

# VIEWS TO DIE FOR

In the end, Penny got her view of Milford Sound

Gertrude Saddle, Fiordland National Park / difficult

I was torn. As drawn to the iconic Milford Sound honey-pot as I was, I knew that jostling through the offspring of 50 tour buses beneath the endless drone of sightseeing planes would make my head implode. So, when Charlie suggested climbing Gertrude Saddle instead, it seemed the perfect alternative. The climb is one of the lesser-known gems in Fiordland, and the view from the saddle extends across a huge section of the national park, all the way to Milford Sound.

From the car park, route markers led us north through the Gertrude Valley and beautiful alpine vegetation. In early summer, the area is awash with alpine flowers, especially the famous Mount Cook lily – the largest buttercup in the world.

The route follows a creek and there are a few crossings, but the water level was low so we managed to keep our feet dry. The track isn't well defined, but is easy to follow as long as there's good visibility. We were soon in a giant bowl surrounded by imposing black granite cliffs. A 1500m-high valley headwall rose in front of us, shiny and dripping from the tearful glaciers above. Cloud began to polish the upper peaks.

After an hour, we reached the head of the valley and followed the route west towards the saddle. This is where it gets tricky. Above the bush line there are no official markers. Fellow trampers have created cairns, which can act as a rough guide, but we knew from experience not to rely on them too heavily. We used a map and our own judgement to find the best way.

The route was steep, unstable underfoot and followed the stream up the mountain. We stuck relatively close to the stream, but avoided getting too close: the wet slabs of rock near the

edge were incredibly slippery.

We reached Black Lake after another hour and could see Gertrude Saddle on the near horizon about 20-minutes away. The mist was now descending quickly, along with a pair of trampers fully kitted-out in hats, gloves and waterproofs. They told us the view was still there but wouldn't be for long. Our inner optimists decided to make a push for it and we hauled ourselves up the steel cables driven into the rock, towards the saddle.

We made it to the top, but unfortunately so had the mist. The promised 'breathtaking views' were no more. I swallowed my disappointment and, as this was Charlie's second climb, I had to be content with a word painting of what was out there. Below: a sheer plummet (this route is not for sufferers of vertigo), ahead: an incredible mountainous valley with Milford Sound in the far distance. Many of Fiordland's peaks can be seen (on a good day) including Mt Tutoko – Fiordland's highest. We soon tired of the dizzying whiteness, and the weather was rolling in quickly. The valley below had already disappeared so we turned back.

Charlie is a sprightly climber. He bounds across boulders and jumps over precipices and, although usually as surefooted as a mountain goat, he met his match on the way down. He sat on his heels for a joy ride down a rock slab. In less than a second he'd lost control and was heading for a cliff edge and gaining speed. He looked as flimsy as a crash test dummy and all I could do was watch while pathetically shouting: "Please stop, please stop!"

After about 30m he hit a cairn, clawed back control and ground to a halt just before

the drop-off. I could see him moving – phew – gingerly checking that everything still worked before looking up at me and shouting: "Hurray! My sunglasses didn't break!" I honestly thought he was going to die and had already imagined the phone call to his mum so couldn't give a monkey's for the sunglasses. He was lucky. Though he was fine, I couldn't help thinking that this is how statistics happen.

Now, I just wanted to get back to safety. The mist was still ravenously gobbling up scenery, and by the time we got back to the car visibility was down to about 20m. Sections of faraway cliffs would occasionally appear, hanging suspended 600m off the ground like a jigsaw piece.

In the end, I still got my view. We drove through the mist, into the black hole of the Homer tunnel and found an exquisite dusky evening on the other side. Having completely missed peak visiting time (excuse the pun), Milford Sound was just how I'd imagined: incredibly beautiful, serene and still.

- Penny Jones

## WILD FILE

**Access** The car park is on the right of the Milford Road just before the eastern portal of the Homer Tunnel

**Grade** Difficult

**Time** Five hours return

**Map** Track information and maps available from the Fiordland National Park visitor centre, ph (03) 249 7924.