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WITHOUT TRYING

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- Lunch
- Dinner
- Snacks



5-day guide inside



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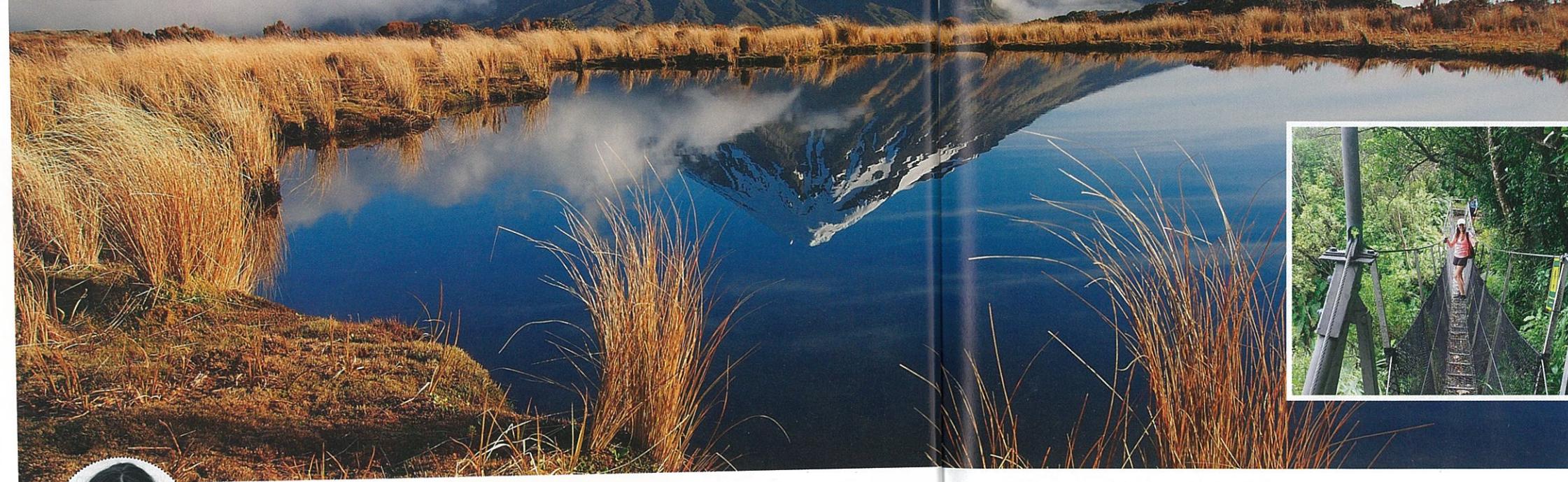


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Active
travel

peak FITNESS



A day-long trek up Taranaki's Pouakai Crossing is no walk in the park – but the arduous climb is more than worth it for the surprise that awaits, says Rachael Russell

An early edition of *Lonely Planet New Zealand* shows the snow-capped cone of Mt Taranaki reflected in a tarn – the technical term for an alpine lake. The shot was taken from Pouakai, and is so well-known that *Vogue China* recently hiked their way up to scope it out for a fashion shoot (in the end it was a bit too much of a tramp for all those designer dresses). That tarn is my destination today. I hope to see Mt Taranaki burnished red as the sun sets and get my own spectacular shot, but I've got a fair bit of work to do to get there.

The route I'm taking is called the Pouakai Crossing, Taranaki's answer to

the popular Tongariro Crossing in central North Island – both day-long walks that are challenging but achievable for anyone with a moderate fitness level.

I'm walking with Top Guides, who have prepped me with a comprehensive list of gear I need to bring – including a head lamp because we will, gulp, be descending in the dark. We don't leave until midday because we want to time our arrival for sunset, which on this day is at 8.18pm. It's going to be a long day.

DON'T LOOK DOWN

The first section of the walk is supposed to be a three- to four-hour hike to Holly Hut; however, there has been a slip

overnight that is forcing us to go a slightly different route. The bad news is it will add another hour to our journey, but the good news is we get to walk over the narrow swing bridge that crosses high above a raging river. Oh wait, that's also bad news, unless you really like heights and wobbly things. We have to cross the bridge one at a time, and I make the unwise decision to carry my phone in one hand so I can stop for a scenic shot halfway across. I'm too terrified to look down, let alone take both hands off the rail to work the camera. I shuffle across chanting "don't drop your phone" until I'm safely on the other side.

We have slathered ourselves with

sunblock, but the first couple of hours we are under the canopy of trees. The shade combined with the gentle slope makes for a very pleasant start.

Our guide Katrina knows her flora so we stop every now and then for a lesson in what's native, what can be eaten, and what you should never rest under (bushman's widow – basically a bush that grows on the side of a tree and when it gets too heavy crashes down to the ground with a potentially fatal thud).

The higher we get, the shorter the trees become around us, until eventually we're walking through a miniature forest and out into bright light and rocky scrub land. The view from 1500m is spectacular, the flat farmland of Taranaki stretching into the distance until it meets the sea. The cell phone coverage is equally impressive, so we pause for lunch and a Facebook status update.

A massive bank of cloud lifts, and there is Mt Taranaki in all its symmetrical glory

A NATURAL HIGH

We have only a short trek to Holly Hut, where we boil water for a cup of instant and use the outdoor toilet. From here the terrain changes to wetlands, which is blissfully flat but where my non-waterproof Nikes take a bit of a hammering. Our bright sunshine has turned to a light drizzle, but nothing can dampen my mood. It's been a long time since I've been so completely in nature, and, combined with the endorphins from walking for more than four hours already,

we're all buzzing with enthusiasm.

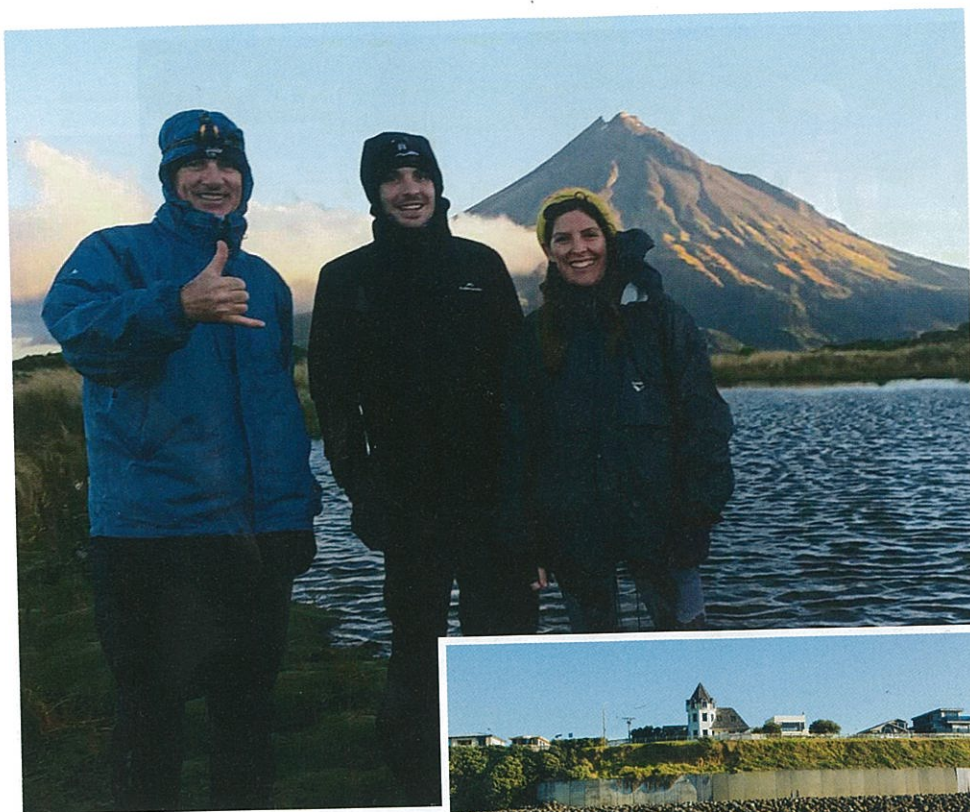
The talk does quieten down somewhat when the wetlands end and we begin the climb to the top of the Pouakai range. It starts off as steps cut into a steep incline and... remains steps cut into a steep incline for the next hour. It's cloudy, muddy, and even a little bit spooky, the trees all stripped to their silvery trunks by the winds that can whip through here. But eventually we hit the ridgeline, the sun comes back out and we can see Pouakai Hut in the distance.

It's been 6.5 hours since we set off, and with my Fitbit reading 27,000 steps, I'm ready for a sit down. As we cross to the hut, we get the biggest surprise of the day – a massive bank of cloud to our right lifts, and there is Mt Taranaki in all its symmetrical glory. I've been so caught up in the walk I'd forgotten all about the mountain, which has been hiding from view all day. Now it has revealed itself just in time for our photo op.

We stop at the hut long enough to add three more layers of clothing, eat, ►



Clockwise, from opposite: Mt Taranaki reflected in the 'lake'; Rachael with fellow tramper Beau and guide Katrina; the Stony River; and gingerly crossing the swing bridge.



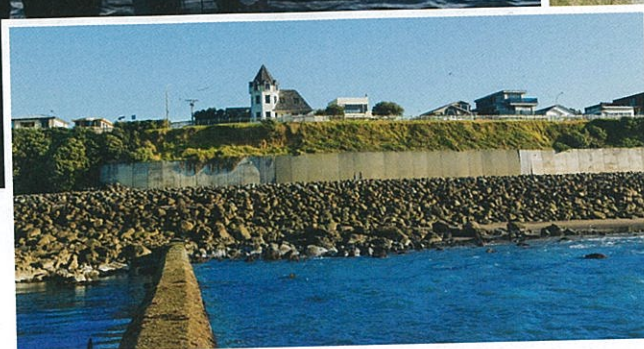
dump our bags and grab our cameras.

It's an easy 20 minutes down a well-maintained boardwalk to the tarn, although if we didn't have a guide with us I'd have sworn we were in the wrong place. Alpine lake? Alpine puddle more like; I've seen bigger backyard swimming pools. But it's perfectly positioned to reflect the mountain, and as the sun begins to set and turn the peak a rosy red, we do our best to recreate the famous shot. Mostly, we stare in awe at this beautiful scenery, lit up so perfectly before us. The moment the sun sets the clouds roll back in; in a matter of seconds Mt Taranaki has disappeared again. We realise just how lucky we were to get our moment.

PEDALS AND PAMPERING

Now it's getting dark it's time to descend, but the good news is we're not going back the way we came, but down a well-maintained track that can easily be negotiated with the light from our headlamps (a crucial part of your gear bag, and don't forget spare batteries!). It's 11pm when we exit the track back into suburbia. By 11.30pm I'm soaking in the claw-foot bath in my room at Hosking House, feeling very pleased with life – and looking forward to the smoked salmon and fried potatoes I've ordered for breakfast.

The next day is gloriously sunny; my legs are feeling a little creaky but I'm keen to borrow a bike from Hosking House and give New Plymouth's Coastal Walkway path a test ride. Starting from the port, the path winds its way for 13km



Alpine lake? Alpine puddle more like... but it's perfectly positioned to reflect the mountain

along the coastline to Bell Block. I ride past teams of kids competing in a surf life-saving contest, adults finishing a fun run, kite surfers getting aerial, and an outdoor café where the locals are sprawled on bean bags sipping smoothies. It's hard to believe yesterday I was wearing layers of thermals, and today I'm wishing I had my togs. It's also hard to believe how fast I'm racing along on my tired legs, although that comes to an end when I turn around to ride back and realise I've had a tail wind the entire time.

I'm ready to drop by the time I get back to the B&B, but I've been smart enough to plan ahead. No active weekend would be complete without a little pampering; and I've organised a facial and pedicure at Silk Spa. As I have the life rubbed back into my tired feet I chat with owner Charlotte about another of the region's well-known walks, the five to six-hour climb to the summit of Mt Taranaki. Again, a moderate level of fitness is required, (and it definitely shouldn't be attempted in jeans and jandals, as some tourists have been known to do). I'm told it's popular to start the walk in the early morning dark to get

to the top by sunrise. Well, I already own a headlamp; sounds like the perfect challenge for my next visit.

Fact file

- Top Guides offers a range of full and half-day guided tours. Book at www.topguides.co.nz. If you don't have time for the full crossing, you can access Pouakai Hut with a two-hour walk from Mangorei Rd. Quicker if you're a fast walker, and Taranaki runners reckon they can do it in about 45 minutes.
- Hosking House is a boutique B&B walking distance from New Plymouth's galleries, cafés, and Coastal Walkway. Plus, they lent me a bike! www.hoskinghouse.com.
- For post-walk pampering, visit award-winning beauty spa Silk Salon www.silkspa.co.nz – your wind-chapped skin will thank you for it. ☺



Above left: Rachael and friends photobomb Mt Taranaki's picture op. Above and left: Cycling the Coastal Walkway.



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