

Last corrected: September 2019

SOUTH WESTLAND

Wanganui Headland

Okarito Coast

Okarito Lagoon (canoe)



Franz Josef Glacier

Fox Glacier

Lake Matheson

Gillespies Beach

Paringa Cattle Track

Monro Beach

Ship Creek

Hapuka Estuary

Smoothwater & Stafford Circuit



Wanganui Headland

Coastal headland

Shearwater colony

Pakihi wetland

Historic pack track

2-3 hours circuit

Bush tracks and beach

4 kilometres circuit

From Harihari on Highway 6 turn off down Wanganui Flat Road (the walkway is signposted) and drive towards the coast some 20km to the small carpark.

Mount One One is the curious and distinctive morainic outcrop at the mouth of the Wanganui River, locals call it 'The Doughboy'. Massive beach with a big surf rolling in and a return on an historic pack track.

From the carpark the coastal walkway passes several idiosyncratic whitebaiters' baches and crosses a deep black swamp creek before cutting across a scrubby terrace to the base of Mount One One. The steps leading up to the old viewing platform have been removed, so as to protect a sooty shearwater colony.

From One One stroll along the driftwood-strewn beach. At low tide it is quite easy to get around the point, scrambling over some large rocks, but there is a high-tide alternative signposted. The Poerua River is not as large as the Wanganui and in winter river levels can get so low that the sea builds up a permanent gravel bar across the mouth.





The track skirts the river and reaches some more whitebaiters' shanties before turning inland and following the well-laid line of the old pack track as it crosses a low 100m saddle and drops down to the pakihi swamp on the other side, and the carpark.

Okarito Coast

Historic pack-track

Wilderness beach and lagoon

Occasional seals

Lookout towards Mt Cook

3-4 hours circuit

Bush track and beach

6 kilometre circuit

From Highway 6 at 'The Forks' it is 13 km to Okarito to the large carpark. Information post in the wharf shed. Tide tables at the beach noticeboard.

This is a 150-year-old bush pack-track where goldminers walked to the Three Mile Lagoon,. The views of Mount Cook and Tasman across the tea-stained waters are jaw-dropping, and on the beach return there may be sleeping seals on the shoreline.

From the carpark (before the beach carpark) the track swings across a boardwalk over a wetland, then sidles up to the original pack-track. From here it's an easier gradient to a track junction with the Okarito trig. If the day is fine go up to the lookout platform with long horizon filled with the snowy peaks of the Southern Alps.

The main pack-track rolls along to Three Mile Lagoon, sometimes coming close to the cliff edge. It drops sharply to a junction, the left-hand fork going to a long bridge over Three Mile Lagoon. The other fork goes on to the beach. The lagoon entrance is often blocked by a sandbar.

With a low tide the beach walk is easy, and quicker than the pack-track, with not much rock-hopping. Constant surf rolls in on this restless, rollicking coast.





Okarito Lagoon (canoe)

Easy to hire canoes

Serene bush delta

White herons on lagoon

2-3 hours return

Flat water canoeing

8 kilometres return (delta)

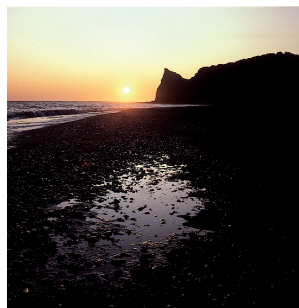
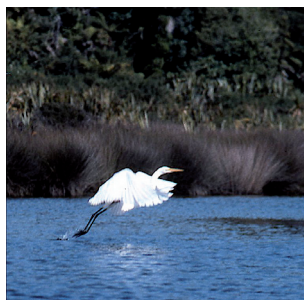
From Highway 6 at 'The Forks' it is 13 km to Okarito to the carpark and canoe hire centre. Cafe.

Okarito Lagoon not only offers relatively easy canoeing, but idyllic canoeing. Flat water, superb reflections, mountain views, white herons, deep tea-stained channels. The canoes are easy to hire, they have maps, and guides, but try not to be too ambitious.

For most people the paddle over to the Okarito River delta is enough, and you are rewarded with drifting through a real rainforest with bush birds chortling above. Basically the Amazon without piranha.

Eager people might try and head up the head of the lagoon. It's a lot further than it looks, and the lake is shallow towards the head, and its remarkably easy to find yourself stranded on mudflats if you get the tides wrong.





Franz Josef Glacier

Glacier and big mountains

Schist rock formations

Well marked track

2 hour return

Gravel tracks

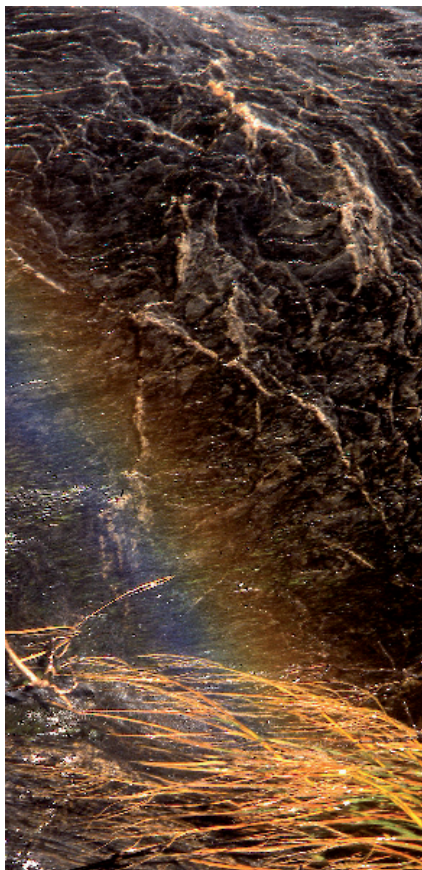
5 kilometres return

From Franz Josef village on Highway 6 it is 5km to the glacier car-park, shelter, information signs and toilets. The narrow road can get busy.

Most of the glaciers in New Zealand are well beyond reach. You might spot them glinting in the distance, or pass over them at 30,000 feet while having your plastic lunch and not even realise what those white squidgy things are. But uniquely on the West Coast there are two glaciers you can almost touch – the Fox and the Franz Josef. Some 1400 years ago Franz Josef was part of a large ice sheet but over the last 300 years it has retreated dramatically.

There's a well-marked trail across Waiho riverbed, with occasional bridges across small side-streams. The sheer rock faces are a great playground for waterfalls, especially after a West Coast downpour, and for the hardier types a trip to the glacier in stormy conditions is exhilarating.

The climate can be vigorous in this cold deep valley, so take some warmish clothing and some nibbles. Don't go beyond the roped off area, as blocks of ice on the glacier snout periodically fall off.



Cafe: Blue Ice, in Franz Josef



Fox Glacier

Glacier and ice formations

Keas

Big mountains

1 hour return

Gravel track over river-bed

2 kilometres return

From Highway 6 by the Fox River, follow the signposted glacier road to the carpark. Road often subject to change and closure. There is a walking and mt biking track signposted from the village to carpark.

The glaciers are retreating again, fast. After some interesting advances in the late 1990s the Fox and Franz Josef glaciers are following the centuries-old pattern of shrinkage. The scale of the mountains, the sheer cliffs and the crumbling tongue of the glacier still make for an awesome short walk. And the keas are never in retreat.

The drive in alone is worth the walk, crossing the Fox River floodplain and winding under the severe cliffs of Cone Rock. At the carpark there are usually kea, an alpine parrot, which cock their heads obligingly as the cameras click. Currently, the well-marked track wanders across the riverbed. and edges along the scree slides.





Streams are bridged. You cannot touch the ice, for obvious reasons — it has squashed one or two incautious people — and the glacier tongue is roped off. but you can feel the icy air rolling off the glacier.



Lake Matheson

Reflections around a pristine lake

Beautiful bush

Several lookouts

1-2 hours return

Bush track and boardwalk

2 kilometre return

From Fox Glacier village drive 4 km down the Cook Flat Road, and turn onto Lake Matheson Road 1 km to the carpark, where there are toilets, cafe, and art gallery

In the last century Lake Matheson would have been called a 'beauty spot', and that is still true, as 20 coach tours a day confirm. The backpacker buses try to get in early for the famous 'view of views' and the tranquil waters that giveth off the perfect picture. Cloud has ruined many a fine reflection, but the lake is still pretty and pristine.

The track starts between the groovy café and the art gallery, crosses the Clearwater Stream bridge and goes to the first viewpoint, but you need to go to the head of the lake and climb up to the View of Views platform to get the 'classic' tablemat and calendar view. On the way the rich rainforest is made of tall kahikatea, rimu and matai, with a lush understorey of shrubs and ferns.





A few minutes on from the View of Views there is a side track to Reflection Island, a particularly pretty perch beside the lake. The famous reflections partly result from the brown coloration of the water, which is caused by organic matter leached from the humus on the forest floor.

The main track then moves away from the lake and follows the forest around to farm paddocks with splendidly isolated kahikatea trees.

Cafe: Matheson, by Lake Matheson

Gillespies Beach

Coastal forest and lagoon

Historic tunnel

Wild beach

Gold mining relics

2 hours return

Bush tracks and boardwalk

4 kilometre return

From Fox Glacier (Highway 6) it's 20km to Gillespies Beach, and 11km of this is unsealed. This is a narrow road with many blind corners. Car-park, toilets and signposted walks.

A wild coast with a battering surf and driftwood piled high on the beach – Gillespies has presence. On a fine day the mountains stand above the black swamp lagoon like a mirage and the spume from the surf creates its own mist. Sunsets are very fine. Gillespies got its name from James Edwin Gillespie, who detected payable gold on the beach sands here in 1865. A small town sprang up but it did not last long.

Gold dredges later turned over much of the beach frontage, but apart from a few remnants of metal there's hardly a thing left to mark the glory days – just the cemetery and the proliferation of gorse.

Head north on the inland track and pass the remains of the bucket dredge, slowly slipping into the mire. This track continues to the beach. Along here is the lagoon, with its long trestle bridge with dark tidal waters and impressive views.

Across the bridge the pack track goes through swamp and coastal forest and climbs to a junction, one branch going to the tunnel. The tunnel was cut in the 1890s to avoid the awkward Gillespie Point headland, and you can walk through to a viewing platform.





It is no longer permitted to go north along the beach to Galway Point as it disturbs the seal colony too much. Alternative access north is along the Galway Point track.



Paringa Cattle Track

Historic route over the mountains

Well graded track, 500 m climb

Historic hut

Abundant bird life

7-8 hour return

Bush track

20 kilometres return

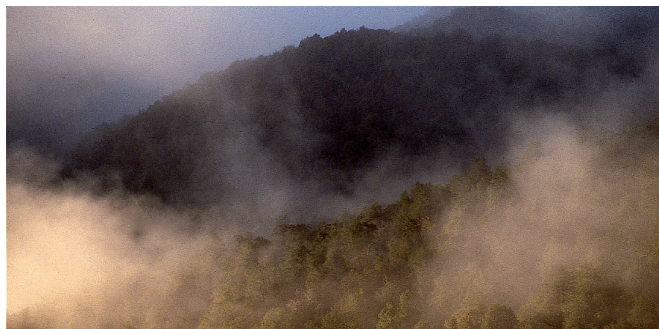
Off Highway 6, carpark sign-posted 5 km short of Lake Moeraki.

An historic cattle road, climbing into the high mist and memories of another time. It was once a Maori trail, then a cattle road until the early 1960s, and you can still see an old (renovated) roadman's hut and the totara posts of the old telegraph line. Now it is a splendid walking track, with your only companions the ghosts of roadmen past, and the squawking of kaka.

From the Lake Moeraki end the track is muddy at first then connects onto a good pack-track that sidles through bush over to the big suspension bridge over the Moeraki (or Blue) River. Blowfly Hut sits in a clearing.

From here the excellently graded track starts its slow perambulations up to Maori Saddle hut. The forest is rich in rimu and silver beech and kereru, tomtits, fantails, bellbirds and kaka add sound to a rarely silent forest.

After an hour you reach the narrow Whakapohai Saddle, but the track keeps climbing steadily, meandering past several side-creeks (Thompson, Stormy and finally the Whakapohai itself), then descends to the spacious hut at Maori Saddle. The hut stands in a cleared beech glade and has 12 bunks and a woodstove. It is a cosy place for lunch, especially as rain is not unheard of in this locality, and you have a long, easy romp downhill to look forward to.





Monro Beach

Majestic wilderness beach

Pretty bush walk

Rare penguins

2-3 hours return

Bush track

5 kilometres return

Follow Highway 6 to Lake Moeraki Wilderness Lodge and take the short signposted side-road to the carpark and information signs. No dogs.

Monro Track is a fine short walk, well graded, and plunges the visitor into a thick forest of mixed podocarps and coastal plants such as the kiekie vine. The beach is sandy with the usual West Coast sea-rollers making it dangerous for swimming.

A colony of Fiordland Crested Penguins nest in the forest behind the northern part of Munro's beach, and they are one of the world's rarest birds. The word 'penguin' comes from the Welsh 'pen gwyn' or 'white head'.

They nest several hundred feet up thick bush slopes and return to the same place year after year. They lay a clutch of two eggs in about August-September and the young birds are fledged by November-December and ready for an independent life. People are requested not to pass beyond the penguin sign if they see birds on the beach.





Ship Creek

Wild shore

Rare pingao grasses

Lookout tower

Beautiful swamp walk

1 hour return

Gravel paths

1 kilometres return

Drive south from Lake Moeraki another 9 km. Ship Creek is about 10 km north of Haast. with carpark, shelter, toilets and information signs.

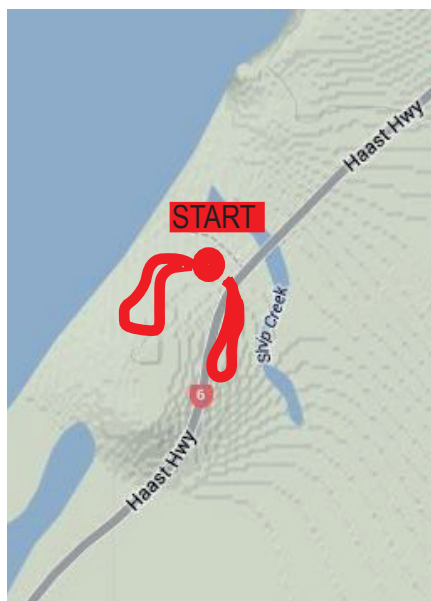
At Ship Creek, a small tidal stream twists down through orange-red pingao topped sand to the plunging sea. Driftwood stands crouched and polished. A lone headland shuts off access north at high tide, and south there is a long beach, so long in fact you can hardly make out where it ends.

In fact it goes all the way to the Arawhata River, and once the settlers used it for taking their cattle up to the markets in Hokitika, via the beach and the Paringa cattle track.

The 'ship' has long been battered into nothingness. It was the stern part of the Schomberg, that sank in Australia in 1855 and drifted right across the Tasman.

In the evenings the sunsets give a brilliant shine to the dark tidal creek, and if it wasn't for the sandflies you'd stay for hours, absorbed in the scenery. The Swamp Walk is utter perfection.





Hapuka Estuary

Kowhai coastal forest

Lagoon views

The story of whitebait

1 hour return

Boardwalks and bush tracks

2 kilometres return

From Haast drive 15km down to Okuru (Haast Motor Camp). The walk and carpark is signposted 50m down a side-road.

Beautiful short lagoon walk that tells the story of whitebait. Whitebait are the young of five species of a native fish genus called galaxiids, of which the most prolific is the inanga. In autumn the female inanga lays eggs in the lower rivers and estuaries and the male releases milt to fertilise them. This milt can cloud the creeks. Most adult inanga then die but the eggs hatch into larvae and catch the big tides out to sea, where they live largely unknown lives. In spring the young fish (or whitebait) migrate back upriver, where the whitebaiter is waiting.

The estuary track wanders through coastal kowhai forest, and common bush birds include bellbirds, wood pigeons, tuis, fantails side by side with estuary-lovers such as oystercatchers, bitterns, pukekos, and pied stilts (poaka).

In the waters there are eels (tuna), flounders (patiki), common bullies, and yellow-eyed mullets (aau). After explaining the whitebait story the track leaves the estuary and wanders into a rich rimu forest with kiekie vine tangled through it, and there's an excellent lookout towards the two Open Bay Islands.





Taumaka and Popotai are two limestone islets that are still a Maori reserve, and were used for muttonbirding and gathering seabirds' eggs. It's an important breeding place for fur seals and Fiordland crested penguins.



Smoothwater & Stafford Circuit

Secluded bays and adventurous coast

Sea-stacks and headland tracks

Tall rainforest and historic pack track

7-9 hours circuit

Bush tracks and beaches

16 kilometres return

From Highway 6 follow the sealed road some 45 km to Jackson Bay. The Smoothwater carpark is 100 m before the information shelter and toilets.

This is a tough but beautiful daytramp, encompassing the best of South Westland: sea-stacks and rock flowers, secluded coves, impressive rainforest, historic pack-track, golden beaches, a trampers hut, a billion sandflies. This is a big day and a **low tide on the coastal route is essential**, as there are several awkward sections. Plan ahead. A tramping circuit rather than a walk.

From the carpark an old pack-track goes over to the Smoothwater River, then turn upriver. Follow the stream till you pick up track markers that lead through wonderful forest along Kakapo Creek. The track then climbs a 100 m to the narrow Stafford Saddle. The bush track gets a bit messy as it heads down the creek and this section can be quite slow to Stafford River.

Now its easy walking downriver a kilometre to the Stafford Hut, with its verandah facing the ocean. A lovely end-of-the-world sort of place.

The coastal route is gorgeous, a view a minute. Good beach travel to Dandys Creek, then some rock scrambling and then a pattern of tidal platforms, sea-stacks, sandy beaches as you negotiate two short headlands. It's important to find the tracks over them.

More tidal platforms after Homminy Cove and the final difficult rock scramble to Smoothwater Bay, a remote and curvaceous curl of sand. Good track up the Smoothwater River, although it is also pleasant splashing upriver anyhow.



