

Remote Stewart Island.



Tramping – the kiwi word for Hiking – is a national sport in New Zealand, a bit like drinking beer is one for Belgium. To experience one of the best remote areas and wilderness of New Zealand and to spot a kiwi bird –a national's symbol-, I decided to tramp the 'North West circuit'. This 120 km loop track is in the Northern part of the 3rd biggest kiwi island located south of the South Island. Do you follow me? Under grey clouds, I took the early morning ferry in Bluff to cross the Foveaux strait to Oban, Stewart Islands' town. After registering my walk at the visitor's centre, I set off to walk directly on the "highway" –a dull easy woodboard path- to the first hut. Just before reaching it, I passed a 50 year old American woman and her 23 year old son. They told me they loved hiking and were experienced... but I guess they did not realize that the country standards were much higher than in the USA.

At that time we were rock hopping on the beach, the woman was very slow and didn't seem comfortable with that terrain. It was their first walk in the country and it takes usually 10 days to do the loop, but they obviously didn't expect the forthcoming difficulties and in a way some fun: mud, knee deep mud, waist deep mud, mud holes, mud ponds, sand and mud, mud and roots, mud and slopes, rain-mud-wind-and-mud, swamps and quick sand, more rock and boulder hopping. Have I mentioned mud already? On that first day I was walking to the second hut, planning to walk on the second day to the third hut and climb to the Island's summit and stay overnight at the second hut, where I expected to be joined by my fellow American trampers... but they never came. One week after, I was told they had turned back being struggling in calf deep mud. The funny part with mud is that some women pay fortunes to have it on their body, while here it's free to add up kilograms until wondering if your feet aren't heavier than your backpack.



On the third day, I was walking up a slope when I heard noise and saw the high grass moving at steady speed towards me. Not understanding what it was, I started screaming my soul of out my body until I saw a brown ball with two feet running towards me. It stopped 1 meter from me. I stopped screaming, realizing I encountered my first kiwi bird, the bird looked at me for 2 seconds to found out the strange sound came from a 6 feet tall creature and run away in opposite direction. Later, I reached the hut one hour before my plan and had a good noodle soup with kiwis. They told me, my walking guide was not up-to-date, the hut had been moved because of a landslide, and was relocated closer to the previous hut but then further away form the next hut.



Each advantage has its failure, and I had to wake up very early on the forth day to walk two huts distances across 'Hellfire' pass. During that day I had to poo in the wild, when I was disturbed by another kiwi. Again I couldn't get a photo of it as you know I cannot run faster with my pants down than a bird with two long legs. At the end of the day, after sunset, I struggled for 2 hours in the pitch black forest and mud to see the moon shining on the dunes at 11 pm just where the hut was located.

I was exhausted, hungry and had tripped over many roots hidden in the mud and was completely brown with yellow sandy feet –the opposite colors of the Yeti-. When entering the hut, the half asleep German couple had heard my whistle and were not frightened by the caveman. The fifth day was easier and the three of us reached Mason bay early and went spotting kiwis with a ranger. When we saw the bird, no one moved and it passed half a meter away from us without noticing, being busy looking for food. The two lasts days were not so muddy, and I reached Oban in time to debrief at the visitor's centre and to catch my ferry back to Bluff.

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