

HOW TO WALK TE ARAROA

There's a secret to walking Te Araora and it's not just in the planning. Preparation is the key, because preparation is about respect.

by CLAIRE NELSON

Walking the length of a country requires a lot of letting go: of comfort, of control, even, possibly, of who you think you are. It all goes out the window once you start trudging through remote backcountry. But isn't that why you're doing it? To let go of something? Routine. Self-limiting beliefs. Boredom. Emotional baggage. Fear. That voice that says you can't. Whatever it is, it's been nudging you towards the long pathway so you can unburden and replace it all with a big ol' pack.

The first thing to let go of is the idea that there's one 'right' way to walk Te Araora. Speak to others who've done it and you'll hear an array of experiences, opinions, recommendations and quandaries. Take them in, heed the advice, but know that what's ahead will be something altogether your own.

I didn't understand that when I set off. As an anxious overthinker, I struggled to cease planning, pre-empting every minor detail, desperate to know what to expect. This was how I felt in control, but really, I needed to prepare. I considered planning as control, but preparation is about respect. You'll probably never feel ready, but a healthy reverence for the places, the people and yourself will be what carries you through.

RESPECT ... YOUR BODY

It's hard to predict how the trail will affect you physically. I met a hardy 70-something bloke with a recently installed hip and couldn't keep up with him. I met people younger than me with painful, creaky knees. When I set off from Cape Rēinga in 2021, I was worried my post-pandemic physique wouldn't make it to Bluff. But my fitness progressed along with me. What was crucial was maintaining physical self-care, which, like bodies themselves, will be different for everyone.

Eliene Albers, a Dutch tramper I met in the Tararua Range, says she underestimated how much food she needed. "I was eating amounts I would normally eat on tramps," she says, "But after doing the Tararua Range I realised it wasn't enough. You need to eat more when you walk every day for months."

Losing weight fast, she had to relearn what her body needed. When I encountered Eliene again, on the Two Thumb Range, she was carrying an entire block of butter and an enviable collection of whole cheeses.

Thru-hiking veteran Phil 'Too Clean' Pappas, from Seattle, has done the big three in the US, plus two in Ireland, three in Scotland and the Camino in Spain. And yet he wasn't immune to New Zealand's particular challenges. "Ninety Mile Beach destroyed my feet," he said, citing an all-too-common complaint. "I never had a blister on the Appalachian Trail, so I was really confused when my feet were riddled with them at the end of the first day."

I didn't suffer from blisters, but neither had I considered the impact consecutive days of walking with a heavy pack could have on my bones. I was forced off trail for several weeks due to a stress-fractured toe. Thru-hiking is a lesson in how to appreciate your body, its capabilities and limits.



Eliene Albers underestimated how much food she'd need, but says "sometimes you just need to go for it! You'll never be 100 per cent prepared."

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RESPECT ... THE ENVIRONMENT

Andrea Fulton, from Auckland, section-hiked the TA over consecutive summers, having previously walked the Camino de Santiago in Spain. She found the 'endurance mindset' much the same, but the big difference was "the need to be self-sufficient – Te Araroa is way more isolated".

The ruggedness of New Zealand's terrain is both its appeal and hindrance. Of course, how tough and in what way will differ, explains Annemarie Athey, a TA hiker from Virginia, USA. "What may be hard for one person could be easy for another."

I had been dreading the Waiau Pass after hearing of its reputation, but it turned out to be a favourite section. Phil, meanwhile, underestimated the South Island's elevation. "The high point is the same as the Appalachian Trail, so I thought it can't be that different. It is. Here you start at sea level and go to 2000m in short distances."

Then there are the unique challenges that even doing the Triple Crown can't prepare you for. "Sandflies!" he groaned. "Dear God, the sandflies!" He regretted "never being able to just stop and sit down and eat lunch or take a break without being eaten alive".

But that's one of New Zealand's charms. What it lacks in bears and snakes it makes up for in tiny annoyances: critters that won't kill you but can kill your vibe. My greatest foes were the wasps that plagued the Richmond Ranges. I picked my way past ground nests and trees humming with wasps drowsy on the sap.

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You need to be self-sufficient to walk the TA. "You have to be brave enough to go with what you have and trust that you will pick up what you need on the way," says Andrea Fulton.

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Phil 'Too Clean' Pappas says the "TA has improved my confidence when it comes to river crossings."

Others were hyper-vigilant about possums and mice after having their food bags nibbled, while Annemarie recounts having a kea tear her tent and drag her phone out into the rain. "I slept through the entire thing," she says.

RESPECT ... THE WEATHER

"I've hiked 3000 miles of desert," Phil said, "but New Zealand is the first place I got sunburned. The UV is much harsher than it seems." Annemarie started TA after a year working in Antarctica. "I was whiter than white. I spent the first day in shorts and a sun hoodie. I put sunscreen on my legs every three hours, and still my legs were red by the end of the day. I wore long pants for ages after that!"

But, New Zealand's weather is dangerous due to its unpredictability. Forecasts change on a dime, storms roll in from nowhere, rivers swell in seconds, and tracks become temporary streams. Venturing into mountainous or remote sections in looming dicey weather is a gamble that's not worth taking.

Of course, the rain can't be avoided. Tony McNaught, from Arrowtown, walked TA with his wife, Vanessa. "We had torrential rain from Aparima Hut to Telford campsite," he recalls. "Eleven long hours, putting the tent up in the wet, and I found the loo overflowing after attempting a number two in the dark." That's another thing to be prepared for: splashback. Though in truth, nothing ever really prepares you for that.

NEW ZEALAND'S WEATHER IS DANGEROUS DUE TO ITS UNPREDICTABILITY. FORECASTS CHANGE ON A DIME, STORMS ROLL IN FROM NOWHERE, RIVERS SWELL IN SECONDS, AND TRACKS BECOME TEMPORARY STREAMS.



Annemarie Athey "I knew that I just had to plan as far as getting to Cape Reinga and that the rest would unfold as I hiked."

RESPECT ... THE PEOPLE

It's easy to forget, on one's life-changing quest, that you're part of something bigger: a community. Occasionally there are traces of those who have slipped up here. Phil noticed a greater lack of leave-no-trace principles compared to his experiences overseas. I recall the night I camped beside a DOC bivvy, occupied by two friendly rangers who'd come to repaint it. "Final coat done!" they said, and headed off hunting to celebrate. In the morning we found someone had passed by that evening and tagged the door with a marker pen. "I don't get it," said the ranger, scratching his head. "Who's it even for?"

If people didn't take care of things – restoring huts, maintaining tracks, updating route access – there would be no Te Araroa. It takes a lot to make the trail happen, so it's worth giving back when you're able. "It's important to have enough money to respect the people and services you need to support yourself as you go," says Andrea. And Tony adds: "Once freight and holding costs are taken into account, bounce boxes are generally more expensive than buying locally, and they don't benefit the local communities. Other than in Arthur's Pass, it's possible to re-supply locally throughout the entire South Island."

As an introvert seeking solitude, I worried most about being around people all the time. In the end I had more alone time than I needed, and the people ended up a highlight. Trampers who became lifelong friends, local characters I'd never have met in any other scenario, and not least, the trail angels: strangers who go out of their way to help a hiker. Not to be confused with service providers, these people offer kindness. And that generosity is sacrosanct.



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Tony and Vanessa McNaught on Te Araroa. "I would do the TA again, although the wonderful friends we met could not be replaced," says Tony


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RESPECT ... YOUR JOURNEY

Hike your own hike. Take the detour if you want to. Go on a side quest. Skip a bit. Flip-flop. Cycle a section. TA is yours to shape into whatever works for you. For me, everything changed when I realised the hike was more enjoyable when I slowed down and didn't measure myself against others. That is harder than it sounds, especially when you meet people you want to stick with.

"Everyone is doing the trail their own way," says Eliene. "Some people race through everything, other people take their time, and it's hard not to get dragged into competitiveness. Though I never pushed myself more than I wanted to, I still got annoyed when other people were much faster."

Same here. Yet every time I pushed to keep up with people who were naturally speedier, especially on bush tracks (my weak spot), I had a miserable time. Finally, about a third of the way down the South Island, I allowed myself to slow down and own my pace, taking a half-day here, a slow day there. I stopped to look around more often. From then on, it was magic. From what I hear, it's a common learning point. "I love to win and to be first," admits Tony, "But at 55 I quickly realised the majority of walkers were younger and fitter. So I recalibrated to my own walk, which all of a sudden highlighted the simplicity of life: walk, eat, sleep, repeat."

It's as simple as that. Go forth respectfully, one foot in front of the other. Let all else go. Only at Bluff did I feel like I'd finally figured it out. In the pub, having a cold beer with my trail companions for the last time, I told them: "Right, I feel ready to walk the TA now." 



Matt Claridge from Te Araroa Trust

STATE OF THE TRAIL

Among improvements to Te Araroa is a goal to become the world's first regenerative thru-hike.

by LEIGH HOPKINSON

Te Araroa Trust has focused on technological developments over the past year, driven by whakahou or "regeneration" as it works toward becoming the world's first regenerative thru-hike.

The aim of Te Araroa Whakahou is to improve the trail's condition and increase biodiversity over time.

The trust's executive director Matt Claridge said geographic information system tracing of the trail route is now more accurate, and the trail app is more navigable. A new registration system, launched in October, has attracted around 2000 walkers. "We encourage walker registration, not just from a safety perspective but because it provides important data to achieve long-term funding and regenerative efforts," said Claridge. "With registration and consistent use of the trail app, we're able to pinpoint overcrowding. Otherwise, it's just anecdotal."

Through the app, walkers will be connected with trail partners and tangata whenua and learn about scheduled events, such as the removal of wilding pines in the Mackenzie Basin and tree planting at Bluff Hill Motupöhue.

Claridge said most walkers continue to pay a koha (\$5 per day is recommended). "That funding is essential because 100 per cent of donations go towards trail maintenance."

In terms of technical advancements and relationship-building, Claridge said the trust is seeing the benefits of having a trail manager. Dan Radford was appointed to this position in November 2022.

There are plans to assess the carrying capacity of the trail before winter and where new huts may be needed. Repairs to bridges and escarpments damaged by Cyclone Gabrielle have been a priority this year, and funding has been secured to build a bridge over the Whangaehu River, which will eliminate 32km of road walking near Whangārei. It is hoped the bridge will open in mid-2025.

Claridge also wanted to inform readers of the death of former trust chair, David McGregor, in December 2023. "David had a big heart and was a big contributor to where the trail is going now."