

loft spaces, private rooms with soft linens, feather pillows and clean towels, and even “stargazers” to sleep in — small wooden tent-shaped cabins, with no room to stand, but perspex roofs that allow you to see the stars from bed. There is a piano, and picnic tables in the garden.

In the morning, trampers cook eggs and bacon, and drink tea as the sun rises. Enjoy it while it lasts — things are about to get tougher.

Day one: Ōnuku to Flea Bay

Leaving Ōnuku, the climb begins — happily, one that is rewarded each time you stop to catch your breath and look back at Akaroa. We climb up and out of the extinct volcano that formed when Banks Peninsula was erupting around 8 million years ago. From the top, at 699m, Aoraki/Mt Cook can be seen in the distance, some 230km away. Climb over the volcanic rim, and leave civilisation — and mobile phone coverage — behind. For the next 48 hours, it’s just you and the views.

From this point, the day gets easier, sloping down over the ancient volcano’s outer slope and into beech forests and past waterfalls, alongside streams with the cool air that refreshes us just enough to get us to the second night’s accommodation — Flea Bay.

Flea Bay is home to one of the oldest farms in New Zealand. In the 1880s, this isolated spot — which had no roads or electricity until the 1950s — supported a school, a dairy and three families. Today the Helps family produce wool and meat, and oversee Pōhatu Penguins, offering evening tours of this important little colony.

After an early dinner our band of trampers don camo jackets and follow farmer Francis Helps on his walk to monitor the penguins’ nesting sites. He gently lifts the lids of their nestboxes to reveal the penguin chicks inside — almost fully fattened and ready for the sea. He shows us one who hasn’t quite got the message yet — his parents, having fed him for months, have now left him to fend for himself. But he’s still waiting for them each day, not quite ready to try swimming and fishing. He’ll work it out as soon as he’s hungry enough.

As night falls, we huddle into hides with binoculars and observe the penguins socialising out at sea, banding into rafts before returning home. This is a natural viewing experience — no lights, no disturbing the penguins in any way — so we sneak off back to our huts to let the penguin parents come to shore for the night.

Day two: Flea Bay to Stony Bay

Next morning, we put the tea on to beat the chill and scoff overnight oats in time to make the 8.30am kayaking excursion. This optional side trip takes you on to the water, out of the bay to 20 to 30m, to see the seals playing (and fighting), learn about the Pōhatu marine reserve and the geological history of Banks Peninsula.

After kayaking, we discover that the day’s track is gentle and winding, following the edge of cliff-top farmland, in and around the bays and points of the east side of the peninsula. The views are incredible — sweeping blue skies, hay-coloured Canterbury hills, and nothing between



you and Chile, 10,000km away. The cliffs are startlingly high, and signs along the way warn “Take extra care in windy weather”. Despite the perfectly still day, we stick strictly to the path.

This day takes us past more wildlife encounters — from Seal Cave, where we find seals twisting and curling in the swells of the ocean, to the only tītī/muttonbird colony on Canterbury’s mainland, safe behind a predator-proof fence. From here it is all gently downhill, away from the cliffs and into a cool kānuka grove, that opens out into the most charming accommodation of all — Stony Bay.

Stony Bay is a collection of huts scattered around an orchard garden. It’s like a little forest village — complete with a tiny museum, private outdoor baths, and a pool table made from upcycled wood, with paint tins for pockets. There is a tiny but well-stocked store with all the treats and staples you need, from tins of baked beans to rib-eye steak.

Here, there is not only no mobile phone reception; there is also no electricity. Each room has candles and matches, and there is a barbecue and gas cookers.

In my room, I find fresh-cut wild flowers, mismatched antique crockery, and old-fashioned candle holders to light my way after dark. We spend the evening reading by candlelight, then gather around the fire pit to drink herbal tea and whisky, and watch the stars.

Maggie Wicks at a trampers’ shelter along the Banks Track; penguins nest beneath the floorboards of a hut. Photos / Alister Winter, Emma Spencer

TIPS FOR THE WALK

Cost

The Banks Track 3-night walk is \$330 per person, including pack cartage. Chilly bins can be carted for \$50, and private rooms are \$225.

Getting there

The Banks Track begins in the evening of your first day. We flew from Auckland to Christchurch, drove to Akaroa, and had plenty of time to do our food shopping in time for the 5pm pick up.

Fitness

There are good uphill sections on days 1 and 3. All tracks are clearly marked and none are technical.

What to pack

Buy your supplies right next to the pick-up spot. The Four Square offers local Barry’s Bay cheeses and basic groceries. Across the road, the butcher sells charcuterie and locally hot-smoked salmon. For an extra \$50, you can have a chilly bin carted for you — well worth it for cold beers and wine at the end of the day.

Pick up a book at the Coronation Library, built in 1875, which was Akaroa’s first library and is now a second-hand book store. Some of the library’s original books are on display.

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Day three: From Stony Bay, through Hinewai, to Akaroa

Breaking the webs in the morning trails, day three begins in the cool glades of farmland and low-lying forest. It is a gentle rise that lasts just long enough to think, ‘Was that it?’. No, that was not it.

Today is steep. It’s all up to the ridgeline, then all down to Akaroa, so get your walking sticks and kneecaps ready. But the rewards are great, with views from the top of both sides of the peninsula, and along the way, Hinewai.

Hinewai Reserve is an eco-restoration project, a 1250-hectare section of land being returned to its natural state. Native trees are slowly coming back, and though large swathes are still gorse-covered, it serves to protect the young natives, before eventually becoming smothered by them.

But still the climb continues. Stop and catch your breath in the shade. Drink. When you hit the elegant red beech forest, you’ve broken the back of it. Just about.

In the shade of this forest, we sit and devour our sandwiches and apples, and nothing ever tasted so delicious.

And then it’s up again. One foot in front of the other, along one of New Zealand’s most beautiful and rewarding walks.

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