

Trails & Tribulations

Setting off from Bluff, Nelson-based journalist Naomi Arnold spent nine months walking the length of New Zealand via the 3000km-long Te Araroa trail, writing her solo experience into newly released book *Northbound* as she went.

WORDS & PHOTOS NAOMI ARNOLD

On the drive from Invercargill to Bluff that summer day, I saw my first Te Araroa walker. She was around 60 and struggling north, laden with a huge blue backpack. She would have already walked 20km from the trail's start at Stirling Point that day and had another 12km to go until she reached Invercargill.

In the moment I glimpsed her from the passenger seat she looked desperately sore, walking with a rolling, painful gait. It was like she carried an invisible piano on her back. I flashed past in the car, saw her shambling along the footpath in a private world of pain, and then she was gone.

That'll be me soon, I thought. I looked out the window at the Tiwai Point aluminium smelter smoking on the horizon, at the large pylons marching along the skyline. A sign hoisted into some trees read 'When the truth comes out, you can't just unvax your children'.

A grey ute overtook us, sporting a bumper sticker: SEND NUDES. Another ute followed it, a brand-new orange Ford Ranger with the licence plate DMIN8R, roaring towards the bottom of the country.

Next to me, in the driver's seat, Doug pointed out the Longwood Range to the west, 85km along the trail – its 764m summit would be my first decent hill.

"Huh," I said, twisting in my seat to look. "I'm going that way?" "Haven't you thought this through?" "I'm not that good with directions." "Jesus, Naomi. You're not filling me with confidence."

Otherwise we were mostly silent on the drive south, the weight of the entire country looming above us. We'd flown from Nelson that morning. Doug was staying in Invercargill for a couple of days to see me off, but once we'd arrived in the city I was too excited to wait and wanted to start walking right away.

We got the last carpark at Stirling Point. It was the final days of 2023 and the famous yellow-and-white signpost marking the end of the country was crowded with sightseers, but I was the only hiker, and this signpost was my beginning.

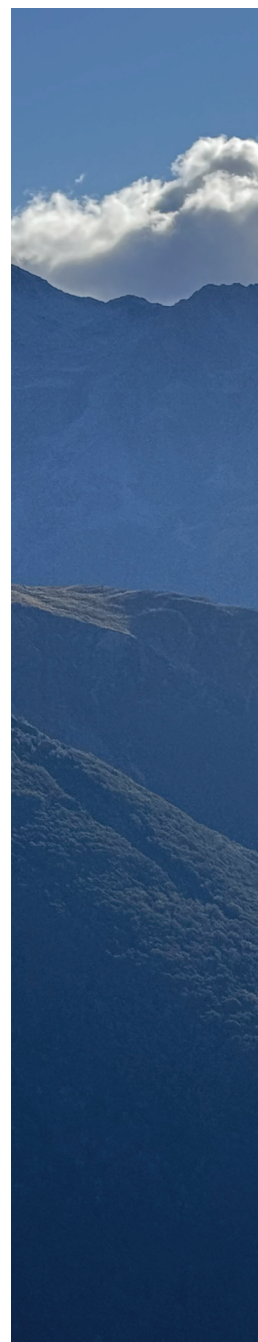
I smiled at an extended family of about 20, the adults struggling to get all the kids looking at the camera at the same time as one of the dads fiddled with the tripod and self-timer, calling directions and rushing back and forth to capture himself in the shutter's click.

Doug and I watched the procession at the signpost for a bit and then took our turn at photos before walking along a path to the small, rocky beach. I crouched to run my hand through the water and tossed a few pebbles into the sea, then picked up another handful and pocketed them.

"You're carrying rocks up the country?" Doug said. He held out his hand and took them from me. "To keep until you get home safe." If I do, I thought, but I didn't voice it.

Fear had been stabbing my gut for the last few weeks: I am not coming home. I cannot walk the length of the country alone for six months. I will die out there. I am in my last year of life on Earth. The thoughts felt real to the point of certainty. They felt like prophecies. I knew he had fears, too. But neither of us bothered to mention them anymore.

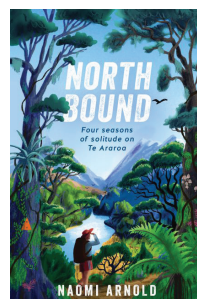
"Well, I guess I should go do this," I said, hoisting my pack. Doug walked me back to the signpost and offered a last warning. "If the Alpine Fault goes while you're on this walk, stay out of the waterways," he said. "Watch out for rivers drying up." "What? Why?" "If a river's dried up, then you'll know there's a slip further up and it's dammed. It could go at any moment."





Of all the very specific worries I had – abduction; murder; snapping my femur and the bone tearing through my skin; falling and striking my head; falling and striking my head in a river and then drowning, unconscious – this particular set of circumstances seemed a fairly remote possibility, but I nodded. I gripped the cold, white metal pole of the signpost, and then Doug walked me to the start of the steps that wound up onto the Bluff Motupōhue.

I stood there, gazing up the steps curving through a green arch of vegetation, then looked back at him. He gave a little wave, his face collapsing in grief and dread. 'Bye,' I squeaked. 'Bye,' he managed. What am I doing? I turned around, feeling a bit sick, and started up the steps. I had 3028km to go. From here, I'd walk alone.



Extracted from
*Northbound: Four
Seasons of Solitude on
Te Araroa* by Naomi
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“I learned a lot about
myself, my body
and fitness, people,
New Zealand’s
backcountry, nature,
friendship and love.”

Naomi, tell us a few of the highlights and lowlights from the South Island part of your journey...

One of the lowlights was definitely the physical toll the trail took early on. Because nearly everyone starts in the north and walks southbound, they have the entire North Island to warm up before hitting the big ranges in the south. Northbounders have to tackle 1000m+ peaks quite early and in some cases several of those over a few days.

I was absolutely exhausted, beyond anything I'd ever experienced, very quickly, and spent most nights trying to sleep with what felt like aching bones and feet, and the electrical-feeling shocks of overuse.

But my body gradually adapted to where I sometimes felt so good I jogged along the trail. The greatest gift that Te Araroa gave me was knowledge of how fit I could get and how wonderful it felt.

Seven months on it's hard to remember how strong and fleet I felt in the last half of the trail especially, but it is nice to know that level of fitness is achievable.

The highlights of the South Island were often simply the breathtaking views that I would walk through with a sense of wonder that never left me.

Some are the Arthur's Pass area including going up and then down the Mingha and Deception rivers (part of the Coast to Coast), the gorgeous landscape around Lake Coleridge, the Two Thumbs, and the St James. Spending a lot of time with valleys and mountains like that was so special.

How come you were walking alone?

I had a totally different trip to usual Te Araroa walkers, but it was completely unplanned. I had originally planned to walk the trail following a more normal southbound September-February schedule in one hit, but self-employed life and work got in the way.

I started in Bluff on Boxing Day, which was late in the summer, and walked through winter into early spring. I met almost no one on trail in the North Island and very few in the South Island.

So while the precis of the book was unplanned, I like that it ultimately encompassed a different experience. I got my first “You're leaving it a bit late” in Tekapo and that just continued.

What was tramping through winter like?

Dark, crisp, and cold, dodging occasional rain and storms. I was walking north so I hit Northland in spring. I was very lucky with the weather that year.

The days were short, though, which meant the sun disappeared around 2pm or 3pm some days and there were a lot of long cold lonely nights, in which I wrote *Northbound* on my iPad.

Most TA walkers will encounter big spring and summer storms and floods. I raced ahead of storms when I had to walk up rivers and spent a few days waiting out a couple of big storms. Because I was alone, I had to be very cautious with weather, rivers and more isolated areas.

As I moved north into more populated areas and spring began to arrive, my fitness and confidence grew, and I encountered more people. Although total solitude was my main experience, the many different people I met in towns and villages brought me alive and provided moments of great delight along with companionship and a renewed appreciation of the quirks and vagaries of humanity.

How did the loneliness affect you?

I look back now and realise how bad it was. I felt the loneliness very strongly as a pain in my chest and gut. It was a deep yearning to be around other people that I'd never experienced before.

And how did you feel as a woman travelling alone?

I was very vulnerable out there – anyone who wanted to attack me could have. But that's as true in a city park in broad daylight as it is on the side of a mountain. I was very jumpy at first but after a while, none of my fears eventuated. I began to realise that a lot of my imaginings were in my head. But I had to develop a bit of a fatalistic view. If someone decided to hurt me there was little I could do.

I always had my GPS SPOT tracker on while walking, and I had my personal locator beacon I could set off. That was the extent of my protection. I did spend a lot of time thinking about it.

What did you get out of the walk in the end?

A life changed. Simple as that. In the last part of the trail, with the daily physical pain behind me and my once cluttered life empty of people and distractions, I realised my brain had begun a new background task: chewing over my life history as I walked. It made me think of yoga, originally developed as a way to ease the body and allow undistracted meditation.

I learned a lot about myself, my body and fitness, people, New Zealand's backcountry, nature, friendship and love. My husband stayed home during the journey and the trip brought us closer together. I learned a lot about the mental limits that women put on their own capabilities, and about how well your body and mind can respond to an incredibly high physical and mental demand.



How do you feel post-trail?

More loving, happier, more confident, and blunter, even obnoxious. Although the fitness I built up will slowly wane, I know I can take on anything now.

When I finished the trail and touched the pole at Cape Reinga I felt a peaceful sense of contentment and happiness – nothing dramatic other than a few tears. I was simply pleased I had finished what I started and looked forward to the next chapter, which was writing *Northbound* and then reintegrating at home.

I did have a few weeks of feeling very strange and out of place, which a family member in the army had described to me was totally normal.

I also had anxiety around crowds, and I have to take more breaks for alone time now – too much talking and noise makes me feel overwhelmed. I don't know if that's here to stay or if that will dissipate too.

Any pro tips for anyone else thinking of taking on Te Araroa or other longer New Zealand walks?

I would spend as much as you can afford on the lightest gear possible, people are always selling gear second-hand. Every kilo makes a big difference to your back and feet.

I would get your blister prevention dialled in very early and wear free-draining trail shoes rather than heavier boots.

I'd leave enough time to take extra rest days early on, to help avoid tendonitis and other strain injuries.

Visit a podiatrist and make sure they are happy with your gait – I was glad I did that.

Also, don't be scared to start or walk alone, if that's what is stopping you. The solitude I experienced was difficult but ultimately also very rewarding. I've decided that becoming very happy in your own company is a wonderful life skill to develop.