

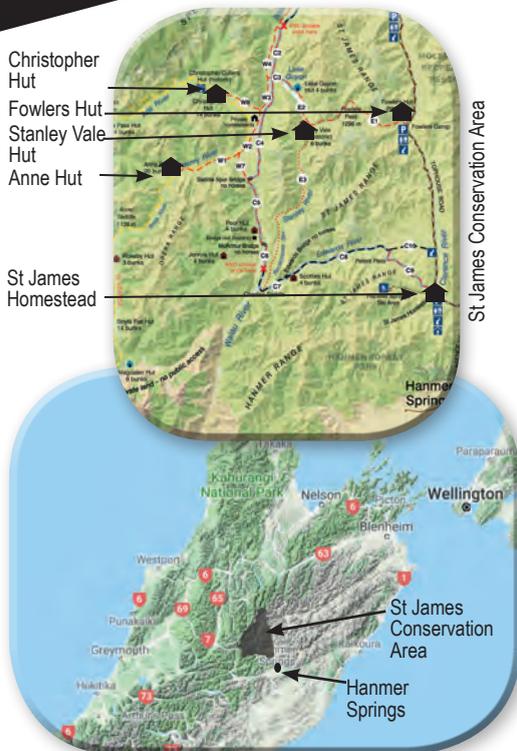
Photos and words by Liz Tollarzo



Katie, Rosie riding Rosy and Elizabeth on Della.

Dressage rider Elizabeth Tollarzo set out on the 26<sup>th</sup> February 2018 for an adventure in New Zealand that proved to be an experience of a lifetime!

# Horse Trekking in New Zealand



“It had all started when a friend, Rosie Stroud, who is an amazing determined lady, decided she would organise her own horse trek through the South Island of New Zealand – a plan that had taken her nearly a year to put together, starting with a Facebook plea for anyone in NZ that would loan her some horses for the trek. Although she didn’t receive any definite responses Rosie continued her plans, mapping out amazing routes and gathering equipment for the adventure. Finally, three horses were kindly offered - Rosie’s plan was for two riding horses and a packhorse so she could have different friends/riders join her over a two-month period.”

## GEAR AND EQUIPMENT

“The cost of setting up for a packing trip was quite expensive as Rosie wanted the horses to be comfortable and riders to be safe. She purchased a pack saddle from America for \$2,500 (plus import tax); two second hand English all-purpose saddles that fitted the horses well at \$4,000; attended a pack-saddle course - \$300; tent and camping equipment \$1,500; hire of emergency personal locator beacon (PLB) \$100; food and accommodation \$1,000; horse transport \$500; farrier \$300; electric fence unit \$200; halters and lead ropes \$80 and, of course, what every packing trip these days needs, a drone to record the trip at \$2,500.

“The plan was for Rosie to go to New Zealand four weeks before the trip was due to start and get to know the horses, get them fit, and check the gear fitted. Rosie found the horses were not in work at all so, with help of the owners, she started riding them, organised a saddle fitter and farrier, and went to work. The owners loved their horses and didn’t like using bits,



The St James wild horses



A beautiful country



One of the many huts available for trekkers and hunters in the St James Conservation area.

SO Rosie rode them in a normal halter, which made some control issues interesting as they were quite 'green'. Unfortunately, due to this, Rosie had to cancel most of her friends who were coming to join her as their riding experience would have made the trip too dangerous and it was at this time that I committed to joining her adventure!"

## THE HORSES

"The three horses were all ex-pacers (Standardbreds) and around 15-hand, that had not been ridden very often by the owners, who did horse hire trekking themselves. On the upside, the horses lived in a herd situation in a large paddock that included the side of a very steep hill, so they knew how to keep their feet on difficult terrain and they were in very good condition. All three were mares and none of them liked each other in the herd situation, which did cause a few issues on the trek!

There was Katie (the alfa mare) the pack-horse, Rosy (a rather reactive mare) and Della, the last horse to be included one week before starting off (the lowest pecking order mare).

Rosie received heaps of support and advice from locals, showing just how amazing horse people can be and how wonderful the people of New Zealand are! With the hard decision needing to be made on whether to continue or not, Rosie decided to push-on despite the odds against her."

## STARTING OFF

"The plan was to ride from Reglan Station with one of her best friends, Emma, who was an experienced horse rider and travel towards Hanmer Springs to do some trekking in the St James and Hanmer Heritage forests.

The trip to Hanmer Springs should have taken 3-4 days, however Rosie and Emma soon found this impossible as Katie the pack horse loved to stop and pull the rope out of their hands and then take off back the way they had come, or towards the greenest field! This happened many, many, many times a day.

To catch her, Rosie and Emma took turns getting off and running on foot, as she just ran off if approached by the other horses - so it turned into a marathon running pursuit, which of course meant the three to four day trip took nearly two weeks to complete."

## MY ARRIVAL

"I arrived a week after Emma had gone home, during which time a cyclone had hit the South Island making rivers rage and many areas wet and muddy. Just before I flew to New Zealand, Rosie had informed me that there were sand flies aplenty, which was just in time to pack a large can of Bushmans, which took care of that problem! I also made two contraptions with a few clips and a bit of rope that I thought would work well to convert the halters into a bitless bridle. A breastplate was also packed as Rosie had found that saddles don't always stay put going up hills when there are saddle bags tied to it!"

Continued

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Horse Trekking in NZ continued...

## CAMP ROUTINE

“Before setting off every morning the pack saddles needed to be weighed carefully to ensure each saddle was exactly the same weight, so they were even and would not make Katie sore. Rosie had our meals all organised with porridge for breakfast and many dehydrated meals for dinner, which were actually very tasty. We only carried one litre of water each with us as water was available from the many water-courses as we travelled.

The next morning we organised the gear (although Rosie had it all working like a machine by now - she was amazingly organised and super prepared!) - and waited for a horse truck to transport us and the horses into the St James Conservation Area.

We had altered our original plans due to high water in the rivers making horse crossings too dangerous, so our first day was only a six to seven hour ride to Christopher Hut along Ada Valley.

This was still amazing with some steep tracks and many river crossing, and my first attempt at trying to get Katie to lead better with mixed results. The horses continued to bicker amongst themselves, which made for endless entertainment as we tried different combinations in the search for tranquility.

Converting the halters into bitless bridles worked well and by the end of this ride the horses were steering and stopping much better, giving us much more control of where we were going.

We both wore full length raincoats and knee high waterproof riding boots, which were a necessity for the first few days. When we arrived at night at the various campsites we made sure the horses had been offered a drink at the nearest river before we untacked and then just turned them into a paddock for the night. Everywhere we stayed had amazing pasture.

Christopher Hut was in a pass where a group of the famous St James Wild horses were penned. High mountains and fencing at each end of this enormous valley kept the horses in. The St James wild horses are managed wild herds, and this herd consisted of mostly two year olds and some older wiser horses in the herd to show the youngsters what to do. It was beautiful to look out of the hut and see the wild horses galloping down the valley ... and they were very beautiful horses too, showing a lot of heavy horse or Clydesdale breeding.

## THE HUTS

“The huts are available for any hikers for a small fee, which is left in the honesty box or pre-paid before setting off.

The huts offer shelter, a place to sleep and a mattress and most have a kitchen of sorts and a fireplace.

Spread throughout the mountain regions most huts have horse paddocks around them - although it was important to check the condition of the fences.

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On the second day we had planned a bit of a pleasure ride, leaving Katie in a paddock. After breakfast, we went out but instead of our quiet horses waiting to be saddled we found all three mares dripping with sweat, rolling, striking out, galloping through the forest – the culprit was bot flies, which these mares were not accustomed to. All three horses had mesh fly rugs on, however the bots flew up under the rugs, making the horses more panicky. We took the rugs off, calmed the mares and led them out to a paddock where they huddled together and gradually settled, but after this experience we decided to go for a hike on foot instead!

The third day we did our exploration of the St James Valley near Henry River and up to Anne Hut, which is the highest situated hut in the area. We passed many hikers on foot and some on mountain bikes and the paths in this area were clearly marked with pickets so it was near-on impossible to get lost, although Rosie used her GPS to check we stuck to our planned route. Rosy the horse loved to give Rosie (the rider) a bit of extra expression by trying to buck ever so often and cantering up every hill!

Leaving Christopher Hut we headed to Lake Guyon, which is an amazing lake teeming with rainbow trout – although every stream appeared to have good stocks of trout.

I had made a rope neck collar for our reluctant packhorse, Katie, so she really improved during the course of the ride and started to learn to lead.

We passed fishermen, who were having a great day with trout and catfish, as we continued upwards towards the historic Stanley Vale Hut, which was renowned as an excellent place for hunters

to base. When we arrived at this hut there were already three deer hunters inside so we set up the tent instead and just used the table inside the hut for preparing dinner.

There were excellent horse paddocks at this venue so the horses had water and feed available all the time.

We had some very interesting land to travel along Fowler’s Pass towards Fowler’s Hut. Having been told it was okay with a pack horse we thought it would be a very beautiful but relaxing ride, as Katie was really improving with the leading.

Over eleven hours later we finally made it to Fowler’s Camp at around 9.30pm at night using our head torches!

Wow, it was an amazing experience as we covered breathtaking areas and enjoyed stunning views, followed the GPS instead of the picket track markers, climbed up and down mountains we didn’t need to climb, backtracked many kilometres, rode on the side of a massive mountain as well as up and down the same mountain! Backtracking again to end up on the original picketed path,

*Left: Two of the huts , top Christopher and middle is Stanley Vale, where we camped in the tent as the hut was occupied by hunters. Below: Fitting the chest strap to the pack saddle gear to prevent slipping on uphill travel.*

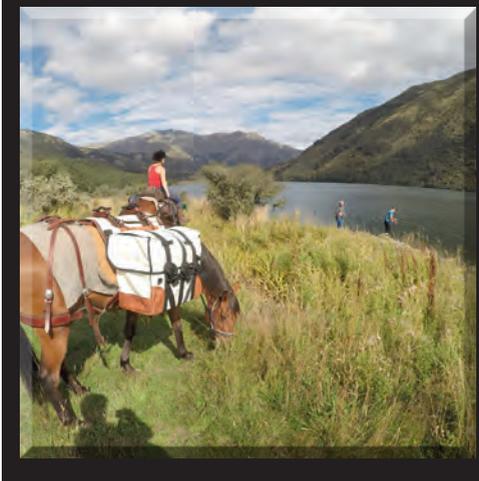
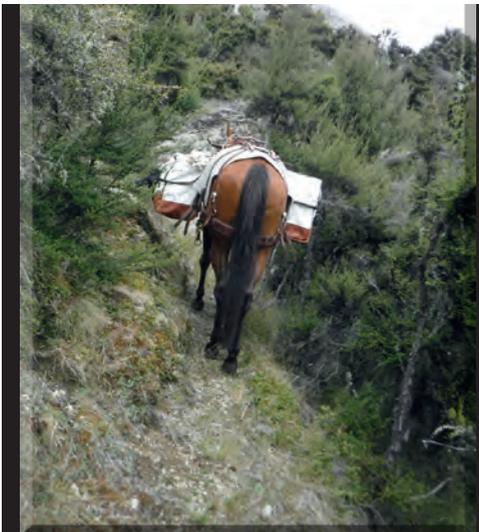


which included a track that we found did not allow for the width of our pack horse and its gear!

Poor Katie got stuck many times, hitting the trees on the sides of her pack saddle when the track became tight on all sides. We had to walk the horses so we could help them where needed as the track was only as wide as a horse's chest with a steep drop down the side of the mountain.

*Katie started to panic and tried to barge through the trees, she became impossible to hold before spinning and bolting, only to then turn and proceed straight over the mountain edge!*

Tying our horses up to other trees on the path we managed to climb down to where Katie had been half suspended by her packs in the trees and yet amazingly calm and still in one piece. We unpacked her, fastened on a long lead and managed to drive/drag her back up the mountain. After this experience we had to lead all three horses down the track for around 100 metres, tie them to trees, walk back and carry



*Left: The narrow, steep sided track was not wide enough for the packs.  
Below: We met fishermen in this beautiful wild country.*

the two 25kg pack saddles down till we were level with the horses. We then repeated this exercise of moving horses 100 metres and following with packs, over and over again until we had descended the mountain the 'recommended way' via the track.

Darkness fell just as we reached the bottom of the mountain – I really wasn't looking forward to camping on that narrow track at night - so thank goodness we made it down! This was certainly a ride (and a walk) to be remembered!

Our last day was very tame in comparison as it was along four-wheel drive tracks to St James Homestead, where we found a nice paddock for the horses before heading by car back to Hanmer Springs for a night's stay at a hostel before I returned to Australia.

This certainly was a trip with a difference and has to be classed as an experience of a lifetime. It was fun, challenging and at times dangerous, but this amazing opportunity of travelling with a good friend and bonding with a horse that you had to trust with your life, as well as seeing what has to be one of the most beautiful countries in the world - is one I will cherish forever.”

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