



DESTINATION

Paparoa Track

Cutting through primeval rainforest and towering limestone gorges, the forthcoming Paparoa Track is New Zealand's first new Great Walk in 25 years

WORDS **SARAH STIRLING**

📍 Sarah admires the limestone Pororari River Gorge – the West Coast's most spectacular



Just as my partner Rob strode away to get dinner started at the mountain hut, the bird magic began. When you're quiet, forests seem to engage you on a deeper level, and nowhere is that truer than in New Zealand. When the Gondwana supercontinent broke up, this fragment of islands drifted north and spent 80 million years in isolation, preserving a chunk of primeval rainforest as a living museum of life before mammals.

It was approaching dusk and tendrils of otherworldly light were filtering through the trees as I dawdled. Suddenly, a small bird swooped through the canopy and landed on a moss-covered log next to me. The feathered grey ball planted its legs wide, folded its wings behind its back and looked at me with confiding eyes. South Island robins can live to be 14 years old, are monogamous and reign over territorial patches in pairs. This one had wise eyes. New Zealand's birds didn't encounter humans until geologically recently – the first settlers rowed over from Polynesia in the 1200s – and as a result, many are more instinctively curious than fearful. Assessment complete, the robin flew off between the ancient podocarp trees.

Next, a nearby fern rustled... one of New Zealand's cheekiest birds flattened itself into a straight line and ran, startled, like a cartoon roadrunner, kicking up red beech litter. Once safe behind a fan of yellowish-green leaves, the weka played coquettish peekaboo.

The West Coast of New Zealand's South Island is one of the best places to see rare birds such as robins and wekas. Hemmed in between the snowcapped Southern Alps and the pounding Tasman Sea, the wild strip has been sparsely populated throughout human history – apart from a brief, heady gold rush.

There's also coal in them thar hills: the first section of the 55km Paparoa Track follows an existing path, the Croesus Track, which is one of the finest surviving examples of a 19th-century coal miners' walk to work. It begins just outside Blackball, a sleepy town with a claim to fame. In 1908, miners went on strike here, arguing for a lunch break extension from 15 to 30 minutes and an eight-hour day rather than the 10 hours their employer wanted. When they won, their moral grit took the organisation of trade unions in New Zealand to another level. Little has changed here since the coal days. The hub is a traditional, resolutely quirky Kiwi pub/hotel named Formerly the Blackball Hilton after an altercation with a certain hotel chain.

Continuing my pre-dinner stroll, I popped out above the bush-line and caught a glimpse of the Ces Clark Hut ahead. To my left, I could see nothing but forested mountains. The sun was setting, turning gathering clouds purple. A whoop echoed down; Rob, looking for me from the hut's huge panoramic windows. Dinner was ready, >



NEW ZEALAND



📍 Clockwise from top left: Sarah surrounded by lush ferns on the Croesus Track; a rare but instinctively curious South Island robin; on Pike29 Memorial Track; the hotel known as Formerly the Blackball Hilton

cooked on a camping stove, and the log burner was lit. Only 10km along the Paparoa Track, I was enchanted.

Moonlight Tops

We had planned on returning to our car the next morning but the bush gods seemed intent on tempting us further along the Paparoa Track. We were settled in with books and breakfast, hoping the rain would clear, when a chopper broke the silence. Two hours later, two grey-haired men emerged from the thinning mist and wandered into the hut. One was wild-blue-eyed and excited, the other calm and responsible behind spectacles.

We told them our story: we had asked the Department of Conservation (DOC) if we could preview the new Great Walk, so that I could write about it. The response had essentially been: 'You dafties, the path's still being built!' While the two ends of the Paparoa Track are existing tracks, the 40km-section along a ridge and escarpment in between them will be new. Path-building teams had been working towards each other for months. Thwarted, we'd decided to walk the existing section to the Ces Clark Hut, then turn back.

The two men looked at each other. The calm one, it transpired, was Tom Hopkins, manager of the project to build the new

Great Walk; the other was an engineer. They were here to see how it was coming along.

Tom pulled out a map, showed us how far the track building had progressed, and gave us permission to walk past 'Track Closed' signs as far as those points. Two new mountain huts have been built along the Paparoa Track. We could, we realised, reach Moonlight Tops hut that day, then descend and spend the next day hiking up the tail of

the path to the other one – Pororari Hut. We'd only miss an 18.7km section of summit ridge between them. We readied ourselves.

On leaving the Ces Clark Hut, the bush gave way to the dry yellows of alpine tussocks and grasses, and we soon reached the Paparoa ridgeline. When the mist swirled open, we glimpsed sea views. From here, the Croesus Track descended west, while the new track snaked north, artfully carved into the mountain crest. Over the past 25 years, there has been a renaissance in traditional track-building methods in New Zealand – fitting the track to the land, rather than the opposite. Interestingly, this is the first Great Walk that is also open to mountain-bikers. It climbs with graceful curves rather than breathless zigzags.

After three hours' walking, we spied the new red Moonlight Tops hut ahead. Every Great Walk has its USP, and the Paparoa Track's is its escarpment, a 700m-high cliff with exposed coal seams. Sunsets from the hut are apparently incredible, as the light reflects from the white escarpment and slips into the sea.

From here, there will be two options: carry on along the top of the escarpment, enjoying sheer, dramatic views, or descend east on a new 11km side track through virgin podocarp and beech forest – this Pike29 Memorial Track commemorates the >

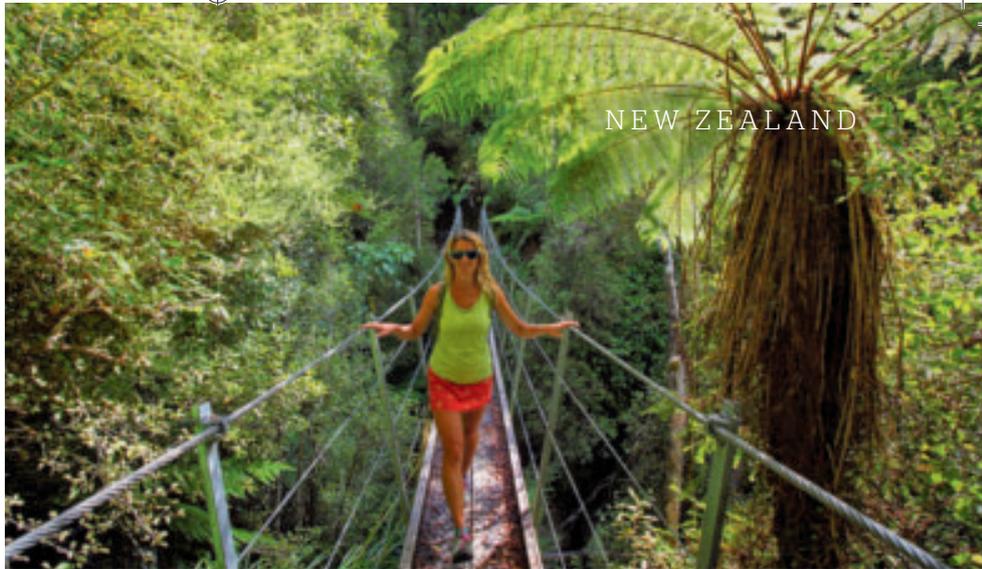
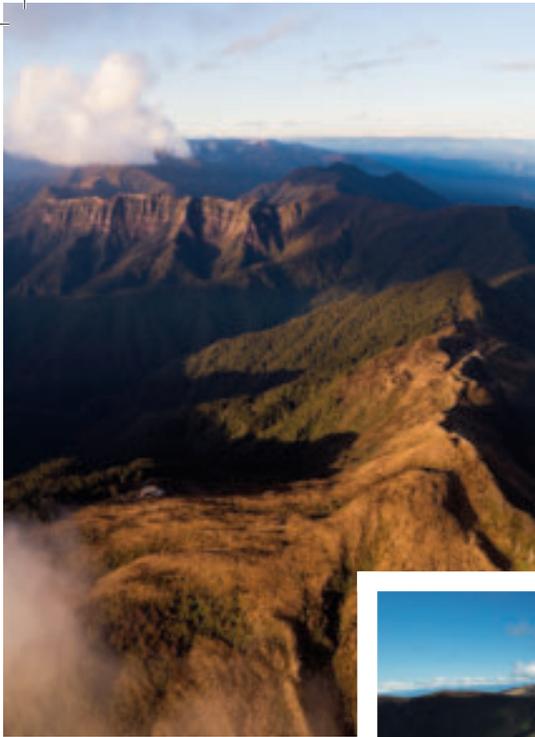
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📍 Clockwise from top left: part of the Paparoa Track's 700m-high escarpment; Sarah on one of the many bridges along the route; sunset with the Ces Clark hut in the foreground; Moonlight Tops

29 men who died in 2010 in a mine explosion at the end of this track.

It feels really wild up on the ridge, which at roughly 1,200m is the highest point of the Great Walk. Paparoa means 'Long Place' – this mountain range extends for a huge 29 miles. In all directions there is rippling, dense bush penetrated by ridges, steep cliffs and deeply incised rivers.

On the eastern horizon, we could make out the white tips of the Southern Alps. Tantalisingly, this was where we had to turn back.

The Pororari River Gorge

The next morning, we set off up the tail of the Paparoa Track, an existing walkway through the West Coast's most spectacular river gorge. The powers of nature seemed suspended mid-battle here – towering fortresses of limestone forcing up through the bush, tresses of greenery reclaiming cracks in the rock and the river, relentlessly carving its passage through.

I spotted New Zealand orchids growing from a tree trunk – they smell of honey – and nikau, the world's southernmost palm.

The gentle hum of cicadas gave a tropical feel. Flashes of colour crisscrossed the trail – this is one of the best places to see New Zealand's forest birds.

After 3km, we reached the end of the gorge walkway, skirted 'Path Closed' signs and continued along the newly built Paparoa Track as it climbed, following the river towards its source. We could really feel that we were among the first people to walk through this pristine section of bush. Seaweed-like lichen was draped liberally from the trees and beams of sunlight were pouring through into the dark depths, giving the feeling of being underwater.

Finally, we reached the new green Pororai Hut, a clearing giving it views along the main spine of the Paparoa Range. At the time of writing, this was the end of the path. It would take workers months to pick a route through the impenetrable bush between here and the escarpment we could see across the valley.

So far, though, the new track had been a delight. Sweeping along riverbanks, zigzagging up steep ascents and running along every ridgeline, the path had kept our eyes moving from one vista to the next, focusing on curled ferns one moment, then opening out to expansive views of valleys and ridges disappearing into the West Coast mist. I can't wait to walk the whole route. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT PARTTRIDGE, SARAH STIRLING, JASON BLAIR, NEIL SILVERWOOD.COM, STEWART NIEMCO, ALAMY



Walk it!

TIME/DISTANCE 55km/34 miles. The Paparoa Track starts at Smoke-ho car park near Blackball and ends at the Pororari River car park near Punakaiki. It can be walked over two or three days, with stays in mountain huts (must be pre-booked).

MAPS Pick up the *Paparoa Track Great Walks* booklet from any Department of Conservation office in New Zealand. Or download it from doc.govt.nz

ACCOMMODATION Formerly the Blackball Hilton hotel is a quirky base from where you can explore the local mining heritage. Nearby Greymouth has a range of accommodation and food options.

