



Teatime in the Wild

A schedule-bound New Zealand adventurer pauses to smell the chamomile BY KARI J. BODNARCHUK

I was running on pure adrenaline. I had just covered more than 1,400 miles in eight days, racing across the North and South Islands of New Zealand in a rental car, swimming with dolphins, white-water kayaking, mountain-biking, jet-boating, fishing, zorbing (rolling down a hill inside a giant rubber ball), river-surfing, bungee-jumping, glacier-hiking, and taking scenic plane rides over the snowcapped Southern Alps.

By the time I reached Queenstown, one South Island adventure remained: a hike along the renowned Hollyford Track in Fiordland National Park. It was an eight-day round-trip, but if I flew to the end of the turnaround point on the Tasman Sea, I could make it out in time to catch my flight home.

"No worries; I'll get you back in time," said Isobel, my hiking guide, when I met her at Queenstown Airport.

There we boarded a single-engine Cessna, and 35 minutes later we landed on a grassy airstrip near the Tasman Sea. We would base ourselves at Martins Bay Lodge for two nights and then boat, hike, drive, and bus our way back

to the airport in Queenstown.

The next morning, Isobel and I took a ten-minute jet-boat ride up the Hollyford River, as a hazy mist rose off the crystal blue water. Cabbage trees and pineapple grass lined the embankments, and Mount Tutoko and its ice fields glowed in the soft morning light. The plan was to explore Jamestown Bay, site of the area's first settlement, and then hike along the Hollyford Track back to Martins Bay.

As our boat driver steered up to the rocky beach at Jamestown, Charlie, the sole resident of the bay, wandered down to the water's edge to greet us. Little waves from our speedboat splashed against his bare feet. Charlie looked exactly as I imagined a grown-up Huck Finn would: He had a boyishly handsome face and tousled light brown hair, and wore a plaid shirt with a ripped sleeve and jeans rolled up to his calves.

"Pop in and have some tea and biscuits," Charlie said, pointing toward his log cabin. "If you have time."

"Yes, of course, delighted," said Isobel as the jet boat disappeared down the river.

We followed Charlie up a path that led away from the pine-fringed bay, into the forest, and finally to a small clearing and Charlie's one-story log cabin. Stepping around lawn furniture carved from tree trunks, we walked through the back door and into a cozy cabin that had a rustic wood table, deer and possum skins dotting the floors like throw rugs, floral-print love seats neatly arranged around a coffee table, and a pair of guest rooms decorated with floral drapes, dust ruffles, and colorful quilts. Isobel and I sat down at the dining room table while Charlie filled a plate with homemade biscuits. The place was neat and tidy even though our host hadn't been expecting visitors.

But then, Charlie rarely knows when people will be dropping by, which is understandable given his location in the largely unpopulated park. He lives alone from November through April, running his backpackers' lodge, Charlie's Place, which sits between the Hollyford River and the Demon Trail – a

section of the Hollyford Track so rugged that hikers often bypass it and take a boat ride upriver instead. That's why, in a good year, Charlie may get only 90 overnight guests during the entire six-month season. Sometimes he won't see anyone for weeks, leaving him plenty of time to fish, build lawn furniture, and tinker around the lodge.

When I asked him when his next visitors would arrive, he said, "I think I have a couple of people coming in a few days. I'd have to check. I lose track of time."

The idea of losing track of time was so appealing to me, but equally hard to grasp after my frantic, schedule-driven trip. But for the next few hours, I happily slipped into a slower pace. We sat around Charlie's dining room table with our feet up on benches and listened to his stories about the doomed settlers who had landed there 130 years earlier, a local couple that was searching for an elusive (some say imaginary) moose, and his own adventures in the area – hunting, hiking,

waiting out wild storms, and searching for gold in another part of Fiordland. But I wanted to know what had brought him out there.

"Stress," he said when I asked. "And I was ready for a change."

Six years earlier, Charlie had quit his full-time job as manager of several salmon farms off the southernmost tip of New Zealand. He wanted to work for himself, so he decided to build his dream lodge. But it wasn't exactly a stress-free endeavor, given his location in the middle of a three-million-acre national park. It took a helicopter 43 trips to deliver more than 60,000 pounds of lumber from the end of the closest road to a nearby river island. From there, Charlie floated the wood 11 miles down the Hollyford on a barge he had built using 44-gallon drums. He also transported supplies by rowboat and once got tossed overboard by a small rapid in the process, and watched his cargo float away. He spent the rest of that winter day paddling downriver

with his one remaining oar, collecting floating poles and planks as he went. With help from local fishermen and a couple of his far-flung neighbors, he then built the lodge.

WHEN WE HAD FINISHED OUR tea and biscuits, Charlie pulled out an old survey map of Jamestown and spread it across the table. "Technically, we're here, right on the corner of Lake Street and Bay Street," he said, pointing to a square and several lines marking the former site of a small town. Looking out the window, I could see no streets, just a wall of vegetation: twisted vines, fir trees, and ferns as big as doors.

"What do you like most about living here?" I asked Charlie.

"The absolute freedom," he said. "There are no white lines in the middle of the road telling you where to drive.... But it does get a bit lonely at times, and I miss having regular access to fruits and veggies."

The closest road is a three-day walk away, so Charlie has fresh produce flown in to Martins Bay every two or three weeks. He then makes the four-hour round-trip hike from the lodge to collect the supplies. The river provides his drinking water, and he hunts deer for meat. After six years of cooking for visitors, Charlie has become a master at preparing venison, incorporating it into nearly every dish he makes. His favorite: fried venison steaks that have been marinated in ginger, garlic, white wine, and honey.

I would have loved to stay for a meal, but there wasn't time; we needed to walk two hours to Martins Bay, then continue to a seal colony on a rocky headland, explore old Maori sites near a long sand spit, and collect *pipis* – a type of shellfish – and get back to the lodge in time for the cook to prepare them for dinner. I was torn between wanting to get going and wanting to relax on a carved bench in Charlie's backyard, listening to the bellbirds overhead and watching the sun sweep across the treetops.

Charlie seemed pleased we'd taken time to stop in for tea. "Cheers for the company," he said as we headed out the door. And to Isobel, he added, "Pop in again when you're in the area."

After we left Charlie's, our pace was noticeably slower, and thanks to Isobel, I began seeing more than just a wall of green vegetation wherever I looked. She pointed out red lichen clinging to rocks along the trail, purple flowers and bright green fungus underfoot, and big epiphytes – Isobel called them basket plants – growing on the branches of tree ferns overhead. I also noticed waterfalls on the towering mountains and brown trout in the flawless river water.

And despite our deadline, we had time to pause along the trail so that Isobel could teach me the songs of the *tui* and bellbirds, explain the difference between *rimu* (red pine) and *kahikatea* (white pine) trees, and tell me about the flirtatious fantails, the yellow-bellied birds that were following us along the track. "They're looking for little insects we stir up as we walk," she explained.

I could probably spend days, maybe weeks, exploring just one small patch of land there and never get bored. But the reality, at least for the moment, was that I couldn't live a timeless lifestyle like Charlie, spending days carving furniture from tree trunks or looking for gold in some distant corner of the bush. My adventures had to fit a sched-

ule, which meant that the next day I had to boat, hike, drive, and bus back to the city to catch my four consecutive flights and a subway ride home. Then I'd be free to pull out my calendar and – at my leisure – pencil in my next adventure. ♦

Editors' Note: We recently heard that Charlie's Place is up for sale.

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