



Left: The high ground provides ample views;
Above: Tree hugging the 100-year old totara

Ancient forest a playground for the young



PEEL FOREST, GERALDINE **easy**

I'd been travelling solo in the South Island for about six weeks and was craving a little company when I got the best email from an old uni mate: "Hey Pen, I'm in Australia at the moment and was wondering whether to pop over to New Zealand to see you for a couple of days. Are you free?"

Yes! I picked Heather up from the airport and, following the rave review of a Christchurch local, headed to a cosy cabin in nearby Peel Forest. Managed by DoC, Peel Forest has good facilities with a large campsite, a great camp kitchen, hot showers, outdoor fireplaces, and basic four-bed cabins. Best of all, there is a huge range of walks on the doorstep – the perfect conditions for a lengthy catch-up.

We planned an all day tramp to the top of Little Mt Peel along Deer Spur, but the dawn had brought the old party pooper, drizzle, so we decided that instead of a major tramp we would take it easy and meander gently around the forest. After choosing a combination of the Acland Falls and Allans Tracks, we set off.

From the campsite, the Acland Falls Track climbs steeply through thick vegetation (mainly fuchsia, mahoe, kowhai and kanuka) before leveling off and dropping to a small stream. The 14m high, moss covered waterfall is a short walk up the streambed. As we began the descent to the stream, four little boys jumped out of the bush behind us and

ran past at a million miles an hour. "Keep to the track. Horrible things will happen to you if you step off the track!" their mother called out as she rounded the corner. Seeing us, she gave a brave smile and said, "I've got to put some fear in them or I'd never see them again!"

We watched the boys dare each other to put their heads under the cascading water for a while but it wasn't a comfortable place to linger so, retracing our steps along the stream bed, we climbed back up the bank and veered right onto Allans Track. This would bring us on a round trip, through the tall podocarp forest back to the Te Wanahu flat and the campsite.

The path was well-maintained but wet and slippery, and was, again, full of the little boys running hell for leather, tripping, slipping and skidding through the ankle deep mud making gruesome faces as they talked of "spurting blood" and "ripped insides". As their mum reined them in to look at a bellbird and its chick, I could definitely see the appeal of the forest for people with kids. What a safe place to wear them out, fill their lungs with super fresh air and encourage a good relationship with nature.

After lunch we did the Big Tree walk, a simple 30-minute disabled access track which winds from the Te Wanahu picnic shelter into Mills Bush through ancient totara trees. The highlight is a three-metre diameter 800-1000 year old totara tree, and we ended up resting on a bench

and keeping the tree company for a couple of hours. I'm so used to long, hard tramps, it was refreshing to just stop and be engulfed by the whole sensory experience of the ancient forest: the earthy smells, the scurrying insects, and the welcome sunlight casting a mirror ball of golden freckles through the leaves.

We searched for firewood on the way back to the campsite on the Clarke Flat, laughing as we slipped on cowpats while scavenging for dry wood under the trees. It was a freezing night, but the fire was roasting and as we sipped hot Milo and munched on hunks of cashew nut chocolate, contentment settled on me like a favourite blanket. There is nothing quite like a day in country in the company of a treasured friend.

- Penny Jones

WILD FILE

Access 20km north of Geraldine off regional route 72

Grade Easy

Information DoC Peel Forest Park Track Information brochure and map: \$1 from the Peel Forest Information Centre on the edge of the forest.