

DAYOUT AT MOUNT COOK

A dayout at Mt Cook under clear skies is a never-to-be-forgotten experience. Independent tourists can watch the forecast and seize a sunny day. One of the great advantages of the Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park is its proximity. The Mt Cook village at the heart of this world heritage site of some 70,000 hectares, encompassing over twenty 3,000m peaks and New Zealand's highest mountain and longest glacier, is only a short drive on an excellent road from Tekapo. You can get there in a morning from Christchurch, and although we wouldn't recommend it, you could even drive from Wanaka, spend the day there and return to Wanaka late in the evening. We think it's such a magnificent alpine area that you need to spend at least two nights enjoying its beauty.

There are some lovely short walks which give you time to view mountain torrents, glaciers, alpine shrubs, the Mt Cook lily - the world's largest buttercup - and magnificent snow-covered mountains.

If you haven't taken a sightseeing flight over the Southern Alps, now is the time. It's a great thrill to fly in a little ski-plane among the mountains. As you pass the splendid Hochstetter Icefall, you feel you could reach out and touch it, even though you're far away. And then comes the excitement of your plane touching its skis down on the Tasman Glacier, 29km long and up to 3km wide. There's time to stretch your legs on the glacier and to take plenty of photos.

Skiers of intermediate level can take a plane high up on the Tasman Glacier and have an exhilarating experience skiing down.

At the village, a range of accommodation is available for visitors. DOC has provided a basic camping site at White Horse Hill, and at the other end of the scale is the Hermitage

Hotel. If you don't stay there, at least have a drink in its lounge or cafe while you enjoy the view of Mt Cook.

HERITAGE

The Maori name for Mt Cook comes from the story of a canoeing expedition that ended in disaster. When their canoe was wrecked, Aoraki and his brothers clung to its highest side to escape drowning. There, they froze to death and turned into stone. Aoraki, the tallest in the family, became the great mountain and his brothers the lesser peaks of the Southern Alps.

Captain James Cook sighted the Southern Alps as he sailed along the West Coast in 1770. It was another sea captain who named New Zealand's highest mountain in Cook's honour, almost a century later.

Julius von Haast and photographer Edward Sealy explored the area in the 1860s. A London exhibition of Sealy's photos inspired an Irish pastor, the Reverend William Green to come to New Zealand to climb Mt Cook. He and two Swiss mountaineers tried several times to reach the summit but bad weather and avalanches defeated them.

Twelve years later on Christmas Day, 1894, New Zealanders Tom Fyfe, Jack Clarke and George Graham reached the summit. Since then Mt Cook has been climbed many times and the mountains in the National Park have proved an ideal training ground for New Zealanders who have gone on to conquer the great peaks of the world. The best-known of these is Sir Edmund Hillary who, with Sherpa Tensing, was the first to climb Mt Everest.

MT COOK - WALKS

Several short walks start from the village. We recommend the Hooker Valley walk, if you can spare only a morning or an afternoon. Even less time to spare? Kea Point Track allows great views of Mt Sefton and Mt Cook. Another half day for a walk? Then climb up to the Red Tarns for panoramic views and a feeling of being up among the mountains - you need good weather for this one. When the weather's not pleasant enough for these walks, try the more sheltered Governors Bush track.

Kea Point Walk - 2 hours return from the Hermitage; 45 minutes return from the White Horse Hill carpark.

A superb, short walk that takes you along a broad, civilized path among tussock-covered piles of moraine. At the end of it you are confronted by the overpowering sense of destruction that Nature can wreak on the land, both by the valley glacier up to the left and by the twisted, threatening hanging glaciers on the face of Mount Sefton and the Footstool above.

Only a short distance from the luxury of the Hermitage is a deep, deep cutting created by the huge force of a glacier. Although the ice has now retreated up two valleys, it has deposited incredible stacks of crushed and ground rock that have been cut into and left with precipitous sides. Many metres below the Kea Point viewing platform, melt-water from the glaciers has created a small lake, used by a tourist operator for kayaking.

The information panels name the mountains and enhance the scene by giving geological and Maori explanations for the formation of the sights you see before you.

Hooker Valley Walk - 3-3.5 hours return

Start at the White Horse Hill carpark and camping area.

Spectacular views, the adventure of crossing two swing bridges over rushing torrents and mountain flora make this a walk not to be missed.

A little way along the track on the left, you come to a path leading to a stone cairn memorial for climbers claimed by these mountains. It originally commemorated three men who died on the Linda Glacier (the most common route up Mt Cook) in 1914. Sadly, other names have been added over the years.

A wide track, but stony, - wear thick-soled shoes or boots - leads over moraine covered with spiky matagouri and Spaniard bushes. After about 30 minutes you reach the first swing bridge over the turbulent, grey Hooker River. As you progress up the valley you get superb views of Mt Sefton and its Footstool on your left; ahead of you Mt Cook's south face dominates the end of the valley. The path narrows as it skirts a bluff just before you cross the second swing bridge which can sway excitingly, or, for some people, alarmingly in a strong wind.

The walk continues along glacier flats among alpine plants: in late spring and early summer, gentians and Mt Cook lilies are a wonderful sight. At Stocking Stream Shelter (and toilets), there's a plane table identifying surrounding mountains A further short walk takes you to Hooker Lake at the snout of the glacier. Here it's Antarctica in miniature, with big chunks of ice floating like icebergs in the lake.

Red Tarns - 2 - 3 hours return

Start at the Public Shelter.

A very pleasant walk along a footpath beside a tinkling stream takes you to Black Birch Stream bridge. Once over that, you climb steeply up the side of Mt Sebastopol. Hundreds of steps lead to a small plateau where a plane table enables you to identify the peaks. The tarns, red because of the red water weed growing in them, are a few metres on.

Reflections of mountains in the tarns are lovely in the late afternoon. The last time we did the walk we started early in the morning when mist still wreathed the mountains. It was awe-inspiring to see snow-covered peaks suddenly loom out of the mist. Whatever the time of day, the views are magnificent, and as you descend you see the village clearly laid out below.

Governors Bush - 1 hour return

Start at the Public Shelter.

This walk gives you an idea of the forest which used to cover the foothills; it's hard to credit that sheep once grazed the slopes of Mt Sebastopol after early runholders burnt the forests. Fortunately, an early Governor, Sir George Bowen, impressed by its great beauty, requested that this stand of bush be protected.

The track climbs steadily through silver beech forest to a lookout. You descend through beech, totara and ribbonwood to Black Birch fan and from there you take the footpath alongside a lovely little stream back to the Shelter.

SIGHTSEEING

Flightseeing

We recommend taking a flight in a ski plane and landing on the Tasman glacier - the breathtaking views and the awesome experience of flying amongst the mountains are well worth the money.

You can also take helicopter flights which land you on the snow.

www.skiplanes.co.nz

www.helicopter.co.nz

ADVENTURE/SPORT

- Climbing

Alpine Recreation offers climbing courses for all levels and a guided 3 day alpine crossing. It also offers ski touring.

www.alpinerecreation.co.nz

- Skiing/Snowboarding

Southern Alps Guiding offers skiing and snowboard touring and skiing on the Tasman Glacier.

www.mtcook.com

- Heliskiing

Alpine Guides offer heliskiing and boarding amongst the highest peaks bordering Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park.

www.heliskiing.co.nz

- Hunting, Fishing and Horse Treks

Glentanner Park Centre (on the road to Mt Cook) offers guides for hunting thar, chamois and for fishing.

They have guided horse treks on a high country sheep station, and you can also hire mountain bikes.

www.glentanner.co.nz