A walk in the Antipodes

Guided walks are by no means a new thing, but their importance in the arena of outdoor activities has grown rapidly over the last ten years. Perhaps once seen as an exercise only for 'wimps' or an exclusive way for the rich to walk the high trails of Nepal, the guided walk has now joined the mainstream, enjoyed by young and old, rich and poor.

The guided walk increases accessibility while offering an opportunity to protect the environment from abuse and overuse. Accessibility involves arranging permission for entry over private land, providing transport to remote locations, and getting people into the great outdoors who otherwise would not participate. With the rapid increase in international tourism and travel, interest in walking has increased considerably, with both the young 'gap year' travellers and the older baby-boomer generation creating significant user groups.

Going on a guided walk creates an inevitable peer group pressure to have the correct equipment, and in particular the younger walkers are keen to work with clothing and footwear that incorporates the best of modern technology. While walkers can pick routes commensurate with their capabilities and interests, from a meander in Tuscany to a tough walk in the Andes, all need to pay proper attention to footwear and protection from the elements, expanding the market for companies involved in the outdoor industry. So while the Timberlands and the Merrells of the world are used to supplying gear for the cappuccino run, walkers of all types create a much more interesting audience.

One place where guided walking is especially important for residents and tourists alike is New Zealand where walking is called 'tramping'. Straddling 41 degrees South and a long way from any other land mass, New Zealand offers a wet maritime climate which can be extremely variable. The North Island is subtropical, and South Island is temperate: New Zealand can experience four seasons in a single day.

With less than four million inhabitants it offers mountains, lakes and coastal routes on both islands that are amongst the most beautiful and unspoilt in the world. More than one third of New Zealand is protected in reserves as the country rushes to protect what is left of its unique fauna and wildlife. The first European settlers brought so many animals and trees with them that indigenous New Zealand species suffered: native birds are somewhat laid-back and are not so keen on flying, making them very vulnerable to imported predators such as cats, stoats and rats or other aggressive birds, such as the magpie and mynah.

On the positive side, for the visitor and local alike, New Zealand has no dangerous or poisonous animals, although sea lions are said to have marched up into Dunedin and trashed a few cars. At least the walker can meander through forests and countryside without fear of bears or snakes. Indeed the most intimidating part of walking in New Zealand is often getting into the country.

Trampers coming to New Zealand have to deal with some unusual demands, including declaration of all hiking gear, and especially footwear which should be pre-washed of all dirt and mud. The boots will be checked and quite likely washed again at the port of entry, and other walking gear will be examined in detail.

Once in, hiking opportunities range in turn from 10-minute walks to multi-day tramps. The DOC (Dept of Conservation) protects the reserves of this resource. The national parks have 12,000km of walking trails and over 1,000 huts for overnight stays to which can be added huge additional tracts of privately-owned land. While there are other famous and interesting walks in New Zealand such as the Abel-Tasman and the Heaphy Track, none is as exulted as the Milford Track. This is sometimes classed as the 'the finest walk in the world'.

Milford Track, located in Fiordland in the south west of South Island, is a four-day moderate class walk of 53.5km. The track can only be walked one way and is tightly controlled during the October to April walking season, with 40 people per day on guided walks using lodges and 40 per day going more independently (but who also have to book) and using more rudimentary huts. The walk ends at the beautiful Milford Sound, which is the second wettest spot in the world and where it rains two out of every three days.

The track starts and finishes on the water, with a start at Lake Te Anau and goes over Mackinnon pass at 1,100m - the highest point. The hardest part of the 'tramp' is the third day when you go up from about 600m over the pass, and then have a long hard downhill to 200m. The walk on Day 3 is 15km.

Milford Track was built in the mid-nineteenth century by Quintin MacKinnon who was employed by the government to cut the track, or properly formed pathway,



where the vegetation has been cut back from the sides. Despite the climb and the descent it cannot be claimed as one of the hardest walks in the world, but the rapidly changing weather and the prospect of a significant proportion of the 8,000mm of annual rainfall dropping on the tramper in a short space of time means you need to be prepared. On a guided walk the organisers provide door-to-door transport, food, free loan of day packs and jackets for those who need them, sunscreen and insect repellent. Yet the list of necessary equipment is extensive.

Walkers need a small day pack, walking boots or shoes, a bottle of water, and a waterproof jacket for changeable weather. They also need woollen or technical thermal underwear top and bottom. They are advised to avoid cottons, jeans, or silk thermals. Perspiration means you will feel cold and damp inside the best rain coat. At the risk of being repetitious, the weather can be very changeable. Snow is possible in summer. Thermal underwear and a fleece jacket are essential, as are a woollen hat, gloves, sun block, and woollen or thermal socks.

Rapid climate changes mean that trampers might find themselves switching between sun-, rain-, and woolly-hat all within the space of 24 hours. Outerwear, footwear, and rucksacks must be water resistant, and other clothes need to be fast drying. Important aspects when buying clothing for walking in New Zealand are weight / wicking / breathing ability / drying time / warmth and fit.

With so many foreign walkers occupying the tracks, the range of equipment to be seen is extensive. Nevertheless, visitors find some unconventional approaches and a lot more New Zealand-made or -designed product than they can have expected. Key



Icebreaker's 100% merino garments offer protection in extreme conditions.

Icebreaker

100% pure in an age of synthetics

Founded in 1995 following a chance meeting between marketing graduate, Jeremy Moon, and a merino wool grower who was experimenting with new technology, New Zealand brand Icebreaker offers an ecological clothing system that is both natural and technical. The merino, sourced from 30 growers in the Southern Alps and South Island, offers protection from scorching summer temperatures that can soar to 35°C and the freezing winters where temperatures can drop as low as -20°C. The properties of Icebreaker fabrics read like an encyclopaedia, they are soft, naturally anti-microbial, quick drying, highly breathable, warm when wet, biodegradable, fire resistant and offer high UV protection.

Focusing on 100% merino, Icebreaker manufactures seven different fibres, each designed for a specific purpose, whether it is long, fine fibres for intimate apparel or shorter fibres with a wider diameter for outerwear. Each of its fibres is lightweight, strong and soft offering a high insulation value, breathability and no prickle. But the type of fibre used is only half of the story. Not willing to take any chances on a below par product, Icebreaker tests each bale of merino for 10 different attributes such as length, diameter, strength and purity, before it is accepted.

The brand offers a full clothing system: base layer; mid layer; and outer layer. Each can be worn individually or as part of the clothing system dependent on the level of insulation required. The system works on the basis of preservation, which has been developed over centuries…by sheep. As the merino spend the winter at up to 7,000 feet (2,134 metres) up a mountain they need insulation, which is provided by merino wool's high warmth to weight ratio. However, as the sheep also need to survive in soaring temperatures, the natural breathability of the wool prevents overheating. This natural thermostat maintains a constant temperature in the sheep, or the person wearing an Icebreaker garment. When moisture is absorbed from the cold air, merino fibres liberate heat through a molecular process called 'heat of sorption', thus keeping the wearer warm, however, in a warm or high aerobic environment, moisture is pulled away from the body and into the fabric, where it is dispersed and released as moisture vapour, thus cooling the body through evaporation.

It seems that there's a lot to be said for the 'natural miracle' too. Performance apparel consumers are known to be a demanding and knowledgeable group, so having already produced its millionth garment in 2004, it seems that Icebreaker has succeeded in developing a top end product in an industry where manufacturers find it nigh on impossible to pull the wool over their customers' eyes.



Icebreaker offer a layered clothing system.
Icebreaker

to many of these is the use of merino wool and an understanding of layering. Brands involved include Macpac, Kathmandu, and Icebreaker.

Merino wins in New Zealand as it is very warm and comfortable and, being wool, stays warm when it gets wet. Unlike many synthetics, perspiration washes out of merino, so it does not build up any unpleasant odour. Consequently merino is not only found in jumpers and t-shirts but also in thermal underwear.

Why merino?

There are many reasons why New Zealanders opt for merino as the fibre of choice for its clothes aimed at trampers and these are not based on the ample supplies available, although it is plentiful, with 700 local merino growers producing 8,000 tons per annum on average. The fibre is fine, ranging from 13-24 micron (a human hair is 60 micron) and it is environmentally friendly, as sheep are designed to be shorn. New Zealand merino is also longer and stronger than other merino wools and, in combination with today's modern synthetic fibres, 'nature's wonder fibre' offers a range of benefits for those participating in outdoor pursuits from base layer to outerwear.

The fact that New Zealand merino is a longer and stronger fibre offers higher durability and longer lasting smoothness - merino fibres can be bent 30,000 times without danger of breaking. The longer fibres give a more even appearance which is less likely to pill. It is exceptionally soft, with no irritation or prickle when placed next to the skin, thus making it an ideal fibre for base layers. It is also particularly white, which offers manufacturers the ability to achieve a wider range of colours from natural through to vibrant, offering superior colour retention.

Merino is a hydroscopic fibre, capable of absorbing up to 30% of its weight in moisture before it starts to feel damp. It can also repel moisture, and merino's regain factor (the amount of water in the fibre expressed as a percentage of its dry weight) is an amazing 17%, compared with an average of 1-4% in synthetic fibres.

It offers warmth without weight. Merino's 'heat of sorption' rate is four times greater than that of nylon and at least double that of polyester. This means that the wearer feels the heat released by the fibres. Another advantage is its resistance to soiling and it can withstand far more washes than synthetic materials without signs of greying, which is caused by the contaminants contained in oil-based synthetic materials. Merino is also the least flammable of fibres and is actually self-extinguishing. Furthermore, it does not melt like synthetic fibres.

So, with its strength, length, softness, light weight, odour resistance, durability, safety and anti-soiling properties, it's no wonder that a company such as Designer Textiles of New Zealand has developed a range of fabrics under its Merino Advanced Performance Programme (MAPP) that caters for all garment requirements. And it seems that the benefits of merino have travelled further afield as producers such as Italy's Loro Piana, UK's niche market clothproducer William Halstead and Co., Smartwool, Japan's Nikke, and Korea's Cheil Industries are just a few of many to have adopted New Zealand merino.

Layering is important as walkers are likely to be shedding clothes through the early part of the day and then putting them back on as the late afternoon chill

starts to set in. Macpac's clothing system is typical of what is on offer. Yet the New Zealanders have another unusual approach in terms of Kiwi fashion, and that is to wear thermal underwear, including long johns under shorts and a T-shirt. It may seem laughable but it is effective and a common sight on cooler days even in everyday wear. If it gets too hot it is easy to strip off the long johns and go about in T shirt and shorts, keeping the thermals handy for when it gets cold again.

This is the essence of layering: two light layers of clothing are warmer and more versatile than one heavy one. Macpac, a brand (see panel previous page) highly recommended by Juliette Jordan and Steve Gibbons who run a guided walk company called Southern Wilderness, has a slightly more sophisticated offer which it terms as its "complete clothing system". This involves Bodywear-Interwool which is a single fabric with a fine merino wool layer next to the skin and a durable high wicking outer layer for the base layers and a series of insulating, shellwear and rainwear layers to adapt to different levels of activity and weather changes.

Southern Wilderness is also an enthusiastic supporter of another small company, Keen, whose trekking sandals, while not suited for the rain of the Milford Track, are perfect for the lighter walks such as the Abel Tasman.

New Zealand does not do flat very well, and with its unpredictable and changeable weather, the walker must be prepared: ninety per cent of the time walking there is relaxed and fun, but… Taking part in a guided walk is a major element in ensuring that any dangers are minimised, but every year one or two independent walkers get caught ill–prepared or become lost. For them one of the best guide books on the New Zealand walks reproduces the Search and Rescue Prayer, which is worth including here.

SAR nightly Prayer
Seek no wisdom, leave no word;
Common sense is too absurd.
Ignore advice, you don't need skill;
Blokes like you are hard to kill.
Take no extra food or gear,
You'll not need it, have no fear.
But, we ask of you before you die:
Please choose a place that's not too high!

Which all goes to emphasise that, whatever the level of walking to be undertaken, preparation is necessary and the correct clothing and footwear needs to be used.

Brand New Zealand

Think of New Zealand and one imagines….well sheep. There's wool, of course, and merino is without doubt a vital part of New Zealand's heritage and the benefits of merino in outdoor apparel are numerous. However, what is less well-known are the New Zealand brands manufacturing top end high performance outdoor apparel.

One such brand is Macpac that produces outdoor equipment for every level, from recreation to, as the company puts it, testing "the limits of human potential". Founded by Bruce McIntyre in 1973, the fact the company is from New Zealand, shapes the corporate philosophy and the apparel it produces, but, far from restricting itself to the domestic market, Macpac now sells its equipment and apparel in Australia, UK, Europe and Japan.

Macpac produces its Complete Clothing System, a layered system that is designed around the interchange between the body and the environment, keeping the body dry and within a comfortable temperature range by creating apparel that that can adapt to changing temperatures and moisture levels. In order to achieve this, Macpac developed bodywear, insulation, and shellwear layers that can be added or removed depending on the level of activity and the surrounding environment.

Macpac has also developed its own fabrics such as AzTec – a unique blend of hardwearing, long-staple cottons and abrasion and rot-resistant polyester fibres – specifically for the brand's hard-wearing backpacks its' latest innovation for its base layer is Interwool, a 'two-in-one' bi-component fabric of merino wool inner, a synthetic outer that performs better than merino only or synthetic only garments.

Swanndri "The New Zealand Legend"

In the 1800s New Zealand was just being discovered by pioneers and early settlers who had to learn to survive in the country's tough terrain and variable weather. A man called William Broome took on the challenge of designing the country's first all purpose, hardwearing, shower proof bush shirt. With the establishment of the Bruce Woollen Mill in Milton in 1871, it became possible for woollen yarn to be woven to create such a garment. John McKendrick took the original design and added the hood, a laced front and long sleeves that have become synonymous with the Swanndri brand. This was launched in 1927.

The range of Swanndri garments has grown and changed to keep pace with different fashion trends through the decades, but the original '103' which goes through controlled shrinking to increase its density and waterproofness, remains an ever popular garment. Whole generations of New Zealanders have grown up with their Swanndri – a garment which is said to be hardwearing enough to last a lifetime.



The classic Swanndri '103' Bushshirt remains popular today.
Swanndri

However, with changing fashions and demands, Swanndri has expanded its range to offer garments with more technical performance and in different styles.

The firm introduced its 100% merino wool Flexiwool to allow stretch to be incorporated into its garments and allow a higher level of comfort and more freedom of movement. It has also added a windproof lining to its garments and improved the breathability. Off the back of its success with these new developments, Swanndri has also launched a new collection of lifestyle garments called Smartwear. The range has been designed to be practical and comfortable as everyday wear, which all incorporate the company's Flexiwool technology.

But despite moving with the times, Swanndri remains true to its history. As the company says, whichever Swanndri garment you buy, you're buying a piece of its history and part of New Zealand's national pride.