

WILD NZ



Summit of Tongariro with Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu in background.

CROSSING THE TONGARIRO



by Mike Cooney



What's wrong with this pic?

After putting on my right boot, I grabbed the other – and quickly realised something wasn't quite right. To be honest, it took a wee while to register. But, when it did, I was horrified. In my rush to head out the door yesterday, I'd grabbed one of my wife's boots by mistake! And now here I was, sitting in the middle of the North Island, three-and-a-half-hours from home, with two right boots: one size nine and one size seven ...

ARIRO

I'd been planning for a while to walk the infamous Tongariro Crossing – rated as the best one-day trek in New Zealand, and one of the top 10 in the world. I'd put aside a two-week window to do it in, but so far, the weather hadn't played ball – and time was about up.

However, when my Ski Patrol mate, Henry, forecast clear skies the following day, a spur-of-the-moment decision was made (with my wife's permission, of course!). And two hours later, I had packed the truck and was heading south.

As it turned out, Henry was working in National Park that week, and he offered to drive me from the track's finish (where I'd leave my truck) to the start, 26km away – which thankfully meant I didn't have to organise one of the many shuttles available in National Park.

The following morning dawned fine and foggy as we drove to where the 'Crossing' ends. There were a few other vehicles around – so I figured I wasn't going to be the only one up there making the most of the good weather. Grabbing my gear and boots, I jumped in with Henry and his mate for the ride to the start.

They dropped me off up the end of Mangatepopo Rd, and I found a place out of the wind to sit and put my boots on.

And that's when my world came crashing down ...

I couldn't believe it – two right boots! I momentarily considered wearing my wife's right boot on my left foot – but I knew that wouldn't work. I also thought about walking the track in my socks – then bare feet. Seriously! Feeling slightly panicked, I looked around in the off chance someone had another pair of boots slung over their shoulders. But

nothing! I wondered what Bear Grylls would've done – but I'd never seen him make a pair of boots out of rocks and flax, and that's pretty much all I had to work with.

So, after flapping around like a headless chook, I finally pulled myself together and remembered I had shoes in my truck. Hitching a ride with a nice young guy in the boot of his Corolla, I made it back to my vehicle and grabbed my fancy, smooth soled, non-padded, dress shoes and hitched another 26km back.

This was going to be interesting ...

Arriving (again) at the start of the track – a good hour and a half after I'd left – I was at last ready to begin ... fancy boots and all! The weather, although windy, was still amazing, – and I'd eventually stopped calling myself names. Things were looking up!

A sign told me I had 19.4km of premium hiking ahead of me – and as I'd already





wasted a good chunk of the morning, I set off at a furious pace ...

The first few kilometres was easy going, with well-formed tracks and boardwalks following the Mangatepopo Stream up the valley. Old lava-flows, tussock and small shrubs covered the rugged terrain, as I made my way towards Soda Springs and the beginning of the Devil's Staircase.

(It was at this point that I was overtaken by a girl, and I realised my pace wasn't that furious ...)

The appropriately named Devil's Staircase is a steep and uneven climb of 200 vertical metres, taking you to the first of a number of craters on Mt Tongariro – South Crater. The plant life gradually gave way to some seriously inhospitable volcanic terrain, but if you take your time it's easily doable. In fact, the outstanding

views give you a great excuse to stop and take regular breaks. The snow-capped peak of Mt Taranaki (or Egmont for the old-school) was clearly visible in the distance – and the panoramic spectacle was quite breath-taking!

The walk across South Crater was nice and flat – and seemed a lot like the moon. I'd initially planned to summit Mt Ngauruhoe here, but the late start, fancy shoes and strong winds had me rethinking that idea. And quite honestly? It looked a LONG way up!

At the end of the crater, the track headed up another steep but short climb – this time onto an exposed ridge leading to Red Crater. Stopping for lunch here, I found a nice rocky crag to shelter from the wind ... food tastes so good when you've earned it!



Blue Lake.

Once again, I was awestruck with the outlook – views over the Rangipo Desert and Kaimanawa Ranges to the east ... and, below me, the beautiful Emerald Lakes: a vivid contrast against the dull volcanic backdrop.

I nearly walked past the turn-off to the Tongariro summit – pretending not to see the poled track to the left. However, it was such a fantastic day that, despite the high winds and exposed climb (and my gripless shoes!), I figured it'd be doable.

Can I simply say: I'm so glad I did!

It wasn't a difficult climb. But the winds were full on – my exposed legs feeling the full brunt of the sandblasting I was getting. Thankfully, I had my *Buff* headwear on, which covered my face, offering some protection – plus it enabled me to pretend like I was a ninja! (Ah, the joys



of travelling alone!) Anyway, it was awesome. But make sure you do it on a fine day, for the full benefit – and take a 'summit-only' treat

to keep you going! (Mine was a chocolate Easter egg ... mmmm!)

On coming down I was greeted by the Red Crater: so-named because it's, um ... red (due to the presence of oxidized iron in the rock). There was also a strong smell of sulphur – which had me confused at first, wondering who'd farted. But since I was the only one there (and I was pretty sure it wasn't me), the smell remained a mystery. Actually, it turns out that the steam vents above the Emerald Lakes were the culprits.

The track down the ridge beside the Red Crater was steep and exposed, with loose rock underfoot, and you could make quite fast progress by jumping and sliding down the face. (However, not recommended if you want to keep a nice shine on your fancy shoes ...) The gale-force winds were still doing their best to fly me down the mountain, and I was quietly thankful I wasn't a midget wearing baggy pants.

The track dropped past the beautiful-but-smelly Emerald Lakes (there are three of them), where it picked up the edge of Central Crater before climbing again onto the sides of Blue Lake – a cold, acidic lake not recommended for swimming (unless you'd like to see your bones).

I was told afterwards that this lake is *tapu*, and you shouldn't eat or drink around its shores. Thank goodness I'd already run out of food ...

Leaving the Blue Lake behind, I sidled the North Crater for a while before starting my descent down the other side of the mountain. The change in outlook here was dramatic, with views north of Lake Rotoaira before me and Taupo in the distance. The Ketetahi hut was visible

below, and the winding track disappearing in the distance stood out against the red tussock groundcover.

It was about now that my feet decided they didn't want to be in my shoes anymore ...

I had less than 8km to go – but they were the longest 8km in the world. All that downhill-pounding in fancy footwear was finally taking its toll, and, as I struggled to find a walking style that didn't hurt, I found myself drifting into madness ... muttering and mumbling as I went, trying to convince myself that pain was my friend.

Thankfully, my strange chanting and awkward gait must have worked, because a couple of hours later, I stumbled out of the beech trees and into the carpark.

All of a sudden I was no longer alone. A number of people were sitting around on the ground near their cars, staring at me. And I'm pretty sure that, as I strolled gingerly over to my truck, they were whispering to each other, wondering if I was the source of the strange noises that had emanated from the forest ...

Hopefully they'll never know. ❁



Emerald Lake.



The long walk down.