

Well how long ago does Christmas seem. I've just had a look and the last time I wrote was just before Christmas. Well our Christmas was all about preparation. Last birthday Steph



bought us places on an organised Milford Track hike, it's one of New Zealand "Great Walks" and it is very good, we did it when we first came here 25 years ago. Its also a proper four day hike with a pretty big hill in the middle so my first reaction when I opened the present was "I'm not ready", luckily Steph has it booked for February this year so we had some time to practice. Practicing is what we have been doing, we hiked a lot in the UK and have continued when we got back. We worked out what we would need to carry and made up a 10KG pack and have started doing all our walks with it. We have mixed up our Tuesday trips to the cinema and done the 15KM round trip on foot, it takes half a day by the time we watched "Wonka" but the walk being along the river bank it's a lovely way to spend an evening.

The other part of the preparation is making sure our newly planted garden survives the summer, we have installed an automatic watering system and friends are kindly helping

out with watering and looking after the worms. Fingers crossed its all still alive when we get back.

Its actually pretty inspired by Steph, having a large tent-pole

event like the hike has shaped the whole of last year and given us something to look forward to and also to plan and train for. I am slowly getting the hang of the new rhythms of life in retirement, and I have to say rather enjoying them.

Allowing for travel to and from the track the whole thing only takes a week but we had decided to take the car across to the South Island and spend a month or so touring around, we didn't actually have a return trip booked so it



turned out to be five weeks. We were going to use the time to carry on training and also have a proper summer holiday. Its quite strange having such a long holiday, we were planning to do the





walk with some friends, who had to work but they came across on the ferry for the first long weekend of walking and then we said goodbye until they met us again later on in the holiday to do the hike. We also met up with friends on their way to Nelson to complete the purchase of a house; we would end up there at the end of the holiday glamping in an empty house.

We did have a variety of accommodation, we tried to staying four nights in most places, it meant we had time to feel like we were not packing all the time. We staying in strange little alpine huts in Hanmer Springs oddly we seemed to have the camp to ourselves. We had a nice two bedroom apartment in





Hokitika complete with Sky Sport just in time for the England v India test match. The backpackers at Fox Glassier had a spa, sauna and gym no less. We had put weights and some equipment in the car as we

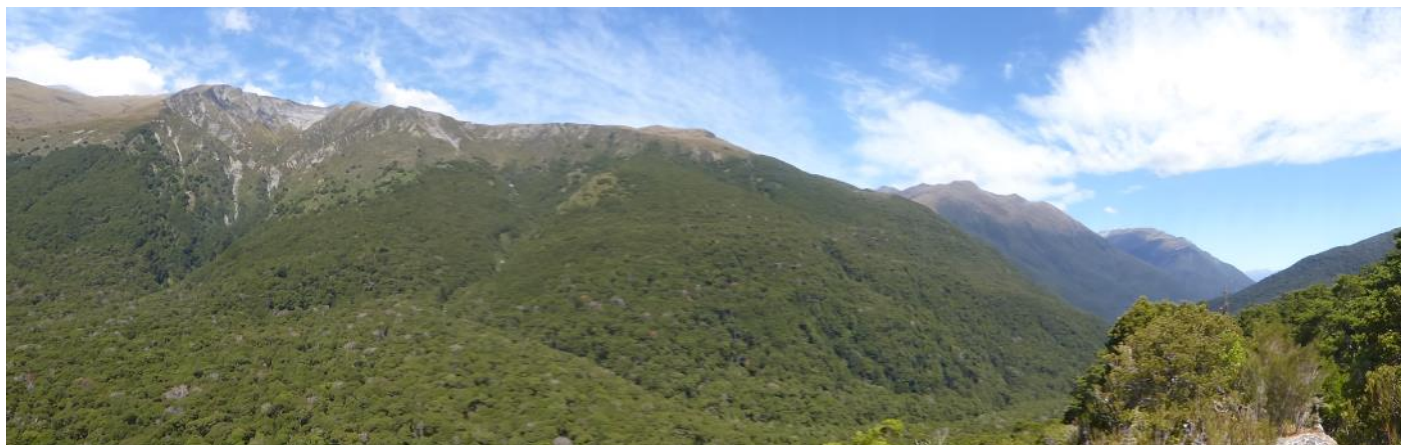


were trying to keep up with the gym. Queenstown only seems to have expensive places so we met back up with Catherine and Sarah in a very swish place before we headed out to Te Anau for the trek.

There was a lovely rhythm to the holiday, it was centred around hiking and exercise in the sun which I believe is good for you physically and mentally. During the five







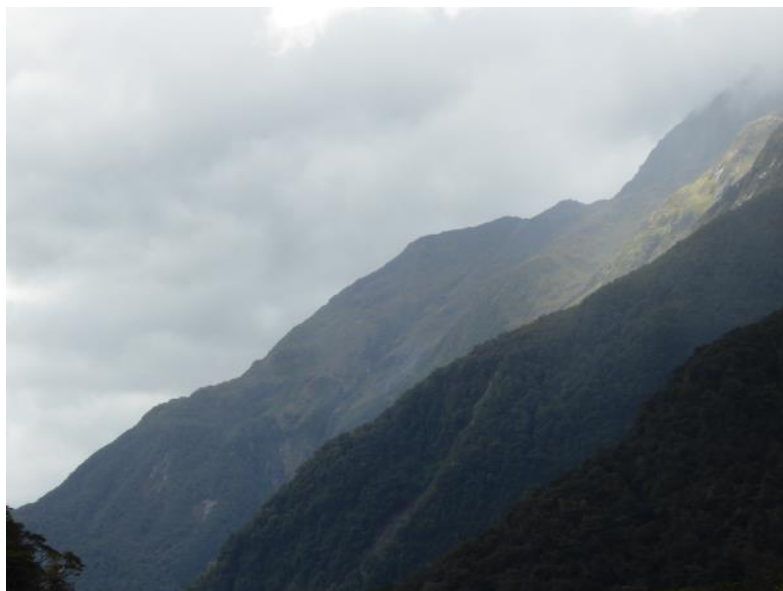
weeks Steph's watch said we walked around 500 KM, that is all walking including going to the shops. I ran tracks for all of our "proper" hikes when we put our boots on, and we did around 290



KM of hikes. I remember when we were in the UK Nick, who used to live in New Zealand, saying that the walks in the UK were so much more varied than NZ. I think I know what he means in that in New Zealand the flora can be a little predictable, there are a lot of ferns, however the thing I noticed about all the walking we did this holiday was how varied our walks were. We had hot dry hikes around Hanmer Springs and wet weather walks on the west coast,



beautiful stark pancake rocks and stunning glacier trails. We even had a very chilly alpine trek above Queenstown, where it has snowed on the hills.



When we did the trek 25 years ago we were in the DOC huts, so we had to carry all our own food and clothes for the week and we slept in bunk beds and had very limited ability to dry things and



no showers. This time we were in the lodges, it's a present so I don't know exactly how much it costs but I pretty sure its at the expensive end of expensive. However we did get a private ensuite room, with hot shower, power points, a three course meal cooked by someone else and there was even a bar so this was luxurious. I do remember looking through the



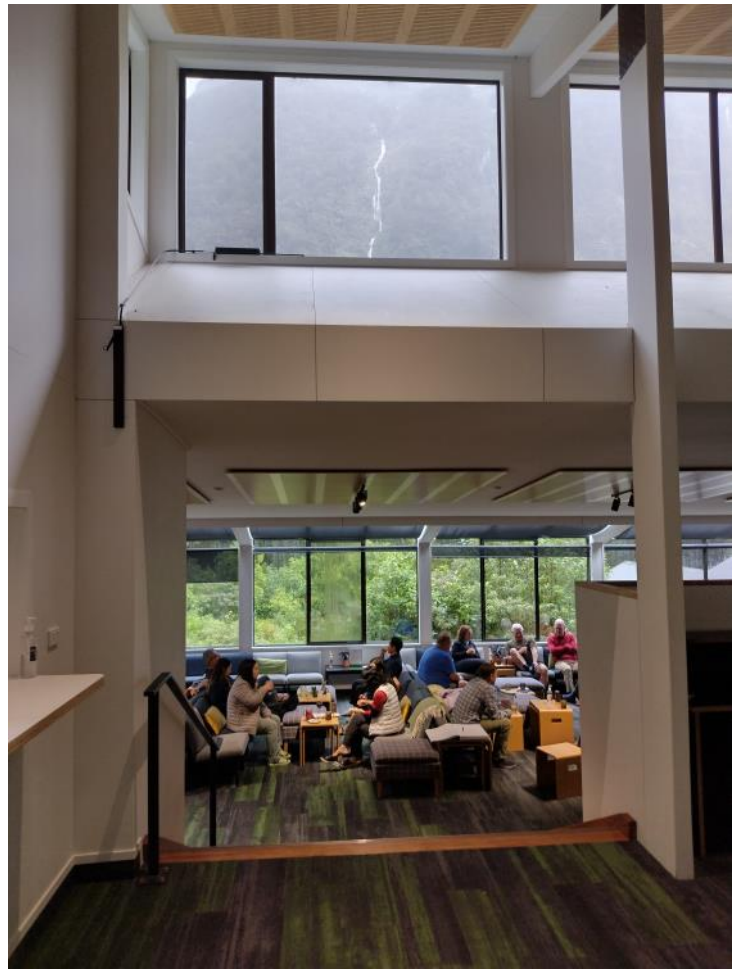


window at the set dinner tables when we walked past 25 years ago, looking a bit like Oliver Twist. This time we took the boat across the lake from Te Anau and then a short walk up to the first hut, a welcoming cuppa and a cake followed by dinner and then our briefing for the next day.

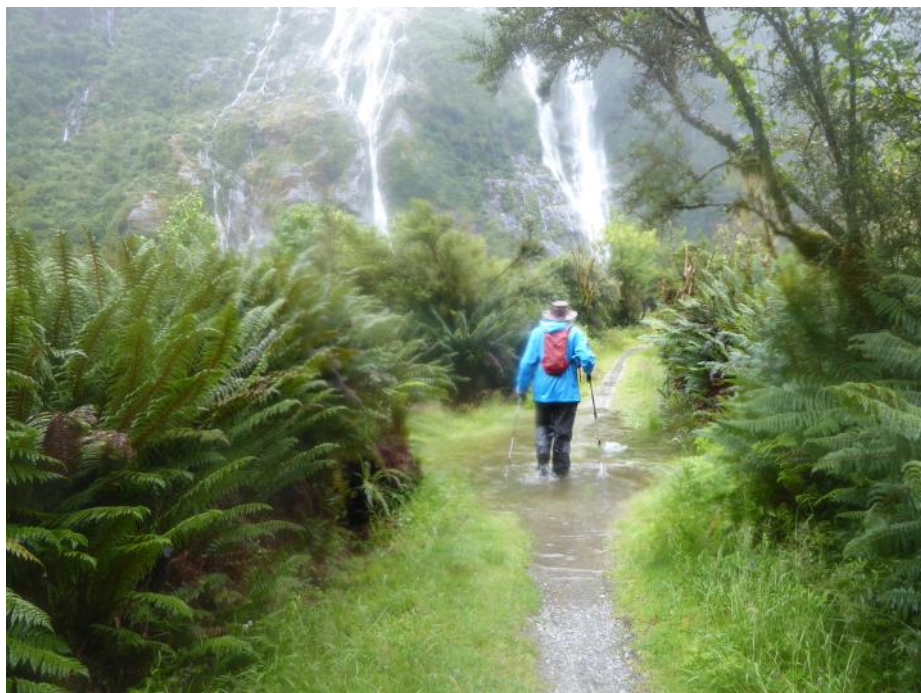
Luxurious it might be but there was no avoiding the

weather and the guides knew that the weather was deteriorating and that heavy rain was forecast, its not much of a surprise, it is a temperate rainforest after all. The thing is that this side of the valley takes about 9 metres of rain a year and the other side of the hill into Milford takes about

14 metres. When we were preparing it was hard to imagine that amount of rain but we did the nature walk this evening and looking at the mosses and ferns it was get-



ting easier to see. Anyway this evening the guide also covered the helicopter briefing as part of the before-dinner presentation. If the weather was too bad then we would be heli-



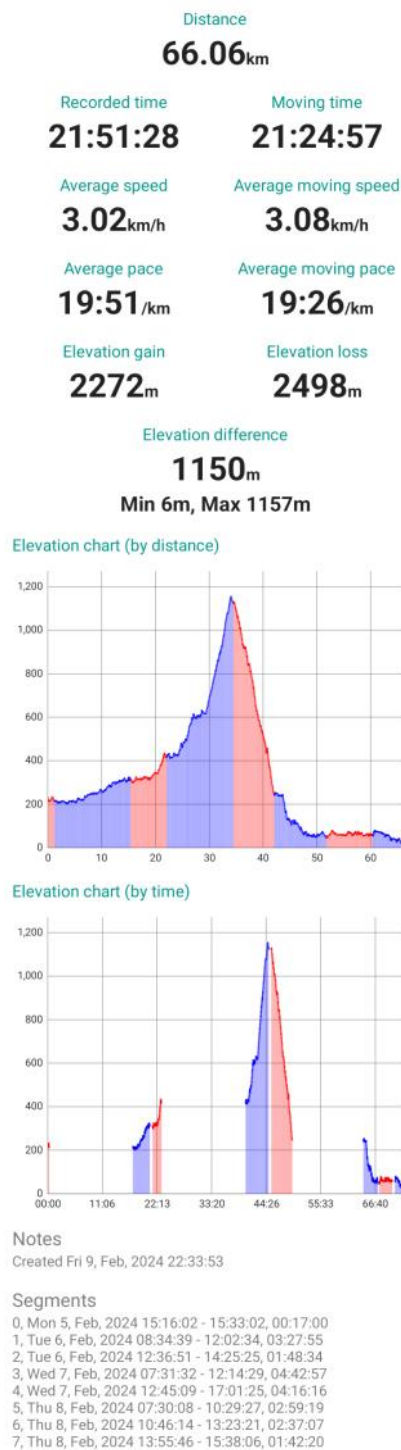
coptered over the problem areas onto the next hut. After dinner we all had to line up and be weighed so that they could balance the load on the 6 seater 'copter. A public weighing after a large dinner it was not a place to be nervous about your weight

In the end the weather was very wet and the paths were running with water but we managed to get through on foot, though I now know that no matter how much you



spend on Gortex layers in the end if you throw enough water around they will fail at some point. Steph had gone to the effort of putting on gators, I hadn't bothered but

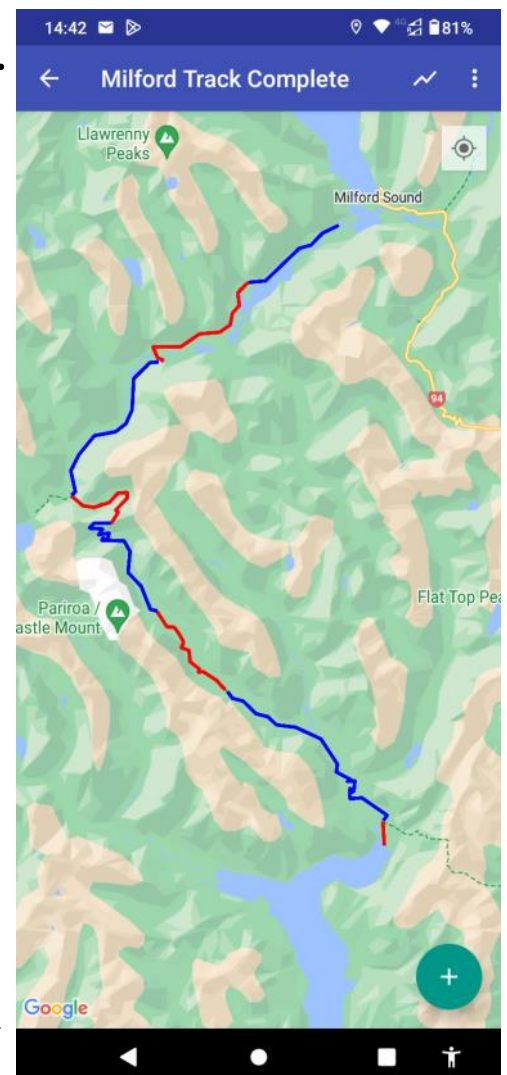




was prepared to change my mind after my feet were soaked, however it turns out that Steph got just as wet. Double socking and using hikers wool meant that our feet were OK. The guides just wore shorts and got wet, it wasn't cold after all. The guides were great they were all comfortably less than 30 and seemed to do the hike 4 weeks on and 1 week off so were very fit and also knew the terrain very well.

One of the advantages of the weather was that the water falls were amazing. We made it to the next hut , ready for the climb up to the pass the day after. We set off at 7:30 and we pushed up

to pass and as we began the slow descent down the cascades the weather started to clear, by the time we got down to the next hut we were in sunshine. We were all a bit stiff, whenever people sat down and then stood up we all looked like people who had



forgotten how to walk and were trying to work it out again as we went.

We were a group of 50, though it never felt like that many. Apparently the hike is advertised on TV and billboards all across South Korea, so as a consequence half of our group were Korean all very well equipped. The guides did say that they tended not to listen when told not to dry boots out in the super hot drying room and after the boots glue melted they needed to be held together with zip lock ties. Its such a clean and clear hike, we were told we could drink pretty much any water, in fact all the water at the lodges was rainwater, as one of the group who had just arrived from Shanghai, it was quite a contrast.

The rest of the hike was down towards Milford Sound and the weather showed it could be beautiful. We got to the last lodge and discovered that the rooms had baths. Our aching bones were very keen to get into a bath, Catherine having bought some bath salts from the shop, we then had a slightly dodgy dividing up of the bag of white powder after dinner, however it was just so we could rest in a hot bath.

After the trek we made our way back up the island. We





spent some time at Fox and Franz Josef Glacier. When we visited Franz Josef 25 years ago it was all the way down into the valley now it has receded a long way back but it was still looking magnificent.



The holiday after the trek was more chilled, we didn't have to focus on preparing for the hike and in some ways that was just as good, we were able to reflect on how we got here and start planning the rest of the year. What would be the next tent-pole? We are planning to go to Australia and it will be good to go on holiday somewhere that isn't NZ or the UK, the first time since the pandemic. So now we are back home again and I have to say we both are thankful to be back. Being away was such a great



break but its good to be settling back in, I am listening to the cricket, NZ vs Australia, and Steph is making gazpacho, pizza and a film to-night. The garden? The garden has



done very well the irrigation system worked very well and everything seems to have flourished, so much so that the gazpacho is largely made using our produce.

