A Walk In The Park

For years my partner Susan had wanted to do a journey in the Fiordland National Park in the bottom left corner of New Zealand’s South Island. A trip which involves kayaking and tramping from Te Anau to George Sound and back. I had successfully weaselled out every time so far, drawing on an extensive range of excuses. Bad knees, work priorities, too cold, family duties and other patented specials.

Fiordland is a huge national park in the bottom left corner of New Zealand’s South Island and is an unmodified wilderness, with a single small tourist resort - Milford Sound. I was inwardly reluctant, but it would be her last trip for a while, and we had done more of my style of holiday on our last few travels, so I foolishly agreed to go. The trip would involve about 60 km of kayaking and 45 km of walking, or tramping as it is called in New Zealand.

The kayaking would be no problem for me, but I am no traper. I do not like walking and when I do go I suffer innumerable agonies, complain constantly and become clinically depressed. Agreeing to go on this trip was the first of a series of mistakes on my part.

Susan, however, was looking forward to the trip and did her usual detailed research, including dusting off a trip report on the route that she had been guarding for years.

At noon on Christmas eve 2012 we were underway. We had left the car at Te Anau Downs Lodge - a week’s supervised storage for the price of a few hours at a city parking meter.

We had a 25 km (16 mile) paddle ahead of us, followed by a portage to another lake. Susan thought we would need to unload and carry our empty boats, then take our kit over in packs. I reckoned we’d be able to drag the laden boats over the grass between the lakes and seal launch right back in. The next lake, Hankinson, is about 5 km long with a hut at the end, but I thought we could make it to the second hut, arriving at about 7 pm. These were my second and third mistakes.

In reality, the main lake, in glorious sun and dead calm, took far longer than we expected due to all sorts of photo stops along the way. Susan
had a new camera and it was the perfect day to practise. At the far end of the lake, we unexpectedly had to wash down our boats and gear with detergent provided, along with sponges, by the Department of Conservation (DOC) to prevent spreading an introduced alga to the upper lake.

The portage was not over the mown lawns I had imagined. We spent two hours unloading and carrying boats and packs over a steep forest trail. The next lake was treacle slow. We headed up the river feeding Lake Hankinson to find the hut had been washed away by floods. Or so we thought, until we found it an hour later, a few metres past the point that we decided it could not possibly be upstream of. While Susan scoured the bank for the hut, I kept swarms of sandflies entertained. Depending on where you go, sandflies can be New Zealand’s biggest nuisance. Fiordland is one of their strongholds, and their numbers suggested that we were expected. We finally got into Hankinson hut just shy of 10:00 pm – midsummer dusk in those southern latitudes. One of us was in secretly grumpy mood at our slow progress, as one of my schemes had been to get it all over with quickly. However, festive goodies revived the spirits and we collapsed, exhausted.

On Christmas morning we left the kayaks and boating equipment at the hut and got underway. An easy romp along the river lasted all of 500m before a three wire bridge. Susan was out of practice, and edgy, and urgent trembling of the foot wire telegraphed her state of nerves. Fiordland is one of their strongholds, and their numbers suggested that we were expected. We finally got into Hankinson hut just shy of 10:00 pm – midsummer dusk in those southern latitudes. One of us was in secretly grumpy mood at our slow progress, as one of my schemes had been to get it all over with quickly. However, festive goodies revived the spirits and we collapsed, exhausted.

Eventually we reached Thompson hut, left a food pack there for our return and enjoyed a glorious lunch in the sun by a roaring waterfall on the Wapiti River. I thought the afternoon would go better – bad mistake. In fact, this was where it started getting tough.

There are many ways to describe the trail from Thompson up to Henry Saddle. None of them is complimentary and most of them contain words that mothers discourage their children from using. I had never done such a track, if it can indeed be called that. It follows what in rainy weather would have been torrential watercourses up sixty degree terrain. Snails smirked as they overtook us. It was so tough I even stopped griping.
The track had been pioneered by Richard Henry, New Zealand’s first great conservationist. I imagined him striding along with the easy lope of a bushman. He’d be wearing a tweed suit and hobnail boots. On his back a couple of New Zealand’s endangered flightless night parrot, the kakapo, which Henry realised were being annihilated by introduced predators, and for which he was establishing an island reserve. They’d be in wooden crates strapped atop his knapsack. He’d be talking to them in a soft Irish brogue, telling them not to fret and that they’d soon be in their new home, and on the flatter sections he’d be whistling jigs from the old country. He’d be looking forward to a fish supper when he got to the coast and remembering the rock from which he caught a fat blue cod on his last visit.

After the steep stuff there is what appears to be a mercifully flat section on the approaches to Deadwood Lagoon. However we soon wished we were back on a slope because the ground was a semi liquid and we were constantly meeting boggy sections. Any bog could be an inch deep or knee high, there was no way to tell.

The planks of death was a series of forty some decomposing split tree trunks laid decades ago over particularly deep bogs that test the balance and the nerves. We were getting tired, and beginning to make mistakes. Susan, in a lucid moment, noticed a spot that was level and dry enough to pitch the tent, and so we stopped. Ecstasy.

During the day, I had been thinking mutinous thoughts and scheming ways to abort or curtail the expedition, but my plans needed a bit more time to brew, so I fermented them within. I also realised that timing of the mutiny would be crucial and I secretly schemed my moment.

While New Zealand has no poisonous or dangerous beasts, the sandflies can still make things miserable and we wore face veils in camp. They are tiny in size but their bites itch out of all proportion. Why they are prevalent in such huge numbers in certain areas is a puzzle as there is little for them to feed on.

“Well, what do sandflies eat when we’re not here?” We realise that there is no hope of ever answering this question. It is only possible to find out by carrying out a study, and being present would change the outcome, so the mystery remains unsolved. It’s a puzzle for a quantum physicist. Maybe they live on a diet of Schrödinger’s cats.

The forest was almost bereft of animal life, due to the presence of introduced predators, particularly mustelids such as stoats and weasels. In the whole trip we saw a few birds - woodpigeon, weka (a large native land rail) and finches, and we heard a handful of kea (the mountain parrot) and tui (a New Zealand nectar feeder), some shining- and long tailed cuckoos. Even common birds that have little fear of humans were scarce; one lonesome tomtit and a couple of fantails visited us. We saw plenty of tracks made by deer, pig, possum and stoat but saw nary a land beast. Trout there were aplenty, and according to the hut books, easy to catch. I’d assumed there would be kiwi, but we did

Crossing a boggy patch. Some were knee deep.
not hear a single call over 5 nights in the bush. In a huge wilderness this tiny amount of vertebrate life seemed very sad, and is due to man’s introduction of foreign species to an ecosystem that had developed over millennia with no mammalian predators or competitors.

The track is very well marked, with orange indicator arrows sometimes only 10 metres apart, and it was usually possible to see the way ahead easily. We fell for the trap of following some arrows that were pointing to the side, only to realise the tree they were on had fallen and had originally pointed straight ahead. If we did get off track, it was usually obvious within a few metres. Only on bare rock areas did we have to search for the route and then we would soon find a happy orange triangle smiling at us. A great job done by DOC in this respect – it was tough enough with good marking but without, it would have been a nightmare.

Within 100m of getting underway the next morning, the trail crossed the river but the marked route was too dangerous to climb down on the slippery rock, so we waded thigh deep to start the day. The level ground didn’t last – before long we were scrambling almost vertically up a dank gully which led to Henry Pass. As altitude increased, bush turned to scrub and different plant species predominated. Underfoot were only roots and rock, just damp enough to keep everything good and slippery. As we approached the saddle, clouds scudded through from the coast. At the very top a pristine white moth welcomed us to its domain.

We had a brief stop by the tarns on the saddle and examined the flowers. Mountain Daisy and other flowers were interspersed with the yellow blooms of Maori Onion. We raised a mental toast to the good Richard Henry himself. The pass is at 830 metres (2500 feet) above sea level. Susan was thinking ‘It will be brilliant to finally get through to the Sound’. I was thinking ‘If we were daft enough to go down to sea level, there would be 830 metres to climb back up’.

My carefully presented bait to suggest that reaching the pass was a massive achievement and that we should now turn back was completely ignored. It was like suggesting to a crack addict that stopping the habit might be a good idea. She had wanted to do this trip for years and her earlier attempt had been thwarted. There was no discussion. My feeble efforts were simply disregarded. On we went.

The next section crossed the bare rock of the saddle then the track dived down an extraordinarily steep gully which we christened Henry’s Crevise. It combined the features of a labyrinth, an assault course and a greasy pole. Next, a more level section where Susan spotted a flat area and we left the tent and a load of kit to lighten our loads. We hung a bag of food so that no pests could get at it and carried on. I had thought Fiordland had not been penetrated by opossums, but we heard one on the roof of Hankinson hut and saw their prints in the mud.

A section crisscrossing the beautiful Katherine Creek, another steep downhill and we spied below us Lake Katherine – last milestone on our route. As we descended, we had good views of the
surrounding terrain. It is scarily steep, with many slopes at 70 degrees, scarred by what might be termed landsides or rockfalls, and which in New Zealand are known as slips. The land is punctuated by hanging valleys and craggy tops towering more than a vertical kilometre above us. The forest on the opposite bank of the lake was in places tinged darker by the southern rata tree, its red flowers in full bloom.

Surely now we would just potter round the lake’s edge then stroll down the stream to the Sound. This track has a way of shattering every dream. The potter took three hours to cover a couple of kilometres. There were several huge slips, the newest still harsh and raw, with the first tiny ferns just beginning to grow in cracks. Huge southern beech trees, tumbled and shredded, lay jumbled along with the smashed rock. The older slips were greener, but steeper and harder to negotiate, and the track climbed many times to get above difficult ground. At several points there had been recent big treefalls meaning major detours, tricky climbs through the prostrate branches or balancing along the fallen trunk.

Leaving the lake, instead of sauntering down the leafy river bank, we inexplicably had another gruelling climb high up over angular mossy boulders strewn haphazardly, and the last leg took another age to complete. The track had been made by a madman with a broken compass and seemed to wander at random. By now I had finally worked out that every slope is actually a slip in some stage of self-repair in what is an endless cycle. The first lake we skirted with so much hardship had been a mature forest growing from the massive boulder fields of ancient slips and that’s why the going was so tough. I was learning the hard way.

We crossed the Katherine River at last and headed through the final section of bush until we saw the welcome sight of the hut and the gleam of the salt water that had been our goal. We had made it to the west coast.

The hut was bliss. My feet, wet for 12 hours, looking like albino prunes, enjoyed their freedom oblivious that they were only out on parole. We perfected techniques to keep sandflies out of the hut and lazed away a day in recuperation.

The hut book indicated that it gets a fair bit of use. People mainly arrive by boat, helicopter or floatplane and it is the most frequented of the huts. It had some fishing gear and a library of books.

Susan gathered mussels which were a tasty entrée to the evening meal of home dehydrated beef curry. It would have been nice to have stayed another day, but we had already had a Fiordland record of four successive dry days. Heavy rain would have made much of the track dangerous or
impassable, so we loaded up again, glad of our reduced pack weights. Was knowing what was in store for us a good thing? We weren’t sure.

My strategy was to be positive, put one foot in front of the other and imagine that it was easy - and it worked. We got back to the tent, packed it and the other gear we had left, and carried on.

On the way back we paused at different places. A postcard waterfall on the Katherine Creek at exactly 45 degrees south. An old dry landslip where the only thing that flourished was lichen, with old cairns so encrusted they looked like weird sea creatures. A bog where all the trees had mysteriously died. A stream of bright orange ooze, whereas all others were clean and weed free. At Henry Saddle, a helicopter was explored the ridgelines and we waved a cheery greeting.

Deadwood Lagoon looks fairly new in geological terms. It seems that a slip has blocked a stream, damming it, and the lagoon has formed in recent times. It is named for the ancient tree stumps protruding of the water, most of which have a decorative bonnet of colonising plants.

Deadwood Lagoon with its eponymous features

Rugged Burn, the stream that runs into the lagoon, is crystal clear and its water delicious. Over aeons, it has deposited masses of dead tree limbs to one area. They are barkless and smooth, tumbled and washed by the waters, and look like a pile of discarded antlers.

We used our previous campsite once again and dozed off to the rustle of a squillion sandflies on the tent, sounding like drizzle. In the morning the noise was still there, but this time it was light rain.

The journey back was just as hard, with bodies showing a few signs of wear but holding up well. We used walk poles on the planks of death this time which was a great help, particularly now that surfaces were wet and even more slippery. A break at Thompson hut where we lit a fire warmed the bodies and rekindled the spirits.
In Fiordland terms there had been a drought since we’d passed through, and the level of Lake Thompson had dropped over two metres, so instead of the arduous track weaving through forested boulders, we walked through mud and water round the lake’s edge. A big brown eel as fat as a farmer’s forearm thought the toe of my boot was its cousin and was very keen on renewing acquaintance. We discovered that eels can swim backwards, but not as gracefully as they would probably like.

The final sections passed mercifully quickly and at last we spied the hut. Within an hour of getting there, the rain came on properly. And how. With gale force winds, it lashed so hard all evening we wondered if we’d be able to finish the journey the following day.

But we had luck on our side. The rain and wind eased. We paddled Lake Hankinson, did the portage more efficiently, and had a tail wind down Middle Fiord. As we emerged into the main lake, we had half metre waves from behind and now similar ones coming from right angles which had some interesting effects on the boats. Later we heard that section of lake is notoriously difficult in wind.

After 7 days away, we got back into Te Anau on the evening of the 30th December and treated ourselves to a cabin for the night.

One of the fun things had been reading the entries in the hut books. Many of them were from hunters. The area is home to wapiti – huge elk so sought after that there is a ballot to allocate the limited hunting permits. Someone had made it all the way from George Sound to Thompson hut in one go and had written “10 hours - not bad for a couple of old codgers with artificial hips”. Not bad indeed – we are relatively young codgers and it took us half as long again and we camped part way.

One party had lost their EPIRB, and left an address for anyone finding to send it to. Remarkably, the next party found it and said they’d post it on. Another group had been at George Sound hut when an earthquake struck and aftershocks continued for three hours. We thought of the tremendous new slip nearby at Lake Katherine and wondered what if…

Few people, it seemed, did the track both ways – most got boat or air transport to or from George Sound. For non-kayakers it’s possible to omit the paddling altogether by getting a water taxi from Te Anau, and a second one across Lake Hankinson, and yet even this reasonably accessible hut had only had 12 parties logged over the past year. Henry Pass near the midpoint of the journey would not play host to many visitors. We saw not a soul in 7 days away, and this in peak season. Someone who’d been holed up for a few days waiting for a break in the weather wrote that he’d rather be eating a ‘Miles Better’ pie in Te Anau. On the strength of this recommendation, we found the shop and sampled their wares. Best pie ever. If you’re ever in New Zealand’s South Island, and south of Blenheim, Te Anau’s Miles Better Pies shop is worth the detour.
The tramp from Hankinson hut to George Sound had taken us 18 hours, and about 20 hours to get back, which we’d done over 2 days for each direction with a day off between. Our average speed was 1 km/hr (well under a mile per hour). Either side of the tramping was a paddle-portage-paddle of 25km, ½ km and 5km.

The best thing about the trip? From Susan’s perspective, a long held desire assuaged, friends and rivals beaten to the challenge and a week in the wilderness. From my point of view, I learned a lot about tramping in a short time, and I would never have to do this track again.

This is not a trip to be taken lightly, or one for the inexperienced, infirm or unfit. The sign to Thompson hut showed a travel time of 2 ½ hours and we took 3 ½. Some very fit friends who did it later took 3 hours and they were joined in the hut by a couple of fellows in their twenties who staggered in after almost 7 hours. While I am a tramping duffer, I was in pretty good physical condition. Susan is very experienced at this level of tramping. A high level of bushmanship is necessary.

We were very lucky with weather. A couple of days later Fiordland got half a metre (18") of rain in 3 days. Tracks were impassable and road bridges outside the park were washed out. In these conditions we might have needed to hole up for several days until conditions cleared, and we had taken 9 days food for a planned 5 days away for this reason. Deep in the wilds, any serious injury could be life threatening. I recalled a recent trip report I read in a magazine where, after a serious incident on a well-equipped group trip, the first couple of EPIRBs set off failed entirely to function. While we tend to assume that gadgets will save our skins these days, it makes you realise that your safety may end up relying only on our own abilities and knowledge.

Maps courtesy of Zoomin and the New Zealand Department of Conservation
Most photos by Susan Cade, others by the author

Sandy Winterton
January 2013