

Tongariro Trail

Andrew Lowton treks the top trail on New Zealand's north island



■ Getting out there on the Tongariro circuit

"THE FINEST WALK IN NEW Zealand." With a reputation like that, the Tongariro Northern Circuit, in the centre of New Zealand's North Island, simply could not be ignored.

That one of its volcanoes was also an 'extra' in the Lord of the Rings was an added bonus. However, as the clouds hovered around my ears on the first morning I was cursing the tourism spin doctor, whom I was convinced had coined the phrase, and was possibly in league with the Dark Lord himself.

At the trailhead I could barely see up the track. It wasn't even that early, just after 9.00am, so I wasn't hopeful that it would clear. I had opted for a later start to avoid the crowds which usually gather early to walk the Tongariro Crossing, one leg of the circuit. This was the day walk made popular by the spin doctor's description.

The track was fairly easy at first. I swiftly passed Mangatepopo Hut, where hikers doing the complete circuit stay on their first night. I was cheating by missing out the boring first leg slog from Whakapapa Village to here.

After twenty minutes I was into my stride and, despite the lack of views, enjoying the gently rising valley walk. It didn't last. As the clouds lifted a little I was faced with a steep climb up an old lava flow to the saddle between the volcanoes of Ngauruhoe and Tongariro. This is the toughest climb on the whole circuit and is known locally as the Devil's Staircase, the slope littered with jagged boulders of black volcanic rock.

I was puffing hard when I reached the top. On the saddle I found a signpost indicating the route up Mt Ngauruhoe (2291m). Since I couldn't see more than 50 metres up the slope of the volcano I debated whether to attempt the climb. Somewhere up there in the thick white cloud was the perfect cone I had seen the day before, so it seemed wrong to not even give the clouds a chance to lift. Off I went.

Mt Ngauruhoe is the youngest volcano in the Park, estimated to have been formed in the last 2500 years. Its symmetrical slopes lead up to a single vent, in contrast to its two neighbours, Tongariro and Ruapehu, which have multiple vents. Lava last flowed from Ngauruhoe in 1954.

The going wasn't easy. The scree slope made for a classic two up, one down sliding gait. After half an hour I stopped to consider my options. Two young lads came running down the scree. "Could you see

anything at the top?" I asked. "Nothing," they chorused, as they slid past. Decision made, I surfed down after them. It was a shame to miss out on looking down into Mt Doom, its name in the Lord of the Rings films, but there were plenty of sights still ahead.

I dropped down into South Crater, a wide flat expanse of hard sun-baked earth, dotted with the odd boulder. Crossing the wide open space with cloud obscuring everything, I half expected a marauding swarm of Orcs to descend on me. Following the marker poles up the rim of the crater I arrived at another junction. No Orcs. This sign pointed off to the summit of Mt Tongariro (1968m). I had to reach at least one summit on the hike, so I turned off. Mt Tongariro is still considered to be active but hasn't erupted since 1926, so I reckoned I was fairly safe. Along a ridge, then over a small saddle, the going was fairly easy at first, but then I hit a slope of gravel and ash which worked its way up to the summit. There was no crater, just a pile of volcanic boulders. Cheated, I couldn't see a damned thing, but I mentally ticked off another peak.

On the way down a curious thing happened: the clouds lifted and I had a view. In the foreground I could see Red Crater and in the distance, the sparkle of the equally imaginatively named Blue Lake. I sat for a while, ate my lunch, and took it all



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in. Amazingly, apart from the two scree runners, I hadn't seen a soul all day. It felt like the whole park was mine, my precious...

Tongariro National Park owes its existence to Horonuku TeHeuheu Tukino, a chief of Ngati Tuwharetoa. His people considered the mountains tapu (sacred). In 1887 the chief gifted the land to the people of New Zealand, seeing this as the best way of protecting the area. It became the first national park in New Zealand and only the second in the world.

Backtracking to the junction I climbed steeply up to the rim of Red Crater. This is the highest point on the circuit, 1886m, and is a spectacular spot. Red Crater itself is a beautiful, scary place; with red and black walls and a huge rent gashed out of its side, it emanates the kind of power Tolkien had in mind for the realm of the Dark Lord. Hot gasses pour out of scattered fumaroles and the sulphurous smell of rotten eggs is all pervading. Down below are the three Emerald Lakes, their colour in stark contrast to the dark rocks and red soil surrounding them.

The slope down to the lakes is treacherous. Loose black volcanic soil is littered with larger rocks, so I took it slowly. At the bottom I was plunged back into the crowds. Hikers were everywhere, lining the edge of the lakes taking photographs. I guessed

most of them were doing the one day walk and, since I would be circling back past the lakes again, I just kept on walking.

Turning north, I started across the Central Crater of Tongariro, characterised by yet another wide flat expanse of mud in stark contrast to the peaks around.

A steep but, mercifully, short climb took me up the crater rim to Blue Lake. Typically, the name didn't hold quite so true in close up, but its almost geometric roundness was impressive. After passing the lake the track dropped off the volcano and I found myself zigzagging down a tussock-strewn area to Ketetahi Hut.

The hut was busy but I managed to grab a bunk and fixed myself a quick meal while the cooks were free. Close to the hut are the Ketetahi Hot Springs and after dinner I wandered down to have a look. The Springs are fenced off and supposedly on private land but this didn't stop some hikers soaking away the day's legacy in the steaming pools.

Later, I sat on the porch of the hut and was fleetingly granted a fine view of Lake Rotoaira below, before the clouds descended once again. After eight hours of walking sleep came unsurprisingly easily.

I awoke to bright sunshine and glowing red hands. Although I had barely seen the sun in past days, nevertheless the backs of my hands were badly sunburned. Having slathered myself in sunscreen this time, I left late and the crowds had thankfully departed. It was a glorious day as I wandered back past Blue Lake and down to Red Crater. By the time I got there, the clouds had rolled in again but visibility was still better than the first day.

This time I had the lakes to myself. I wandered along the shores, watched the clouds of steam gushing out of Red Crater, took some photographs, and moved on. At the signpost I turned towards the Oturere Valley. The first kilometre was a knee-bender, descending 200m on a steep and slippery slope, before levelling out then zigzagging down, across old lava flows, to the valley floor. From there to the hut the sandy track is level, and the walking was easy. The surroundings, however, were distinctly surreal.

The trail here weaves through a wonderland of bizarrely sculpted lava formations left by eruptions from Red Crater. Away to my right stretched the desolate wasteland of the Rangipo Desert, New Zealand's only desert and above it, Mt Ngauruhoe was still wearing its helmet of white clouds.

Topping another rise, surrounded by boulders, I sud-

denly came upon Oturere Hut. This hut is beautifully situated, with views down the valley to the east. I did the only decent thing and stopped for a cup of tea. As an added bonus I found a 20m waterfall a few minutes walk from the hut and had a quick wash, with an eye on not freezing any valuable body parts.

Moving on from Oturere the scenery was evolving. Ahead I could see a green-covered ridge and, beyond that, occasional glimpses of the snow-covered slopes of Mt Ruapehu.

This volcano dominates the south of the national park and is the highest peak at 2797m. It is the most active in the park. During its last spectacular eruptions in 1995 and 1996 Ruapehu spat out volcanic rocks and followed up with massive clouds of ash, which spoiled the fun for many a ski enthusiast.

Hoping that Mt Ruapehu wouldn't choose this day to make a come back bid, I focussed on the green ridge and kept walking, crossing four valleys on a gravelly path until the barren ground finally gave way to tussock-covered hillocks and a shady beech forest - a welcome change from the desert.

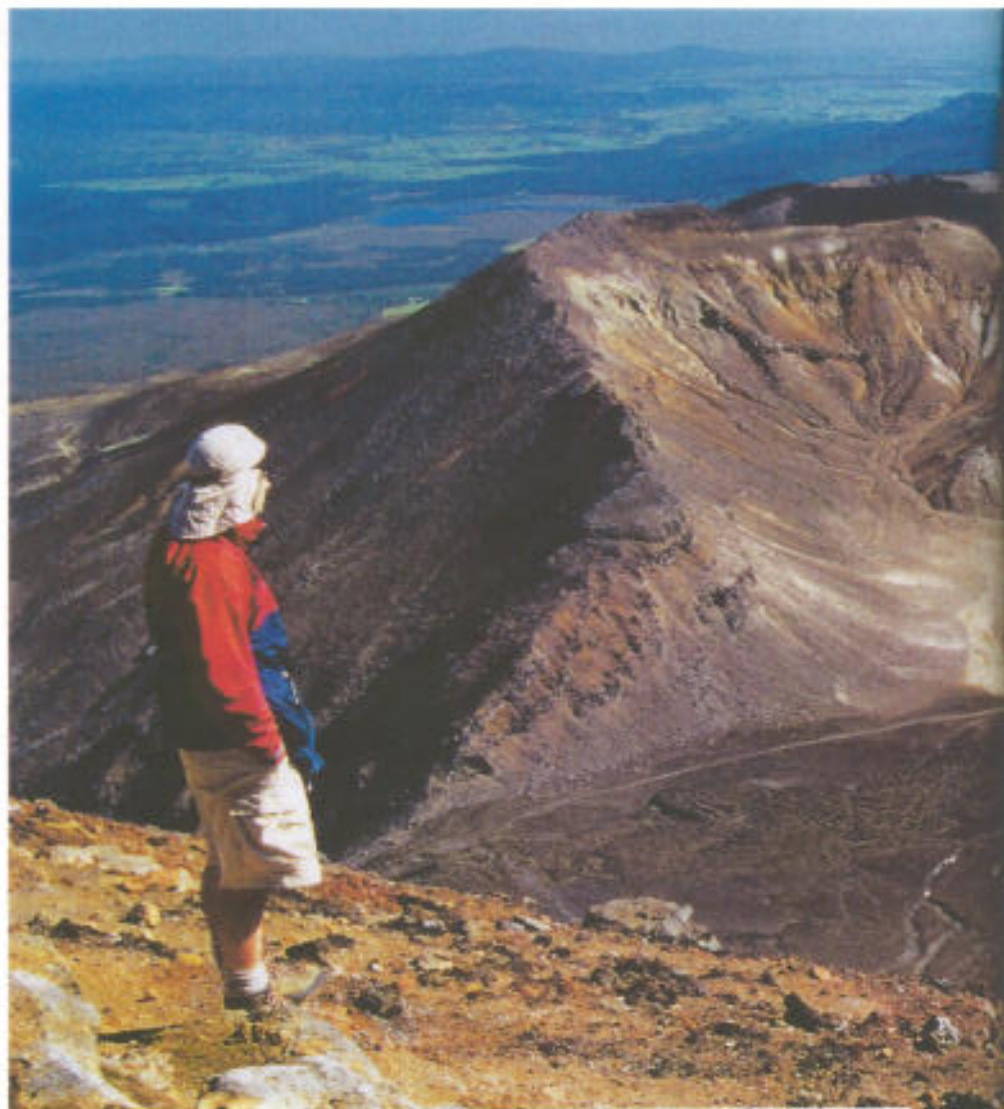
After a steep climb up a ridge I could see the welcome roof of New Waihothonu Hut nestling in the trees below. This hut is arguably the best on the Circuit, with its three separate sleeping areas, a pleasant central living space and a stream running past the door, Oturere only beats it for location.

It also has attractions nearby. First up was a twenty minute walk to Ohinepango Springs. Not the most spectacular, but having spent the best part of two days crossing an arid landscape, it was a novelty to find clear cold water bubbling up out of the ground. Surrounded by lush green vegetation it's a little oasis, but a quick temperature assessment was enough to dispel any thoughts of a dip.

On the way back from the Springs I detoured to Old Waihothonu Hut. This hut was built in 1903/04 by the government as a stopping place for stage coaches. Its sturdy construction, a double layer of corrugated iron sandwiching pumice stone, means it still survives intact and is preserved by the Historic Places Trust. It features some very old graffiti.

Back at the hut only a family of Kiwis from Wellington were in residence. Not many people complete the full circuit. The family generously shared their massive dinner with me and we enjoyed a pleasant evening discussing the best New Zealand hikes. The Tongariro Northern Circuit was their favourite and this was the fifth time they'd walked it. They warned me that they had never yet completed it without getting rained on.

Sure enough my final day dawned with rain in the air. At first a few spots, then gentle but persistent, before culminating in a full-scale deluge. I believe the views on the walk from Waihothonu Hut to Whakapapa Village are supposed to be outstand-



Who's Writing?

In the late nineties, to the surprise of many, I gave up a comfortable 15 year career in local government to be a volunteer with VSO and ended up in Uganda, in East Africa. I liked it so much I ended up staying for 3.5 years. When I left I travelled for a year through Africa, Australasia, the Pacific, and North America. My passion is hiking (preferably in mountain areas), particularly in Africa, New Zealand and North America. This year's trip is to Namibia and South Africa. Recently married and now combining a part-time job with a human rights organisation (The Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers) with freelance writing.



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ABOVE: - The 'other worldly' landscape of the Tongariro National Park

LEFT: - Lava formations, sulphuric fumeroles, crater lakes and hot springs.

ing, flanked as it is by Mt Ruapehu to the south and Mt Ngauruhoe to the north. Alas, I couldn't see a thing.

The track was well-maintained and I just put my head down and bombed on. The rain eased a little as I reached the side trail to Tama Lakes, subtly seducing me. One look at the gathering clouds brought me back to reality. I marched on.

A sharp descent dropped me at Taranaki Falls, which warranted a quick stop, but from there it was just a case of trying to get to the end of the hike before the real rain started. I was lucky. The moment I walked into the Whakapapa Visitor Centre the deluge began. The rain was so heavy that you could barely see your hand in front of your face.

Despite the disappointing last day it had still been a great hike. If I was a tourism spin doctor I would bill it as 'the finest volcanic walk in New Zealand'. And, as an added bonus, I avoided capture by Orcs as well. ■

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WHAT IS THE TONGARIRO NORTHERN CIRCUIT?

The Tongariro Northern Circuit is a 3-4 day hike of 41km in Tongariro National Park in the centre of New Zealand's North Island. The hike actually goes round Mt Ngauruhoe (2291m), a perfect volcanic cone, and over the flanks of Mt Tongariro (1968m). On a clear day you will have superb views of Mt Ruapehu, the highest mountain in the Park (and on North Island) at 2797 metres, and the most active. It last erupted quite spectacularly in 1995.

The hike takes you through spectacular volcanic terrain, crossing craters, passing brightly coloured lakes, steaming fumaroles and waterfalls, with the option to ascend Mts. Ngauruhoe and Tongariro. In good weather the trail is easy to follow, with poles marking the route, signposts at junctions and well-maintained tracks. However, poor weather would make it tricky.

Four well-appointed huts are spaced at regular intervals around the Circuit which means there is no hurry to complete the hike. Most hikers doing the complete circuit take 3 or 4 days; many just do the one day Tongariro Crossing. I took 3 days.

WHEN TO GO

The safest and best time to walk the Circuit is between December and March (summer), when the weather is less severe and the snow has gone. However, this is also the busiest time. In winter you'd need alpine experience to tackle the Circuit when ice axes and crampons would be required.

GETTING THERE

The best way to arrive is to fly into Auckland and then catch a bus to the towns of Taupo or Turangi or the village of National Park, from which you can arrange transport into the National Park. The village of National Park can also be reached by rail.

Getting to and from the Tongariro Northern Circuit - there is no public transport into Tongariro National Park. However, private companies run shuttle bus services from Taupo, Turangi and National Park to the trailheads and Whakapapa Village, within the Park. For details of the shuttle bus services contact the Whakapapa Visitor Centre (Phone +64 (0)7 892 3729 or e-mail whakapapavc@doc.govt.nz)

WEATHER

The weather in the higher areas can be extremely changeable. Even on a hot summer day winds in the higher areas can be very cold and storms can roll in from nowhere. Be prepared for anything.

FOOD AND DRINK

There is a shop at the Whakapapa Holiday Park but it is expensive so all supplies are best purchased in Taupo, Turangi or National Park. Wider selections are available in Taupo or Auckland.

On the Trail water is available at each of the huts.

ACCOMMODATION

In Taupo, Turangi and National Park Village there are hotels, motels and campsites to suit all budgets. Whakapapa Village has less choice: the ultra-expensive Grand Chateau Hotel; the reasonable Skotel, which has some hostel-style rooms; and the



Whakapapa Holiday Park, which has cabins and campsites. Two basic camping grounds are located in the park but are difficult to access without your own transport.

There are four huts on the Circuit at Mangatepopo, Ketetahi, Oturere and Waihoenu. All huts have mattresses, cold water, sinks, toilets, heating and cookers with fuel (gas). Note that heating, fuel and hut wardens are not present in the off-peak season. (See red tape and permits below for details of seasons.)

There are campsites near each of the huts and campers can use the hut facilities.

HEALTH HAZARDS

Aside from the weather the biggest hazards are the loose rocks and slippery volcanic slopes if scaling Mt Ngauruhoe and the thermal areas, although the latter are easily avoided if sensible.

EQUIPMENT

Due to the weather variations you will need everything from shorts to a warm mountain jacket and hat and waterproof jacket. Take several layers of wicking clothing and a change of clothes. Wet clothing may not dry overnight. Broken-in waterproof boots, which support the ankles, are essential on the rough terrain. For scrambling up Ngauruhoe gloves and long trousers will protect you from the sharp volcanic rock. A sun hat and sun cream are essential as there is little shade. During winter and snow conditions snow gaiters and goggles should

be added. An ice axe and crampons are also essential, together with experience in using them. If camping, a strong and sturdy tent should be carried as winds can be vicious. Gas cookers are available in the huts during the peak season - so no need to carry fuel, but you must carry cooking utensils.

MAPS AND GUIDES

The 1:80,000 Tongariro park map is ideal for the Circuit but the Department of Conservation (DOC) leaflet is informative and is all you need. Both are available from the Whakapapa Visitor Centre. There is a good description of the trail in *Tramping in New Zealand* by Jim DuFresne (Lonely Planet).

PERMITS AND RED TAPE

To stay in the huts or camp in the park you require a permit which can be obtained from any DOC office in New Zealand. During peak season from late October to early June a Great Walks Pass is required. To stay in a hut it costs NZ\$20 for adults and NZ\$10 for children (under 18) and to camp it is NZ\$15/7.50. During the off-peak season a Backcountry Pass is required which costs NZ\$10/5 for huts and NZ\$5/2.50 for camping. These fees are per person per night.

CONTACTS

New Zealand Tourism
www.newzealand.com/travel/
 New Zealand Department of Conservation
www.doc.govt.nz/index.html