

WESTPORT

WESTPORT - ECOTOUR

Cape Foulwind Seal Colony

From Tauranga Bay (15km west of Westport) take a 10 minute walk on a well-formed track to the viewing platform above the colony of New Zealand fur seals (kekeno).

No, the cape wasn't named because of the smell from the hundreds of seals that congregate here, though you would be forgiven for thinking so at the height of their season. The name came from Captain James Cook's description of the gales around the cape which hammered his ship *Endeavour* on his 1770 voyage.

The seas may be rough, but they are rich in food for the seals, and the rocky shore is a safe place for them to rest and sunbathe. If you want to see the pups and their antics, early in the year is a good time, as they are born late December

WESTPORT - WALKS

Cape Foulwind Walkway - 1.5 hours one way; 4km

Begin the walk either at the end of Tauranga Bay Road, or closer to Westport (11km), at the end of Cape Foulwind Road.

Starting at Tauranga Bay, you follow a well-formed track to the seal colony viewing platform. Just past that, the route becomes a marked trail over farmland. A short climb and you reach a plateau with a magnificent view of the coast and, to the east, the rugged Paparoa mountain range.

After about 20 minutes, you reach a memorial to Abel Tasman, the first European to record the cape. A mounted astrolabe, a replica of a navigational instrument used for measuring the angle of the sun, commemorates his anchorage off the cape in 1642.

Other interesting features on the walk are the lighthouse and the remains of a railway. This was built to carry the granite, quarried on the cape, to construct breakwaters and embankments at the Buller River mouth.

Charming Creek Walkway - 2.45 hours one way; 10.5km

This is one of our top five, day walks in the South Island. It combines stunning scenery with a fascinating insight into early timber and coalmining history. The track incorporates remnants of man-made structures in one of the most rugged gorges you can tramp along. And yet it's a really easy walk, with a swing bridge and some short tunnels thrown in for excitement and a sense of mystery. Well worth the pleasant drive from Westport.

It isn't a loop track. Start at either end: at Ngakawau, 31 km north of Westport on SH67 (signposted just before the Ngakawau bridge), or at Charming Creek Road (take SH67 to the Seddonville turn-off, just before the Mokihinui bridge; the start of the track is 10 km from Seddonville).

If you can arrange transport, we recommend starting at the Seddonville end of the track and finishing at Ngakawau - the track descends gradually and the scenery just gets more and more dramatic. Because of transport difficulties, most people start and finish at the Ngakawau end, so we'll describe the walk from there. If you have limited time, a walk as far as Watsons' Mill (2.5 hours return) takes in the best scenery and introduces the history of the area.

Ngakawau is a coaltown. It's the terminus of the Westport railway line and of the aerial cableway bringing coal down from the Stockton mine. There's a good view of this modern operation from the car park.

Remnants of the pioneering operation are evident from the beginning of the track. You walk along an old railway line beside the Ngakawau River - mostly over railway sleepers, sometimes on shingle and occasionally over patches of coal dust. Keep a look-out for the protected, native snail; it has a large, reddish-brown shell with intricate spiral markings (taking even the empty shell is illegal).

Before long, beautiful birdsong is drowned by the sound of rushing water which becomes a roar as the gorge narrows. Soft, dappled light filtering through the forest canopy contrasts with the harshness of rusted rails broken by rock falls above precipitous drops to the thundering gorge. You can only marvel at the courage and ingenuity of the engineers and workmen who built the railway, used to extract timber and coal between 1914 and 1958.

Along the track, information panels tell you about historical sites. The first clearing, The Bins, is where coal was stored and sorted. Further on, there's a railway siding and coal trucks. As the gorge closes in and becomes steeper, you marvel at the spectacular scenery. The first tunnel and the swing bridge, some 30 metres above the gorge, remind you of the resilience of the men who tamed this landscape. Across the bridge you get a splendid view of the Mangatini Falls, before you enter another tunnel.

A 10 minute walk and you reach Watsons' Mill shelter - a good spot for a picnic - and the confluence of Charming Creek and the Ngakawau River. Sawmillers, George and Bob Watson, built the railway for access to the Charming Creek Valley, the site of one of the few remaining forests in the Buller region. It was extended later, when they took up a coal lease.

From here the landscape changes to an open valley with fern, scrub and regenerating bush. You pass the remains of Mumm's Mill built in 1935 and piles of coal, before reaching the site of the old Charming Creek Mine, closed in 1986.