

Horse Trekking in New Zealand

Land of the Long White Cloud



After two years planning, Jim Shield, finally lived his dream to go horsetrekking in New Zealand, on a 12 day trek from Lake Tekapo to Waitohi Downs, on the South Island, with Alpine Horse Safaris.





Crossing the Two Thumb Range

Arriving at Waitohi Downs, about 1.5 hrs north of Canterbury, near the Balmoral Forest, I met my 14 fellow trekkers and Jenny from Alpine Horse Safaris (www.alpinehorse.co.nz).

Once introductions were made, we were all shown how to roll our clothes and sleeping bag into a swag roll and quickly discovered that we could only fit the bare essentials, so some choices and re-packing were needed, before eating a delicious meal and bedding down for the night. Next morning we headed off by mini bus to Mount Gerald Station at the northern end of Lake Tekapo where we met our other guide, Lawrie and Corinna, our chef, nurse and general all-round hand.

The Alpine horses have been bred over many years, to be sure footed to suit the terrain, and gentle to suit the riders.

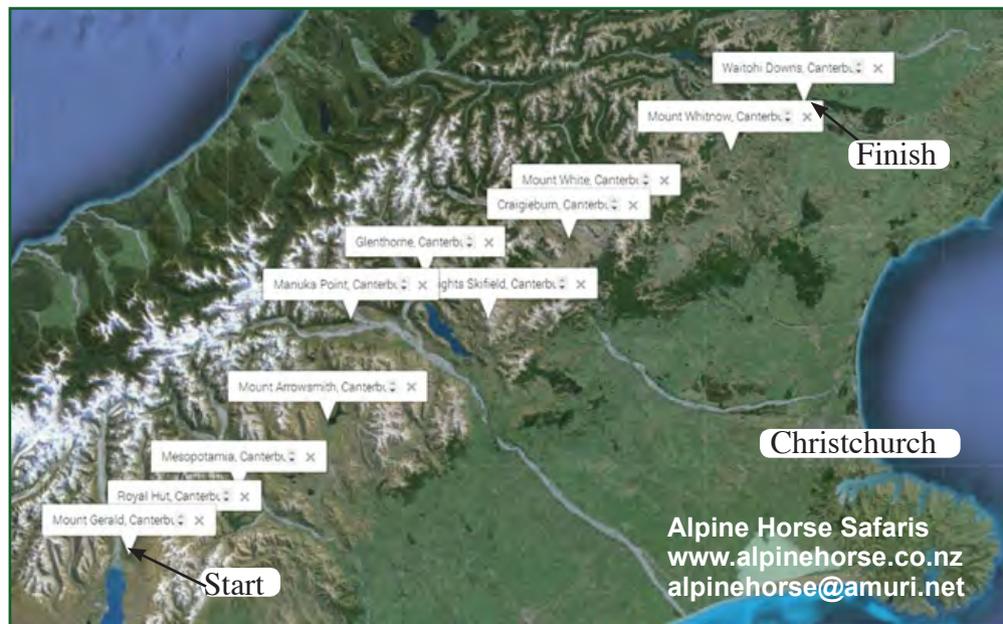
Horses were allocated here to match our height, weight and riding experience. I was given one of the senior horses named Beech and learned that she had done every trip to Tekapo there and back. The Clydesdale/Thoroughbred cross line have been bred for many years by Lawrie and Jenny, and they have developed a free moving, sure footed horse, safe in rough terrain. We saddled up and went for a short ‘get to know you’ ride and were given a health and safety briefing so that everything was ready to start bright and early the next morning. We soon found out this was not so much a holiday as an adventure, as we would be having breakfast at 5am each morning.

On these safaris everyone is encouraged to get involved in saddling their own horses and helping with saddling and loading the packhorses, which I was keen to learn from the start. All the swags and tucker boxes have to be weighed each morning so that each pack horse has an

even load on each side so the saddles do not slip. On this trip we had ten packhorses and four spare horses in case of injury. All the packhorses and spare horses ‘run free,’ that is, they are not led. They are kept in check by a rider in front and normally follow in single file in a pecking order with the senior horses up the front and the young horses at the back. Riders may be required to help if the packhorses need pushing along, or provide the occasional redirection if they decide on another route.

We left Mount Gerald on our first day, in low cloud with a four hour climb to the top of the Two Thumb Range. Halfway there the cloud began to clear and presented us with amazing views of Lake Tekapo and the Southern Alps, featuring Mount Cook, and by the time we reached the top at Stag Saddle (1924m ASL) the cameras were working overtime with the breathtaking views. We also experienced how sure footed these horses were as we had to negotiate some large scree rocks and snow drifts.

After stopping at the top for lunch we walked our horses down the loose scree as we descended onto an open tussock valley where we stopped to camp for the first night at the Royal hut. This hut is a single room hut





Rest stop on top of the Two Thumb Range

managed by the Department of Conservation (DOC) with an open fire and eight bunks. Tents are normally pitched, but as it was a nice evening volunteers decided to sleep under the stars. The horses were put in a paddock nearby after they were unloaded and the saddles stacked under a tarpaulin to keep them dry.

Each day, after we unloaded the horses and put the saddle blankets out to dry, we would have a welcome cup of tea or coffee and, when the horses were tended to and everything was set up, we would settle down with a beer or wine with cheese and crackers before dinner to talk about the day that had been. Most camps had showers available, but not at the Royal Hut, where you washed in the nearby stream. After dinner some people would have a drink and chat, some read books, but I can never remember really talking about what was happening in the outside world ...there were no

No phones, no facebook, no outside world. We talked about our day, around the campfire at night, or read a book.

phones - pure bliss!! We were pretty tired by the end of the each day, so were usually in bed by 9pm.

We headed away about 8.30 in the morning, on a gentle climb towards Bullock Bow Saddle with great views of surrounding mountains. This land is now

controlled by DOC but was once farmed by Mesopotamia Station where hundreds of wild deer were caught during the height of the deer boom in the 1970s. From the top of Bullock Bow Saddle we witnessed

another piece of breath taking scenery of steep scree slopes in mist disappearing to the valley floor way below. We followed a track down into Beech forest and then open country making our way to Mesopotamia shearers' quarters for the night. The next day all our swags and tucker boxes were driven around to Mount Arrowsmith Station, which gave the pack horses a day's rest from carrying a load.

Our third day was another clear one as we headed

across the Rangitata River viewing Mount Potts and Erewhon Stations in the distance, and on to Hakatere country with vast areas of developed land that has been made possible by the DOC taking control of marginal and less productive country, supplementing the farmers. We stopped for lunch looking across to Lake Clearwater, then rode through open tussock country to Mount Arrowsmith, a highly developed sheep and cattle property which runs down to the shores of Lake Heron. We camped in their modern woolshed with all the conveniences for a comfortable stay. Here we replenished our food and supplies to last us for the next four days.

Next day dawned cloudy as we rode around the northern end of Lake Heron and the rain had started to set in before we tackled the mighty Rakia River which takes about an hour to cross. Our camp for the night was Manuka Point, a luxurious hunting lodge, which was most welcome after the wet day.

The Wilberforce River in all its moods governed Mona Anderson's life for 33 years, and was inspiration for her best-seller A River Rules My Life.

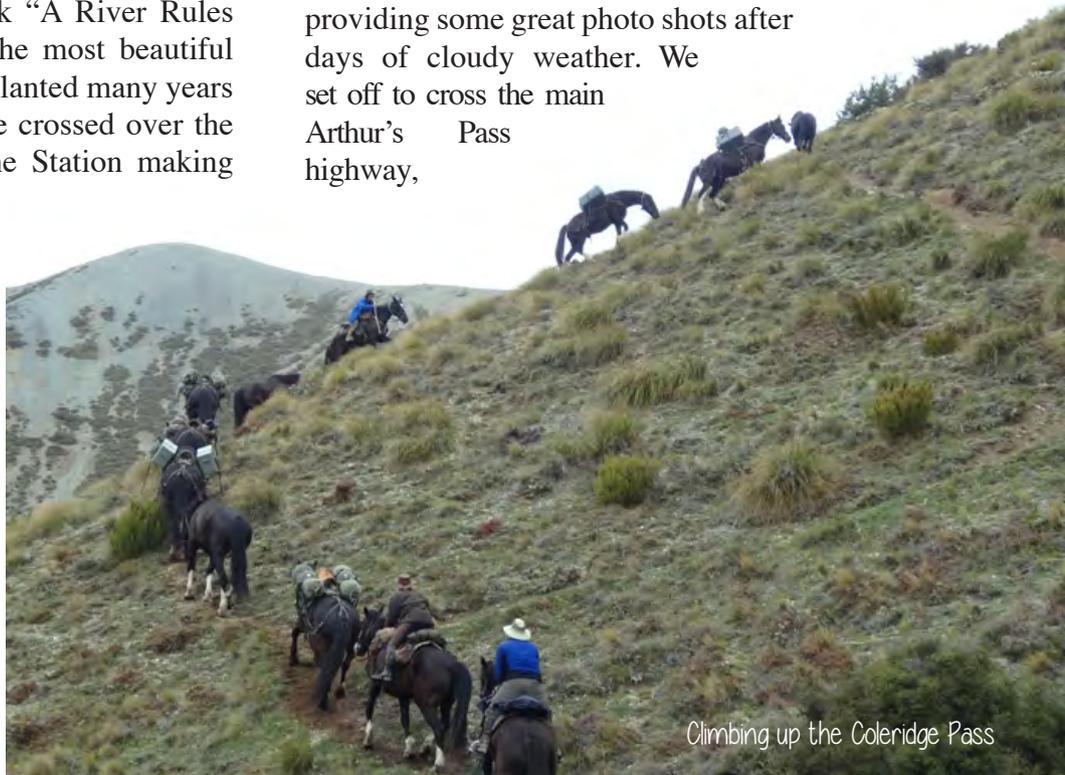
It was a drizzly morning, as we headed off over the Mathias River on to Mount Algidus Station, made famous by Mona Anderson's book "A River Rules My Life", where we rode past the most beautiful English trees that must have been planted many years ago, possibly by Mona herself. We crossed over the Wilberforce River onto Glenthorne Station making our way up to the junction of the Harper and the Avoca River then on to the Retreat Hut where we were to stay two nights. This was to be our rest day for both horses and riders. A former Forest service camp, there is a main building and two smaller huts aptly named 'The Honeymoon Suite' and the 'Refugee Hut'. The horses were rested in a lush paddock nearby, with a stream running through. Rest day for people consisted



of doing some washing and most of us going for a walk up to Lake Lilean, about 20 minutes from the hut. One of our group brought a collapsible fishing rod and managed to catch two nice trout, which were to become our entrée for dinner that night.

We crossed the confluence of the Harper and Avoca Rivers next morning and rode looking down onto Lake Coleridge in the distance before a steep climb up to and over the Coleridge Pass, then followed the Porter River down to Porter Heights Skifield Lodge for the night. As there was no grazing around the lodge we had to paddock the horses about 2km down the road.

A clear day greeted us on our seventh morning, the mountains and the mist hanging in the valleys providing some great photo shots after days of cloudy weather. We set off to cross the main Arthur's Pass highway,



down the Porter River where we viewed some stunning limestone rock outcrops on Castle Hill Station.

We then rode onto Flock Hill Station with vast areas of flat and downy tussock land heading for Craigieburn Station shearers' quarters for the night.

After a wet and windy night, the next day intended to be about a five hour ride to Mount White Station. When we got to the Waimakariri River we managed to cross the smaller braids but the main braid was too high and dirty, so we had to turn back to Craigeburn. We took the horses to Grassmere Lodge next to Arthur's Pass Highway to graze for the night and we were ferried back to Craigieburn for another night.

Next morning we saddled up, heading for the Mount White Bridge which crosses the Waimakariri River. Heading up the main highway for about a kilometre, this was one of only two times that we had to lead the packhorses (the other was through a hay paddock on the last day). Once across the Mount White Bridge we headed for very comfortable quarters at Mount White Station for the night. Mount White is an iconic 150,000 acre station that is still run in a very traditional farming style.

Another beautiful morning next day as we headed through some very scenic country of bush and tussock lands, arriving about mid-afternoon at Cattle Creek Hut. With one room and eight bunks tucked away in



Safety First. Instead of forging across the swollen Waimakariri River we had to take the 'easy way', over the bridge.

the bush, this hut would have been one of our favourite spots on the trip. Next morning we had a steep climb over the Puketeraki Range.

We could not have picked a better day weather wise, and as when we reached the top we had magnificent views over most of Canterbury. The top of this range was all scree and again showed us all how well the horses handle this terrain and we all agreed that it was probably the highlight of the entire trip.

After riding along the top we led our horses down a considerable part of the way before riding on to Mount Whitnow Station quarters for the night where there were fresh baked pikelets

to meet us and another beautiful meal. This was our last real night together on the trip and, after 12 days, we had all made great friends.

Next day our swags and pack saddles were transported by truck, so we had an easy ride back to Waitohi Downs, our final destination, to wash the horses down and let them have a well earned rest.



Stunning views at every turn in the track