

A hiker with a backpack and trekking poles is seen from behind, walking along a dirt path on a grassy ridge. The ridge is covered in tall, golden-brown grasses. In the background, a vast mountain range stretches across the horizon under a clear blue sky. The mountains are rugged and appear to be made of volcanic rock, with some green forest visible in the valleys.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER



ON TE ARAROA, THAT FAMILIAR ADAGE 'HIKE YOUR OWN HIKE' APPLIES AS MUCH TO THE SECTION-WALKER AS TO ANYONE.

by **CLAIRE
NELSON**

MY TE ARAROA

adventure quickly showed me that no two hikers were tackling the trail in the same way. NOBO (north bound), SOBO (south bound), flip-flopping, one island, both, singling out sections. This, as is often discussed among the community, is the beauty of Te Araroa.

It is also, perhaps, part of its curse – that the long pathway cannot always be completed in one consecutive journey. The section-hikers I met on Te Araroa had a multitude of reasons for doing it in manageable parts. Some didn't feel physically fit or strong enough to walk it in one go, or wanted to build their confidence in the outdoors gradually. For others there were work limitations, visas, family or study. Others still just liked the idea of stretching out the adventure as an ongoing project.

There were the many who, like myself, had planned to tackle New Zealand from end to end, only for New Zealand to laugh at our plans and toss them aside like a poorly pegged tent in a gale. Many challenges can interrupt the journey – extreme weather, injuries, illness, logistical chaos, Covid lockdowns, unexpected events back home ... my plans were thrown out by more than one of these, and my TA turned out much more segmented than I'd intended. Yet the journey I ended up with was spectacularly rewarding, perhaps even more so given the satisfaction of having faced my own unique set of obstacles and worked around them.

And, while completing an entire five-month thru-hike is impressive, it could be argued (which I do) that a person's commitment to tackling it in sections when they're able is impressive in its own right. It's an acknowledgement of the very real hurdles of time, jobs, family, mobility, money... of life! – and, despite it all, finding a way to walk the TA. Their TA. That familiar adage, 'hike your own hike', applies as much to the section-walker as to anyone. Perhaps especially so.

I spoke with five TA section-hikers who shared their motivations, limitations, highs and lows and what was learned along the way. Each experience was slightly different; what they all had in common was a love of the trail.

For those of you who have a craving for the long pathway but can't see how to do it, rest assured that whether you chop up the grand adventure and savour the pieces over a number of seasons or simply pick up crumbs whenever you're able, it will still feed your soul. It's merely a different way of tasting it.



^ Brent Piggott section-walked because it didn't involve taking too much leave from work

BRENT PIGGOTT

Sections: Cape Rēinga to Auckland, 2023 / Auckland to Hamilton, 2024

I'm a keen tramper and wanted to experience as much of the New Zealand outdoors as possible. During Covid I was inspired by reading books on thru-hiking and watching YouTube vlogs. I said to a friend, "It's something I would like to do but ...". She replied, "What's stopping you?"

The choice to section-walk was really down to how much leave I could realistically expect my employer to approve. It allowed me to get a taste of the trail and test my ability without committing to the whole TA.

Cape Rēinga to Auckland was a nice length to give me that experience. I walked most of Ninety Mile Beach alone, enjoying the solitude and the challenge of its environment. I'd read so much about the blisters and injured feet and legs other walkers suffered that I expected similar issues. But my emphasis on preparation, rationing my water, investing in lightweight gaiters to keep sand out of my socks and having well worn-in footwear, meant I found the beach a pleasure. And no blisters!

I'd definitely suggest to others to do a section first. to test out themselves and their gear – it doesn't even have to be on Te Araroa, as long as it replicates thru-hiking. And be satisfied with the gear you have unless it actually needs replacing – at least think twice on the never-ending upgrade of products that don't offer much more benefit than those you already have. It can be an expensive exercise if you fall into that trap.

As you progress you'll find you have to do less and less preparation: you have your gear, your food plans are already tested, everything is weighed and you know your walking speed.

I did find with section-walking that I had to re-motivate myself each time, and I went through a rollercoaster of emotions from the post-walk blues to pre-walk excitement with every section. If I can get time off from work I'd love to walk the whole TA, if not I plan to keep doing it in sections.



Teacher Sarah Jackson used various school holidays to walk the South Island TA

SARAH JACKSON

Sections: Most of the South Island, NOBO, between December 2019 and April 2024

After reading loads of articles and books about US thru-hikes, I wanted to do a long trail, but couldn't afford time off from my teaching job. So I section-hiked during the school holidays over a number of years. It's surprisingly easy to complete the whole thing if you just do it a chunk at a time – like the old joke about eating an elephant.

While I'd have liked to experience TA in its entirety, my first section was several weeks long and I was getting less enthusiastic towards the end. So maybe I would've hated it! And as it turns out, section-hiking is easier to organise, there's less to carry, you can miss bad weather and you never get bored. The cost was easier too as it was spread out.

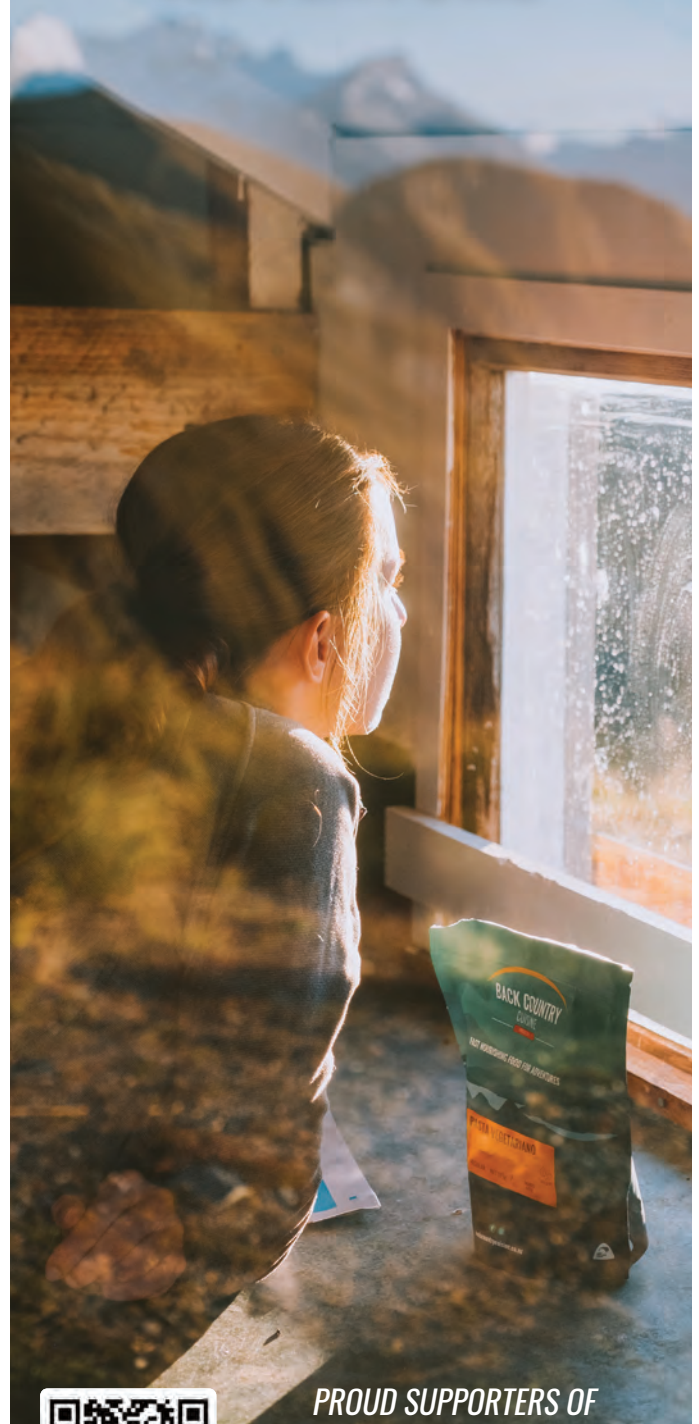
I loved the whole Lake Coleridge to St Arnaud section as well as the Richmond Range. They were so scenic and also a great physical challenge.

If you're thinking about doing the TA, in sections or otherwise, go for it! If you're not a regular trumper then you'll need to train, but think of the older or less-fit people who've done it.

I'm debating doing the North Island next. I don't really fancy farm- or road-walking, but I have family in Wellington and it would be cool to fly down to visit then walk home! →

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PROUD SUPPORTERS OF

DING CAPUNITAN

Sections (2020–2022): Cape Rēinga to Wolleys Bay / Matapouri to Bulls / Palmerston North to Wellington / Tongariro Alpine Crossing / Timber Trail / Ships Cove to Lake Coleridge / Glenrock Stream to Bluff

I hadn't done any multi-day tramps longer than five days and wanted to challenge myself. Since we were in a pandemic at the time and the borders were closed, I thought I might as well give it a go!

I liked section-walking as I could plan my trips and have a break in between sections to spend time with my family in Auckland. With all the back and forth, in the end I decided to do the South Island in two one-month stints; it was more practical in terms of time and finances.

There were tricky bits to organise, especially the Timber Trail and 42 Traverse's mountain-biking sections, where I brought my own bike, but I'd say the key is to plan your logistics and then just do it. For the South Island I was able to send six food-drop boxes so I didn't need to get to towns to resupply, which would have taken time.

All the sections I did were beautiful, but if I had to pick a particular favourite I'd say the Richmond Range. Although it was the most challenging it stood out for the birdlife (I loved the tītīpounamu rifleman).

I might do some of the other sections again as future walks, and maybe even the whole TA again, but next time going NOBO and thru-hiking it.



^ Ding Capunitan spent two years walking Te Araora on and off

GEORGE BECK

Sections (2022–2024): Tongariro Alpine Crossing / Queen Charlotte Track / Richmond Range / Short sections around Auckland

While tramping in the Richmond Range in 2022 I met a hiker from the Czech Republic who was doing Te Araroa.

I decided to walk the trail in sections so I didn't have to leave my wife and daughter behind for several months. Section-hiking also allows me to maintain my business, which is hands-on work that can't be done remotely for long periods of time.



^ George Beck section walked because he didn't want to spend long periods away from his family

I'm not on the trail to discover myself or my calling but rather to enjoy the outdoors and meet people from all over the globe. Walking with others helps you learn about the world and other people and their perspectives. You also learn a lot about yourself and your abilities, and appreciate your comforts more when you get back home.

I do think New Zealand trails are harder than in other countries as they are not well formed in a lot of places and there are few switchbacks – which means there is only one way and that's straight up or down! But at least with section-hiking you can go further with a lighter pack; over time I have reduced my base weight to 5.5kg.

So far the Richmond Range has been my highlight. It's known as the hardest section, but the changing scenery and epic views are worth every step. I'm now looking forward to the next sections: Wānaka to Arrowtown, then Nelson Lakes. Once I've finished the South Island I would like to do the North Island – which for me will be more about meeting people.

ONE PLANET

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PACKS



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Eden Holley says the hardest part of section-hiking was finishing

EDEN HOLLEY


Section: Queenstown to Arthur's Pass, 2023

I had a real thirst for adventure – I craved the simplicity of life on the trail where only my next step mattered. The spontaneity of it was another driving force: I wanted to escape fast-paced city life and immerse myself in this experience. I also wanted something that required minimal logistical planning.

What I liked about section-hiking is that I was able to take more luxury items without worrying about carrying the weight for months on end. I also felt I could immerse myself in the trail knowing I had no pressure to complete the whole thing in one go. Every part of the trail felt like a unique adventure.

You can't get caught up on other people's journeys; whether you're thru-hiking or tackling one section, the trail is yours and yours alone. I embraced a go-with-the-flow mentality. I didn't have a strict plan, only a rough schedule, adapted to whatever happened on the trail.

The Motatapu Track is my favourite hike of all time. It is, in my opinion, the epitome of backcountry tramping in New Zealand.

The hardest part of section-hiking was having to finish when part of me lived on the trail. I just want to get back out there. It's not about the destination but the journey. The biggest regret you'll ever have is not starting. 

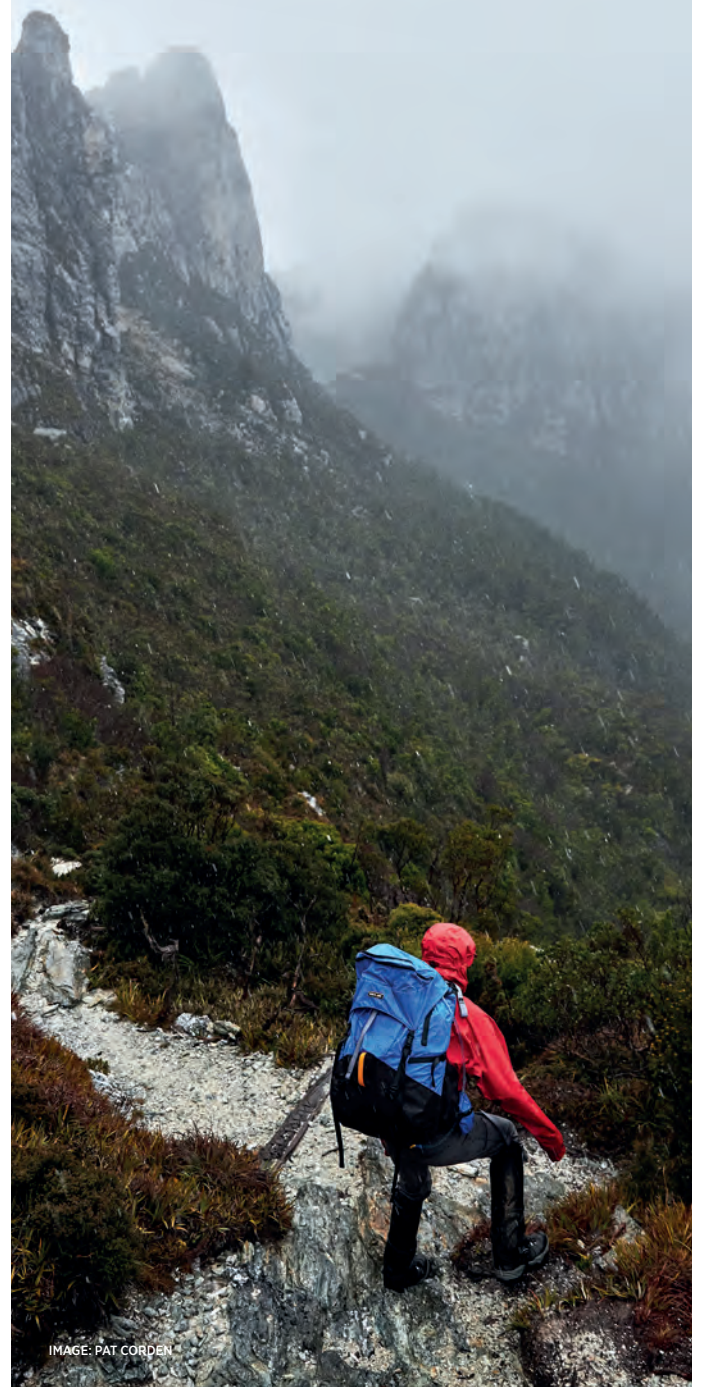


IMAGE: PAT CORDEN