost – we hadn't decided yet where to go. Something not too touristy, doable in 2 weeks time, and of course with the most amazing landscape possible, to maximise the experience. After long consideration of different options, we finally decided to do the Dusky Track, at the southern end of the Fiordlands. The description sounded interesting – many river crossings, 15 three-wire bridges, 84km long (including the detour to Dusky Sound), and 8 days to do it. Now, since I knew that the walking time recommendations provided by the Department of Conservation are usually very accurate, that sounded a bit odd – 84 km in 8 days? Less than 11km a day? How come?

For people who have never been to Fiordlands, some facts about the climate. The west side of the Fiordlands, close to the coast, has an annual rainfall of 6 to 8 meters,

and around 285 rainy days a year. Quite impressive – basically we expected it to rain all the time, and according to the track information, it can be quite muddy, and sometimes the track is flooded. Inspired by some canyoning trips we did before, the thought of wearing a wetsuit came up, but was of course put down as being a ridiculous idea. We should find out very soon...

Only a few weeks later I was sitting in a brand new

plane of Pacific Blue's fleet, on one of the first flights to Christchurch, and enjoying the more than amazing sunset behind us. Something still worried me a bit – my plane was about to arrive in Christchurch around 11pm, and the backpacker's I wanted to book didn't accept check-ins after 8:30. Organized as I am, I didn't have a place for the night, and already thought if someone would mind if I put up my tent somewhere next to the airport... It turned out that this wasn't necessary – after asking the right person for some backpackers which are open late, a very friendly New Zealander took me home, so I could spend the night there. What a friendly and helpful lot, these Kiwis!



After Madeleine and I met in Christchurch (she was on a different flight), we did our shopping for the trip. I guess we got carried away a bit in that supermarket – at some point we realised that we bought a whole lot of food to carry with us. On the other hand, we didn't want to run low on food during the 8 or 9 days on the trek. One approach is of course to live only on rice, couscous and oats, and have a light pack instead. We ended up doing the more luxurious version, with bread, oats, honey, peanut butter and cheese for breakfast and lunch, and rice, couscous, some pasta, fresh veggies,

including carrots, broccoli, onions, and even some tomatoes for dinner. I have to admit that I had to be convinced first, considering the weight and shape of my backpack. A rough estimate, a bit more than 30kg at the start of the trek for each of us. And since my pack turned out to be a bit small, some stuff was in a small daypack attached to the rear of the pack, which made it a bit unbalanced. Still, we could carry it, and at least we knew it would get significantly lighter towards the end. After the preparations were done, we could travel on to the start of the Dusky Track.

The logistics involved in doing a single trip in New Zealand can be quite tricky. The Dusky Track starts at Lake Hauroko in the very south of Fiordlands National Park, and ends at Lake Manapouri. On both lakes one has to take a boat across the lake. This is no problem at Lake Manapouri, because the track ends at the power station, and there are several ferries every day. Getting to the start is more tricky. There is a boat to the start on Mondays and Thursdays, and the boat service is operated from



Tuatapere. Where, please? So we took the bus from Christchurch to Invercargill, which takes all day, so we had to spend the night there. This gave us a chance to have a look around the city, which is quite nice. On the next day we took the bus to Tuatapere, where we had to spend the night again, since the boat went early in the morning the next day. From there, a bus took us to the lake, the boat was launched, and took us across the lake.

It turned out that we were not the only people on the track, as we expected. Instead, two Canadians, an Israeli, two Kiwis and three Germans were with us. The speedy boat ride across a lake took about an hour, plenty of time to chat to our new travel companions. Finally we got to the start of the track, where the boat was fixed with a rope around some grassy bush, to allow us to disembark. The guy unloading my pack thought we are crazy... but we were just waiting for the evening, to enjoy the jealous faces when we start cooking dinner.

Now we finally were about to find out how the track looks like, and why it would take 8 days to do 84km. It was quite good – the first hour. Then the first creek crossing. Trying to keep my boots dry, I lost balance and slipped. Sitting in the creek, wet to the bone, and realising that I just drowned my digital camera, I didn't know what was about to come. Later I got stuck in kneedeep mud, so that I had to take my pack off to get out. The rest of the day was smooth hiking to Halfway hut, steadily climbing up. It didn't even rain all the time.

The huts are small, but cosy, and have between 12 and 14 bunk beds. There is a wood burner installed, but firewood has to be collected in the forest. Of course the wood outside is always wet, since it rains every day. Usually there is a small supply of dry wood in the hut to get the fire started, and it is eti-





quette to dry some new wood on the fire for the next party. After some seriously good food (it also tastes even better after a long day outside), we went to sleep – in our tent. It turned out to be the right decision – with 10 people in a hut, the probability of someone snoring is 100%. The main reason for taking a tent was the Routeburn track, where we planned to save some money and camp. It is not really necessary on most of the walks, since there are huts everywhere. Still, it's always handy to have a tent, in case a river is impossible to cross, or something else happens.

The next day it rained – surprise. But, there's no such thing as bad weather, there is just the wrong clothes. We had the right stuff – polypro thermals, fleece shirts, and a heavy duty breathable rain jacket. Still it is a bit uncomfortable to get into your wet



thermals after a cold night... at least they were not frozen, and we soon got warm after we started walking again. Gradually the track got muddier, as we kept going. According to Murphy's law, you never know how deep a puddle is before you step in it. Unfortunately there is only one word for mud – the Eskimos have about 20 different words for snow, and that is about the variety of different types of mud we encountered. There is the thick, sticky mud which doesn't let go your boots, the thin, watery mud, sometimes with moss growing on top of it, which makes it difficult to anticipate, then mud that looks deep but turns out to be ok, and mud that doesn't look deep, but still you sink in waist-deep, and so on. And of course the big bog with no footprints in it, though you know that people crossed it half an hour ago. It's always good to remember that



old rule – if you don't know how deep it is, then always step on the hats... Slowly we got used to it...

Now some might say, if it's so wet, muddy and cold, why are you doing it? The answer is simply that the landscape is absolutely unique, and totally breathtaking. The mountains in Fiordland National Park are extremely hard rock, shaped by glaciers, with hardly any erosion. I haven't seen mountains and valleys that steep anywhere else. Due to the impressive amount of rainfall, a thick, undamaged rainforest dominates the lower sections, while you find beech trees higher up. The treeline is around 1000m, from there the vegetation changes again to grass and moss. The variety and uniqueness of vegetation and landscapes is awesome. I won't try to describe it in words – simply go there and see yourself. Or take a look at the photos... but now back to the track.

On the third day, we had to descent 1000m within 1km. Obviously the builders of the track have never heard of switchbacks – it just followed the straight line down. This meant climbing down tree roots for 2 hours, sometimes almost vertical. Water rushing down the track washed away the soil, so that we were basically walking on entangled roots all the

time. Forget about Fangorn Forest in Lord of the Rings – this is the real thing! Strange, though, that they don't have sandflies in the movie.

Sandflies are annoying little beasts. The good news is, they don't sting to suck your blood. The bad news is, they bite to suck blood, which is even worse. Also, they are small enough to fit through the tiniest gaps. They have about the same stubbornness as Australian black flies, but are far more painful. And the sheer amount of them is amazing. While you are walking, they can't spot you, but as soon as you stop, it doesn't take a minute, and you are surrounded. According to a Maori legend, some god created the landscape, and realised how nice it is, and that humans would dwell there forever, once they've seen it. So, to remind the humans of their own mortality and imperfection, the sandflies were introduced.

At the end of the day, we came to the three-wire across Seaforth River, which can be impossible to cross at high water levels, according to the track information leaflet. There is even a shelter provided for that case. We were a bit surprised when we finally saw the three-wire bridge – 3 meters above the ground, with a ladder to get up. How can it be difficult? We found out on the next day. As we noticed later in the hut, the lake at the end of this river, just below the hut, rises and falls quite significantly. It has only a very small, steep outlet, so that excess water cannot flow off quickly. It rained all night, and on the next morning, the lake level was 3 meters higher, and the ladder to get onto the three-wire was suddenly in the middle of the river. As we heard later from people who crossed it the day after us, it was about 1.5 meter deep, and they almost had to swim to get to the ladder. Happy that we had already crossed it, we followed the track into the other direction, towards the end of the track.



After about an hour, due to the high water levels, the track was "subject to flooding", and went straight through a pool. It was about 1.5 meter deep, and we almost had to swim to get across it... but this was just the start.

Because of the high water levels, we decided not to do the full two day detour to supper cove, but do a daytrip instead. Without the heavy packs, we could walk much faster, but didn't reach Supper Cove, though, since the track was flooded, and we had to turn around earlier. On the following day, the track

lead us along the river, forcing us to wade through several chest-deep pools, creeks and mudpits. It is funny how one slowly adapts to the situation – I remembered how I tried to keep my boots dry on the first day. Now I tried to keep my shirt dry...

It is unbelievable how much water there is. Everything is saturated – wherever you put your foot down, water spills out. The problem with building a track is, as soon as you start digging, water flows into your track and turns it into a creek. On the other hand, if there already is a creek, why dig in the first place? Just put up some track markers along the creek, done. The Dusky





Track is now around 100 years old, so it's sometimes hard to tell what was first, the track, or the creek. Sometimes we couldn't tell the difference, and didn't see any track markers, so we followed a little creek, thinking it was the track. Until we stood at the banks of a raging river... but in general it is difficult to get lost there. The Dusky Track is the only track there, which makes navigation pretty simple. You don't even need a map.

As we went on towards Center Pass, crawling up waterfalls (remember, the track is a creek, so if it gets steeper, it turns into waterfalls), we were a bit surprised to see a big waterfall shooting out of the pass itself. It was not so much the waterfall itself, there are plenty of them everywhere. But creeks usually don't just appear on the top of a pass, to shoot down one side as a raging waterfall. We saw when we got to the top, that the pass itself was only a narrow flat strip, maybe 100m wide, but several creeks came down from both mountains left and right of the pass, joined, and rushed down the side we came up. Quite an unusual sight! The way down on the other side mainly followed a knee-deep river (I don't mean, the track went *along* a knee deep river, but the track *was* a knee deep river. Or a knee deep river was the track – whatever...). The water was so cold that I couldn't feel my feet anymore after a while. We finally reached our last hut on the track, the Upper Spey hut. When we got there, two guys

arrived, carrying nothing but a very small daypack, which was a bit odd, compared to our packs. It was also odd that they were coming our way, but the boat to the start only goes on Mondays and Thursdays, and they didn't come with us. When we asked them, they told us that they were *running* the Dusky Track in two days, so this was their last day, and they would leave now after a short break, because they want to catch the ferry. They said, usually they go climbing in the Milford area, but the weather was too bad this weekend, so they decided to go running instead... I have done some long distance runs myself already, but this is incredible. I don't really know how it is possible to run the Dusky, with all these roots, bogs and mudpits, where every step could make you sink in. As they left, we called it a day, and cooked our last veggies with rice. The last night on the track was pretty cold, and it snowed down to 800 meters. The final day brought us to the trackhead at Lake Manapouri, where we took the ferry back to civilisation.

I absolutely enjoyed this trip! The nature and landscape is just breathtaking, and to experience the sheer, overwhelming amount of water is impressive. The other hikers we met on the trip were really nice, especially the other "members" of the "Dusky Swim team", James, Felix and Sebastian. And thanks to Madeleine for having the idea and organizing the trip! So, what's left to say? If you have a chance, do it! And don't forget your snorkel...

Felix

References:

Transport:

<http://www.duskytrack.co.nz/>

Track Information at the Department of Conservation:

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/Explore/002~Tracks-and-Walks/Major-Tracks/Dusky-Track/index.asp>

(or just search Google)

more pictures:

www.schillnet.org