

[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text]By Dan Friesen on April 9, 2016

Yesterday ended with torrential rains on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island. This morning, however, dawned clear and bright. From the tiny township of Haast, we drove inland along the Haast River approaching [Haast Pass](#), one of only four crossings through the Southern Alps and only converted from a rough track to an unpaved road in 1966, and left unpaved until 1995. The ubiquitous name Haast belongs to 19th century German geologist and explorer [Julius von Haast](#) who left his mark on the South Island in many ways.



Luminescent berries on the Blue Pools path

Waterfalls lined the walls of the valley up which we drove and we stopped briefly at one of them - Thunder Falls. Sand flies were mostly a non-issue yesterday but this morning they found us at Thunder Falls. These little nasties are stealthy, small in form, slipping in silently to bite, and leaving a welt that itches for a couple of weeks. Scott is normally a magnet for mosquitoes but the sand flies ignored him and gorged on me.



Light display at Blue Pools after night of rain

Our second stop was magic! After passing through the so-called Gates of Haast, a bridge over a particularly dramatic plunge of the Haast River through massive boulders, and crossing the continental divide, we stopped at the Blue Pools. Already the vegetation had changed markedly, with less undergrowth, suggesting a drier climate. A walk through lovely beech forest led to a couple of pedestrian suspension bridges over stretches of water known for their blue tint. Today, however, they were a less spectacular shade of green. What was spectacular was the sun slanting through the foliage on the walk down and back to the pools.



Diamond Lake Walk

Last night's West Coast rain had drenched this beech forest as well, and morning sun slicing through the shade at about a 45 degree angle caught all the remnants of the deluge - drops hanging from leaves and moss and every horizontal surface, and rising mist evaporating in the growing warmth of the day. It was a sacred experience for me, awe at the privilege of being here in this special moment of transition between the deluge and the dry.



Admiring the mirror-like qualities of Diamond Lake

The main event of the day was a new walk in the Lake Wanaka area. My intent was to improve on our walk exposure through the lake and mountain vistas for which the South Island is justly famous. I'd read about the Diamond Lake walk, with a continuation up to a bench of land overlooking the much larger Lake Wanaka, and we'd hired a couple of local guides to help deal with the unknown nature of this new walk.



Walkers dwarfed by Mt Aspiring National Park vista

The drive in from the Blue Pools was delightful, the road approaching huge Lake Wanaka from the north, then winding along the opposite slopes of a mountain putting Wanaka out of sight but flanking the even more beautiful panoramas of Lake Hāwea.

Arriving at Diamond Lake, we met our guides, a couple of enthusiastic kiwis named Heidi and David. Heidi stayed with the lead group and David “swept” with Scott on the ascent to Diamond Lake, a small circular jewel, ringed by deciduous trees overhanging the water and bathing the reflective surface in glowing shades of gold.



Overlooking lovely Lake Wanaka - Diamond Lake Walk

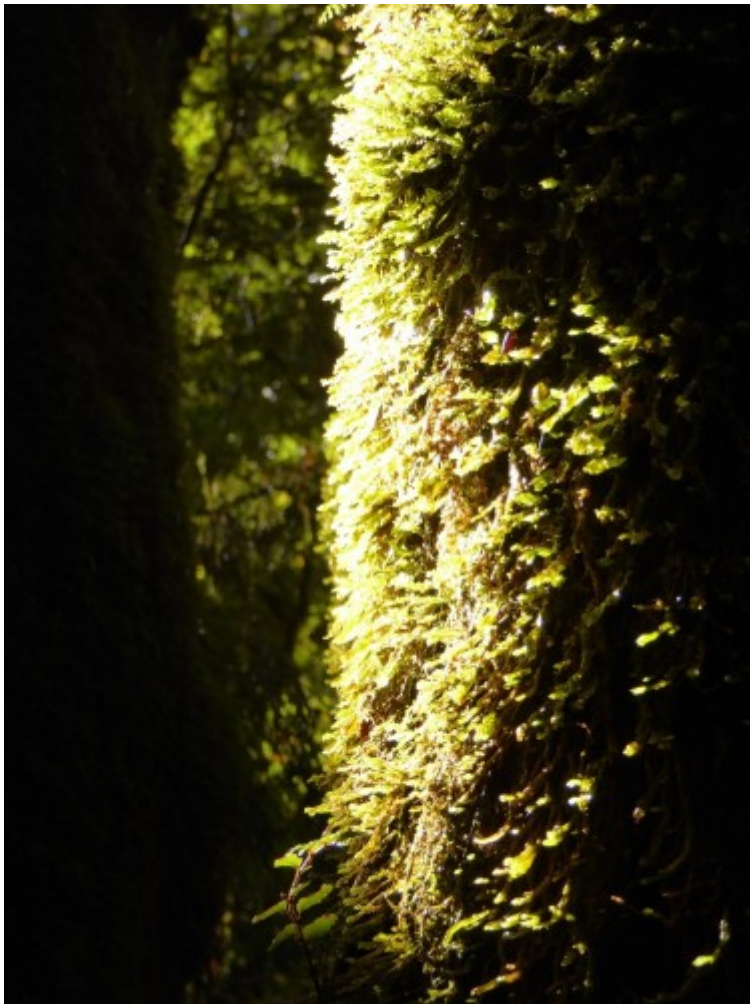
We reached a decision point only a couple hundred meters into the lake walk. Those wanting a greater challenge began an ascent up nearly 300 stairs while the rest opted to stay along the loop walk around Diamond Lake. Most chose the ascent, which led to an overlook platform high above Diamond Lake with stellar views of the mountains to the west in Mount Aspiring National Park. Here, Heidi pointed out that on the peaks to the north, just visible between passing clouds, the Fellowship of the Ring had been filmed scrambling across the mountains in their quest to properly dispose of the powerful but toxically corrupting “one ring to rule them all”.



Beech forest en route to the Blue Pools

The Lord of the Rings trilogy has had tremendous impact on New Zealand! These Hollywood films put New Zealand on the map, raising awareness throughout the world of what I already knew - this country is packed from one end to the other with stunning scenery! Tourism has soared! Prices have followed.

It was a perfect day! The autumn sky was clear and blue and views unfolded before us as we ascended only a bit further from the Diamond Lake overlook. We chose the next overlook as our picnic spot. If the Diamond Lake overview provided stellar views, these sweeping vistas over the infinitely larger Lake Wanaka were breathtaking! The water seemed to shimmer a turquoise hue, and islands and peninsulas jutted out, adding varying shades of green to the kaleidoscope of color.



Sunlight on wet moss - Blue Pools track

We continued on another kilometer or so to the final overlook, a vantage point that allowed us to gorge on scenes of the full length of the lake, from north to south . A group photo beckoned, then we returned to the shores of Diamond Lake and finished the circuit, marveling at the reflections and serenaded by the plump little bell bird, whose crystal clear half a dozen notes seemed to expand as they reverberated through the quiet mountain air.



Picnic overlooking Lake Wanaka

We bade farewell to Heidi and David, delighted to have shared their company as they shared this special local trail with us, and our driver John turned the coach south towards Queenstown. Upon arrival at our lakeside hotel, most of us opted for the gondola ride up to Skyline Restaurant. A day of scenic delights ended with an exclamation point as we sat high above Lake Wakatipu, drinking in the drama of yet another South Island wonder, flanked across the Frankton Arm of the lake by the majestic serrations of the Remarkable Mountains.



Lake Wanaka Panoramas

The only fly in the ointment of this magical evening was the task of sampling from the seemingly endless buffet, and the realization that we really did need to get to bed in preparation for tomorrow's day at Milford

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