

Where do you start?

How do you put the most epic journey of your life into words?

Perhaps I'll begin with the statistics – then tell you a story. Paint a picture of what led to the point where I decided to cross the country, under my own steam, through some of the hardest and wildest terrain New Zealand has to offer.

On the 29th of January 2022, I set off to cross the country on a human-powered mission from the west to the east coast of the South Island, using the 45th parallel south as my guide. The trip lasted 26 days and covered over 600 kilometres, with over 300 kilometres on foot, 22 kilometres of paddling, and around 270 kilometres of cycling. But of course – these numbers don't tell the stories, the highs, the lows, or the drama!

Oh yes, there was drama.

But first – why did I decide to cross the country, unaided?

I value challenge, personal growth, and adventure – and I absolutely *love* being out in nature. That said, there is something deeper there as well...a desire to push my boundaries to determine what I am capable of. At my very core, I am a wild adventurer. I look at maps and become excited about the places I could go, and the things I could see. When I look at those contour lines, I see possibility, exhilaration, hard work, and ultimately an experience that I know will leave me a better person than I would be going into the trip. I will come out the other side stronger, wiser, more confident, and with a deep feeling of gratitude and fullness of heart that only being wild can bring.



Spot the tent!

When I first devised this plan and began plotting the line across the country, I was scared. While I love the outdoors, challenging terrain sets off all sorts of alarm bells in my head and I often need to work through intense fears to achieve my goals. Fiordland, my chosen starting point, has some of the most rugged, remote, and unforgiving terrain in New Zealand. It is mind-boggling in its scale and grandeur, and not a place where too many people venture off-track. My route through this beautiful yet brutal terrain was to be all off-track, with some sections never conquered before.

So why choose something so hard, and so off the beaten track? It was exciting to think that I would be forging a path where few had gone before me – and in that, fewer women. I have been through hard times in my life. The fact that I was even planning this trip felt somewhat miraculous to me. After leaving a long-term abusive relationship spanning over ten years, I had become a mere shell of myself. If you had told me at that time that I would be crossing the country while hiking, paddling, and cycling, I wouldn't have believed you. The relationship had left me with crippling PTSD, and the fearless girl I was once before had been transformed into a woman crippled by anxiety.



Hut wash

Not one to let other people or circumstances define me, I have spent the last seven years overcoming fear and rebuilding both my life and self-belief. I got a second chance at life when I left that relationship, and the wild adventurer that had been buried soon began to blossom. The traverse was a culmination of all the work I had done, and a signal to myself that I was strong and brave enough to forge my own path.

I spent hours poring over maps and searching the internet for trip reports and information on the areas I would be covering. Somehow, in the face of doubt from others, I found a deep well

of belief and excitement about completing this trip. I just knew at the core of my being that I could do this. I would find a way through, no matter how hard the terrain.



Daily navigation planning

It's funny the way people talk about hard things as if discomfort is something to be avoided. I firmly believe that we all need to embrace challenging situations because, in my opinion, overcoming challenges is one of the most rewarding experiences life can offer. Hard times are simply part of the journey. To go and see extraordinary places comes at a price. You have to work for it – and if you do, you are rewarded with hallowed ground that few get to see or experience.

Trekking Caswell Sound Ridge to Glaisnock Hut

There is something quite surreal about being dropped by helicopter into the middle of nowhere. No track to follow, no one else around. As the rain fell steadily the clouds rolled in around me, shortening my line of sight to mere metres ahead. The *thud, thud, thud* of the helicopter retreated into the distance until I was engulfed in silence, and the magnitude of the journey in front of me weighed heavily.

Yet even with the weight of the unknown, I felt a great sense of excitement. Let the adventure begin!



Starting the trip on the Caswell Sound Ridge

Fiordland pulled no punches, and from the very beginning presented the most challenging yet mesmerising terrain – like the grandeur of the mountains that soared near-vertical into the sky, and the most magical hanging valleys. It was often not until I had travelled some distance that I could turn around and be awed by the hallowed terrain I had just covered. Very few step foot in this country. It is rugged, brutal, and unforgiving – but also the most beautiful, remarkable, and rewarding landscape. Many tears were shed in Fiordland. Tears of frustration, pain, and fear – but also of joy, relief, and wonder.



Breakfast high above Caswell Sound

Each river, ridge, and valley had its own distinct character – from the thick and unrelenting bush along the Stillwater River, to the enchanted forest of the Wapiti River with moss-covered boulders the size of houses and lush green bush. Bluffs and massive slips appeared before me at regular intervals, testing my strength and determination. My heart raced as I figured out how to climb up, down, or around them. In Fiordland, it felt like I spent as much time climbing hand-over-hand up and down the steep terrain as I did pushing my way through ferns, leatherwood, and bush lawyer. The cuts and scrapes on my arms, legs, and face became badges of honour.



Caswell ridgeline traverse behind me

The intense relief as I ticked off each section was almost visceral, as scrambling up exposed sections of waterfalls or sidling vast, steep slips made me aware that placing one foot wrong could mean disaster. But those are the risks you take when travelling in this terrain. For the most part, Fiordland terrain is steep but densely covered in bush to catch you when you fall (which I did, twice).

Paddling North Fiord and Lake Te Anau to Camp Bay, and the Trek to End Peak

It was with trepidation that I stepped into my kayak to cross North Fiord and Lake Te Anau. The calm waters of the previous day when I arrived at the water's edge had been replaced by waves, wind, and a forecast of rising winds still. Water, my nemesis, has always instilled a deep primeval sense of fear, and on this day the fear nearly got the better of me. The headwind roaring down the Fiord felt like an invisible force pushing me back to where I had come, challenging me with every stroke of my paddle.

But I was rewarded for my efforts with the most beautiful waterfalls crashing from the unforgiving terrain above me into the unfathomable depths of the Fiord. I was absolutely captivated by this place as much on the water as I was on solid ground. I edged closer to the lake, knowing that I would soon be trading my headwind for a strong crosswind and that the true battle with my fear of this powerful lake was about to begin.



Paddling the North Fiord

I was gratefully supported on my paddle by Fiordland Outdoors. Before crossing Lake Te Anau, I was told the boat would cross beside me, blocking as much of the wind as it could. I simply had to 'aim for the big rock on the other side, and just keep paddling'. With any luck, the crosswind would push me further up the lake towards Camp Bay, where my next trekking adventure would begin.



Traversing around Lake Katherine

The waves rose and fell around me, and I paddled my heart out. About halfway across, I felt an intense pain in my right shoulder which increased with every stroke. I wanted to cry, to bail, to just not be there in that moment, which felt so close to overwhelming me. My breath quickened as an irrational panic started to set in. But there was nowhere to go, and I wasn't going to get on the boat this close to my goal. The fact the boat was there gave me the courage I needed to continue. I paddled into the calm of the bay and enjoyed the change in wind direction which meant a tailwind helped carry me to the shore, where, with shaking legs and arms, I greeted solid ground.



Paddling Lake Te Anau

That day wasn't done with me yet though, as I decided to make a push for End Peak, some 1,200 vertical metres above me. Little did I know I would be entering the contours of deception and the climb of despair. I had coined a phrase through my travels this far: 'Fiordland, not what it says on the map!' and that statement was no more true as I climbed through the bush to reach the summit. This was the kind of terrain where your compass is indispensable, as the map and the terrain simply don't align. Of all the places I had travelled on the journey so far, this would be the area easiest to get lost in. The climb of despair came when, ascending above the bush line, I was greeted with scrub almost as tall as me, which made the final climb up the spur brutal on my weary body.

The wind on the tops was wild as I set up the tent in a perfect spot on the ridgeline, with the most stunning 360-degree views. It was when I was safely ensconced in the tent enjoying dinner that a message came through noting I was to expect fierce gale force winds - which

meant I needed to get off the tops. So, at 11:30pm I packed up the tent and headed down to find a clearing that would offer shelter from the wind. Morale was low, the push to the top had been brutal, and the planned ridgeline route was tantalisingly close – but with severe weather warnings, there was no choice but to turn around and find another route through.



Waterfalls on the North Fiord

By this point, I had been going for 16 days. I had ascended near-vertical waterfalls, descended into vast boulder-strewn gullies, followed the most amazing animal trails, and bashed and clambered through the thickest of bush. I had climbed up, down, and around more bluffs than I could count. I was weary and my resilience was down. I coined a term for how I was feeling – ‘contour anxiety’ – as things so often weren’t as they indicated on the map. I wasn’t sure in my fragile, sleep-deprived state that I had the headspace to deal with the uncertainty as I continued the push through potentially another week of off-track navigation.



The contours of deception climbing to End Peak

Trekking the East Eglinton River track to Mount Nicholas Station

The next few days were spent travelling the East Eglinton River – from climbing to the most breathtaking saddle, descending into the valley through massive boulder fields and dense scrub following the Mararoa River, to finally trekking into the relatively easy-going terrain of Mount Nicholas Station. There were lots of laughs, moments of frustration, and sometimes bewilderment at the still seemingly endless bush-bashing and intense navigation at a point where I thought the terrain would start to relent. Even so, I found myself in a flow of moving through the bush, picking lines, and navigating more confidently.

There was so much beauty and brutality, but I was used to the ebb and flow now. Simply being in the moment, knowing that each high and low would pass, and realising that this is simply the natural order of everything. Sun and rain, howling wind, still, peaceful moments, extreme physical and mental exertion – all followed by moments of relative and restorative ease. It was late in the evening as I trod on the first road of the trip into Mount Nicholas Station, aware that the true wild was done and I was mere days from the East Coast.



Nearing the head of East Eglinton River

Mount Nicholas Station to Bannockburn: Via Cecil Peak, Wye Creek, The Remarkables, Mount Rosa, and Mount Difficulty

From Mount Nicholas Station through to Bannockburn, I was in familiar territory. Open tops made navigation easy – but these were big days, covering at least 40 kilometres per day with a tired body. The terrain was completely different to Fiordland and I was climbing scree and slate bowls, my rock climbing skills coming into play as I scrambled along ridgelines. A lack of

water while crossing the tops from Wye Creek to the Nevis River nearly derailed the journey, but reminded me that I needed to constantly adapt to the changing terrain.

Climbing Cecil Peak, Otago

Cecil Peak, Otago

From the high point of the spur overlooking the river, the gully across the river looked steep, unforgiving, and impassable. Though the lesson learned on this trip is that things always look worse from a distance, and that there is always a way around. Crossing the Nevis River – which was still high from a storm that had passed through days before – was both a milestone and a challenge, as I stood on the banks wondering if this fast-flowing river was going to be the end of the trip. I was delighted to find a way across the river, the fear and exhilaration leaving my legs shaking as I encountered strong animal tracks. They lead up through the gully to the farm tracks, guiding me to Bannockburn and my bike.

Heading down into the Maharoa Valley

Saddle at the top of Maharoa Valley

Cycling Bannockburn to Oamaru

Bannockburn was a sight to see, though the civilization was both welcomed and dreaded. As those who have been in the bush for any length of time know, the push and pull of civilisation can weigh heavy on the heart of the adventurer. This point for me meant dropping my heavy pack, grabbing my bike and starting a new leg of the journey. As a relatively new mountain biker, I approached the Dunstan Trail with trepidation. I had received messages from helpful people telling me to be careful on the corners and that there were ‘high consequence cliffs!’ Ugh, just what I needed to hear with my brand new clip-in shoes attached to my pedals – and a propensity for being fearful!

The Dunstan Trail was exciting, the cliffs considerable, the bluffs spectacular, and the journey thrilling. From Clyde, I joined the Otago Rail Trail which offered a largely flat and uneventful passage through to Kyeburn, where I headed for the hills once again. The twists and turns of the expedition were not done yet though. As I arrived in a paddock at the base of the final trek, after a 110+ kilometre cycle with a headwind, I was informed that I didn’t have permission to be where I was. I considered my options: should I try to get landowner permission at 6:00pm with just a Garmin InReach for communications, or pick another route? A quick look at the maps and the route over Danseys Pass became an obvious alternative as a cycle, rather than a trek into Oamaru. It also meant another 30 kilometres back the way I had come on my bike to get to the campground on Danseys Pass.

The ride to the start of Danseys Pass began with the most amazing seven kilometres of tailwind and I whooped and hollered my way back to Kyeburn enjoying my first and only taste of tailwind. However, turning the corner towards the pass it became apparent that the next 20 kilometres of cycling was going to be into a fierce headwind. I have to admit, it was a pretty low point. I had run out of fuel and water due to the extra 27 kilometres as an unexpected add-on to an already big day. The wind was unrelenting and the road was anything but flat as I headed into the pass. There was a quiet determination to grind out

those kilometres with the knowledge that this would be the last night in the tent. The following day dawned as the last. No alarm, I cruised into the morning knowing I had another 80 kilometres to take me to the coast, with a saddle to gain as I journeyed over Danseys Pass. The wind had been with me for the last few days, but was determined to follow me to the end as I pushed through a crisp, cool morning in all my layers. I spun up the hills and enjoyed the drama playing out in the sky as rain fell, clouds billowed, and the wind chased them across the sky in a spectacular show, casting shadows and giving glimpses of the valley below and the mountains around. I flew down the hills at speed with a massive smile of excitement, simultaneous with underlying sadness that today was the last day of the trip. In only a number of hours, I would be dipping my toes in the ocean. The hills weren't done with me yet though as I joined the Alps to Ocean Cycleway, and the track undulated through farmland, tunnels, roadsides. Finally, I hit the town of Oamaru.



Our ridgeline traverse

You can go your own way!

That song, which became a regular feature of the trip while I forged my own path through the wilderness, was blasting from my phone as I rode through the Oamaru Public Gardens. Standing up on my pedals, punching the air with my fist, and singing at the top of my lungs – I had tears in my eyes at the realisation that I had *done it*.

Coast to Coast along the 45th parallel south is a journey that still feels more like an unbelievable dream than a reality. I can still feel the cool dampness that came with climbing up the waterfall to Ethnie Saddle, my feet struggling to gain purchase on rotten trees, the dense bush dark around me, and the smell of moss and earth.

I recall the most imposing bluff pushing me across the creek and up onto the saddle, the terrain somehow leading me to where I needed to go. The pure exhilaration and tears of joy when I looked at the map and realised I had finally, after eight hours, managed to negotiate approximately two kilometres down a steep spur coming off Camp Hill – after spending the night on a small ledge without adequate daylight to complete the descent.

I remember the heart-sinking realisation that, on more than one occasion, I had pushed too high in my navigation, taking me off course to the subsequent downclimbing that had me rooted to the spot in fear. I hadn't wanted to move forward, sunlight pouring through the trees overhead and a warm breeze causing the leaves in the trees to dance.

I remember running along the ridgeline high above Caswell Sound, singing the praises of the deer that left tracks for an easier passage.

So many memories, so many emotions – but prevailing above all is both gratitude and a deep understanding of the great privilege I had to move across the country, powered by my body.



On her journey, Tanya demonstrated how to turn fear into feat



Thinking of exploring the New Zealand South Island?

