

ROUTE BURN TRACK – NEW ZEALAND

by **Stuart Doyle**

IMAGINE running on a soft track winding through an ancient forest of fir trees and giant moss covered rocks, with light filtering through dew coated strands of lichen and dancing on the surface of a crystal clear stream. Feel the exhilaration of flying along a narrow mountainside trail with sheer drop-offs to a valley floor 3000 feet below. Now think of running to the top of a mountain with breathtaking views of ice-capped peaks, down a mighty river valley with an ocean bay shimmering silver in the distance. Picture yourself on the sandy shore of an emerald green lake, bathing in the warm afternoon sun. Could it be possible to experience all of this on one run, in just one day?

Once I did a fantastic mountain run in the French Alps. The scenery that morning consisted largely of glaciated mountains. The memories of that epic run still remain, which is more than I can say of the Forerunner 201 that I was wearing on the day (and had yet to download the data from), which met an unfortunate end when my mum's Golden Retriever mistook it for a bone. This taught me a valuable lesson, if you want to be able to re-live your favourite adventures, make sure you retrieve the data before the family dog does it for you!

Ever since this unfortunate episode I've wanted to take my Forerunner on another epic run and so when a friend told me of an amazing run he'd done in New Zealand last year, and that he was organising a group to run it again this year, I knew deep down I just had to do it.

Some organisation was required as it's a point-to-point run, with several hundred kilometers of driving for the support crew between the start and finish. Although the track is well marked, busy and has lots of 'huts' along the route, it also traverses a lot

of high ground with unpredictable and potentially dangerous weather conditions year round. With this in mind we organised a group of four experienced and fit mountain runners, consisting of World Long Distance Mountain Running Champion, Emma Murray, three-time Australian Mountain Running Champion, Dave Osmond, ultra runner Paul Veldcamp and myself.

We made sure to start on a slow pace as we had 34km of running ahead. The first half hour was 'Lord of the Rings' style forest broken up occasionally by suspension bridge crossings of the Route Burn River. I kept expecting Hobbits to

jump out but the craziest things were bright red and white spotted mushrooms scattered across the forest floor. If you like your forests wet, dark and wild, this is the place for you! In such surrounds it was easy for my

mind to wander and it seemed no time had passed before getting to our first rest stop at Routeburn Flats Hut. It's here the track leaves the river valley and begins the ascent out of the forest, to the spectacular alpine country above the tree line. But first we stopped by the Route Burn River, resplendent in the warm morning sun. "What's the rest of the world doing this morning? Who cares!"

The climb out of the valley is a long one, but it's worth every step. The first stop on the spectacular scenery tour-de-force is the aptly named Routeburn Falls Hut, right on the edge of the falls. Now, one thing you need to know about NZ is that when it comes to rivers, falls, mountains and huts, there are no half measures! Rivers are really rivers, falls are really falls, but huts sure ain't huts! As with many NZ 'huts', the Routeburn Falls Hut is more like a four star eco-retreat complete with balcony perched over million dollar views.

Looking over Lake Harris



The first of many really rocky sections of track started right after the falls. It was a hard decision to make between watching your footing and gazing at some of the most breathtaking alpine scenery you'll ever see. Often the more clumsy and painful option was taken!

The next 'wow' moment was heading up past Lake Harris and over Harris Saddle (1300m), where we got our first look at the Hollyford River, almost at sea level some 1400m below, with snow covered peaks shooting up over 2000m

Stuart at Lake Mackenzie



out of the valley.

A half hour detour at this point took us up the steep, slippery and rocky trail to the top of Conical Hill (1515m). From the summit we were treated to the most amazing experience of being able to see over 60km down the Hollyford Valley to the silver glow of the Tasman Sea in the distance. Well worth the scramble to the top and a nice way to work up an appetite for lunch.

Although it was the most splendid clear late autumn day, the wind was bitterly cold, so we sheltered for lunch in the hut at Harris Saddle. It was a good lunch spot, as the next section of track was a nice, slightly downhill traverse, with a 1200m drop straight off the edge of the path to our right and icy

streams plummeting off the slopes up above from Ocean Peak (1848m) on our left.

Possibly the hardest part of the track followed, with a very rocky 500m altitude descent down to Lake Mackenzie. I don't have the writing skills to begin to describe the beauty of Lake Mackenzie or the feeling one gets from being by its shores. You're just going to have to go there yourself. If you do, you might want to stop at Mackenzie Hut. We met a guy there who was lying on the front porch in the sun. He'd been there for a few days and was going to be there for "Maybe a few days more".

One last big climb out of the valley and after about another 45 minutes of very rocky trail we had our last, and very well earned, rest at Earland Falls,

where we all consumed some Powerbars and GU's. This fuel-up really did the trick for me and I seemed to have a huge burst of energy over the last half hour. The downhill section of track to the finish point at Lake Lochie was great fun and the four of us were getting down towards 3min/km pace over the last few kilometers, an exhilarating way to finish!

We were really happy to see Andrea and Ingrid waiting for us at the end. It had ended up taking us about five and a half hours, which included lots of time for stops and the must-do detour up Conical Hill.

Anyway, as I said, that was just a brief glimpse. If you want the whole picture you're going to have to go see for yourself. Remember to take your Forerunner with you!

R4YL

Routeburn Falls Hut – what a view!



Emma Murray, Dave Osmond, Paul Veldcamp and Stuart Doyle at the start

