

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Hug a Tree...

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...that's what children in the United States are taught if they get lost in the forest. It's supposed to calm fears and anchor them to a spot where rescuers can easily find them. On my most recent "tramping" trek in New Zealand, I hugged plenty of them. Trees, not rescuers. I wasn't lost. I was trying to stay alive. I clung to trunks, branches even leaves in order not to slip off the trail and slide down the steep embankment toward the river far, far below. I wasn't alone...I know enough not to venture into the wild solo. Even better: my 11 year old son, sister- and brother-in-law and their daughters were all on this journey. Our well-researched overnight adventure turned into a death-defying obstacle course that left us wondering where we went wrong.



We had a guide book that assured us, after a few initial hurdles, this "must-not-miss" trek in Wanganui would lead us through a verdant, regenerating forest to a beautiful waterfall, on a path graded as "easy." My son surmised "they meant easy to die!" When I asked a Kiwi friend of mine, who's found herself in equally dicey situations (once with a 4 year old), she quipped it was a "classic Kiwi understatement."

The guidebook's author accurately described obstacles at the start of the trail, which appears to be mostly used by longhorn cattle and is still squishy with the evidence. After that, the wide paths narrowed to a foot-and-a-half-wide mountainside track where wild goats roam. Trail improvements were promised...just around the next bend. Instead, conditions increasingly degraded. Disappointment turned to palpable fear when my oldest niece took one false step on a slippery rock, and the dirt crumbled beneath her. The memory of her yelp and cartwheel over the edge toward a tree 30 feet below will never be erased from memory. Shocked, but alive, she miraculously suffered just a scratch. After witnessing the accident in what felt like slow-motion, I was left knock-kneed and shaking. It could have had a tragic ending.

By this time, we realized we had a real safety call to make. Conditions weren't going to improve, but we had also gone more than halfway toward the cabin we booked. Everyone was tired and nightfall was just a few short hours away. We had plenty of food and water, and reasoned it was better to carry on slowly and carefully so we could rest, refuel and refocus before trying to trek back out the next morning. One final hurdle tested our credulity: we had to step gingerly on slippery stones directly under a small waterfall! Clearly it was considered just a part of the trail, no warnings required.

The "easy" trail rating may have been understated, but the promised eye candy was oversold. When we finally reached the cabin, my usually sunny and spirited sister-in-law concluded our trip went "nowhere for no good reason." We did trek through a nature preserve designed to encourage

the new growth of indigenous plants. While I respect the process, I have to say it has a way to go before it becomes breathtaking. After we arrived at the cabin, we gave the guidebook and our high hopes one last chance. A “perfect vantage point” to peek at a beautiful waterfall was supposed to be just a swing bridge away. But it turned out to be but another path to nowhere. At that point we considered using the book for campfire kindling.

When night finally fell, Mother Nature decided to up the ante. Instead of the forecasted “drizzle”, sheets of rain poured down, further fueling our frustration. My sister-in-law and I lay awake for hours, planning our emergency jet-boat extrication. When the sun reappeared in the morning, we resolved to give the return trek a go, but very cautiously. As expected, mini-landslides had overtaken parts of the narrow path during the overnight storm. The adults carefully guided the younger kids over the obstacles, turning ourselves toward the mountainside, digging into the dirt to grab roots, shuffling our way sideways along the muddy trail ledge.

My sister-in-law’s guidance came from her experiences at Outward Bound-style survival camps in her teens. My brother-in-law ranched 70 thousand acres almost singlehandedly. They are level headed and know how to navigate tricky situations. I, being a former news reporter, ran through all the lessons I’d learned from the dramatic stories we’d covered and resolved we would not become the next headline. Even though I knew we couldn’t control this situation.

“Tramping”, or hiking and camping, is a national pastime in New Zealand, and one of the biggest reasons tourists trek to this little corner of the southern hemisphere. But expect a few “wild and wooly” scenarios. A British friend who regularly treks with a local walking group once had to bushwhack her way back out, amid jokes of it not being the first time they’d “spend a night in the bush!” She marveled that none of the Kiwis seemed too worried by their predicament or how they got into it. Interestingly, when I looked up the Department of Conservation’s website (after our trip) I found tramping tracks, even those rated “easy”, can present a series of challenges. And the [Department Of Conservation guide](#) clearly warns on each of its pages “Safety is your responsibility.”

There were signs. One we found in shreds lying on the ground, stating there were “multiple hazards ahead.” Oh well, as they say here, “she’ll be right”. As Americans, we are used to being over-cautioned, even coddled by safeguards to protect people and against liability. By comparison, Kiwis seem to live life a little on the edge. There may be no bears, no mountain lions, no rattlesnakes to avoid, but Kiwis understand there’s always risk to any adventure we choose to take. The dial can turn quickly from adventure to survival. Here, they believe it’s up to you to maneuver your way safely.

Now understanding the Kiwi way, we’ll include in our planning plenty of conversations with people who have “been there, done that” instead of relying on books and maps. We’ll also check the copyright date to make sure reviews are recent. But we won’t stop tramping. Because in the end, once the fear dissipates, there’s real satisfaction in overcoming obstacles and managing risk successfully. Much like life, at the end of the journey, you emerge stronger and smarter, and with one heck of an exciting tale to tell. Even if wasn’t really death-defying. I guess that’d be a classic American overstatement!

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