



KIWI CROSSING: A bridge over the namesake stream of New Zealand's Routeburn Track

TRAMPING HILLARY'S BACKYARD

Routeburn Track

NEW ZEALAND



Not a half day into the Routeburn Track, at a place called Key Summit, the peaks of Mount Aspiring National Park surround an open meadow set high on a rare triple continental divide. From there, three epic valleys—the Hollyford, the Eglington, and the Greenstone—drain west into the Tasman Sea, south into the Southern Ocean, and east into the Pacific. On the horizon stands the imposing Daran Range, where Sir Edmund Hillary prepped for Everest. It's a portentous spot, itself reason enough for a trip to the other side of the world.

The Routeburn, one of New Zealand's nine "Great Walks," is less crowded than its world-famous neighbor, the Milford Track, and the scenic payoffs along the Routeburn's alpine stretches far surpass those of the lower, often cloudier Milford. The Routeburn's easily-traveled route connects two of New Zealand's conservation jewels, Mount Aspiring and Fiordland National Parks, via a high alpine pass named the Harris Saddle. To reach the saddle, you'll travel through valleys choked with rain forests reminiscent of the Pacific Northwest, except that in New Zealand's Southern Alps the green gossamer in the trees is goblin

moss instead of lobelia, and the forest is twisted silver beech and red beech, not Douglas fir. The flora here is hyperabundant: Hikers who set out in December and January will witness an explosion of wildflowers, including the kotukutuku, the world's largest variety of fuchsia, and the Mount Cook Lily, the biggest species of buttercup on Earth.

INSIDER ADVICE: Start on the Milford side at The Divide trailhead and finish on the Queenstown side at the Dart River valley—one of New Zealand's most scenic valleys and the site of the breath-taking Rohan scenes in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

WHEN TO GO: November to April
LOGISTICS: The hike is staged from Queenstown on the wild and sparsely populated South Island. Air New Zealand flies the two-hour trip between Auckland, the capital, and Queenstown several times each day (\$188; www.airnz.co.nz). Transportation to The Divide trailhead is easily arranged from Queenstown, where hut fees (\$50), hiking information, and guided options (\$690 for three days; www.routeburn.co.nz) are also available. Because of the Routeburn's growing popularity, it's advisable to reserve your spot on the trail in advance through the New Zealand Department of Conservation Web site (www.doc.govt.nz).

STAGING AREA:

Queenstown, New Zealand

DISTANCE:

28
MILES

TRAIL TIME:

3-4
DAYS

TOTAL TRIP:

Two Weeks

DIFFICULTY (SCALE OF 1 TO 5, 5 MOST DIFFICULT):

2.5

DIY COST (INCLUDING AIRFARE):

\$2,500-\$3,000