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WALKING AND ADVENTURE TOURS for the senior active traveller



Photograph: Courtesy PureTrails New Zealand.

Sue and Hilary of PureTrails New Zealand.

PureTrails New Zealand are a small New Zealand owned and operated adventure tour travel company offering you an unforgettable guided hiking and adventure travel experience of this beautiful country. They specialise in South Island walking and biking tours for the older active age group — incorporating day walks and adventure activities such as jet boating, whale watching, wine-tasting, ecological boat tours and scenic flights. Visiting lesser-known locations away from the crowds, they make sure you experience the real New Zealand. They have a passion for this country, and want to share its many secret and beautiful places with you.

by Hilary Weller

PureTrails New Zealand

Sitting at my desk with the cat sprawled out over papers, the sun streaming through the window on a lovely Christchurch sunny day, seems like a world away from last week 'in the office'. That's because last week, 'the office' happened to be the aqua-blue waters of the Marlborough Sounds; the yellow sandy beaches of Golden Bay; the beech forests and majestic peaks of the Nelson Lakes National Park; and the lush rainforests of the West Coast.

My mother, Sue, and I were guiding an eclectic bunch of Australians aged 44–78 years of age on an 11-day walking tour around the top part of the South Island. Known affectionately as 'The January Walkers', [as the leader's surname is January], these people go on walks together every Sunday in Sydney, and some of the group have been walking together for 20 years. Every two to three years they do a 'big walk' and it was group leader Malcolm who found our website and decided that our South Island walking tours would be an ideal trip for his group.

Designed for the 'senior active traveller', PureTrails New Zealand was set up to offer guided walking and adventure tours of the South Island specifically for the 50/60 plus age

group. The formula is simple: flexible walking options ranging from one hour easy strolls to six-hour moderate walks, and even the option of walking the 82 km Heaphy Track over four days; comfortable, (but not luxurious),



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accommodation in carefully selected B&B's, lodges and cabins in double/twin/triple-share rooms; small groups of up to 12 people; hearty and nutritious homemade meals; and two guides on each trip that allows us to split the group to cater for different ability levels.

How did I, a 27-year-old, come up with such an idea you may wonder? Several years ago I worked for a backpacker bus company driving a big bus around New Zealand which catered for mainly young international backpackers. This bus was unusual in that, instead of staying in hostels, we camped. Contrary to the backpacker stereotype, I kept getting 'backpackers' aged in their 60's who were quite happy pitching a tent at the end of the day in some remote Department of Conservation wilderness campsite, sleeping on a mat no more than 25mm thick, using rudimentary toilet

facilities and eating the ambiguous backpacker grub provided (all in the company of people aged predominantly in their 20's).

One such backpacker from Scotland, Margaret, aged 69, brought this new concept to my attention. When I asked Margaret why she had chosen this budget backpacker tour, she declared she was not willing to fork out \$5,000 to do a 10-day guided tour with an upmarket adventure company, and she certainly wasn't going to 'experience' New Zealand on a 'grey-bus' tour. For her, this was the only option. She suggested that if someone came up with a tour for people her age, staying in comfortable but not elaborate accommodation, it could have the potential to succeed as there was really nothing available like this in New Zealand.

And so the idea was planted in my mind. A year later I was

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at Lincoln University doing a post-graduate year of study to build on my Commerce Degree in Marketing. Researching my idea, I found that in fact, this market of people aged 60 plus was indeed a growing market and in far better health than previous generations, with the time and money to travel. A business plan rolled out the start up process, and by the end of the year PureTrails New Zealand Ltd was established.

Another year on and the formula appears to be a winner. Malcolm, of 'The January Walkers', writes: "I knew when I found the website that this was the walk for us and how right I was. We have all had a great 11 days. No requirement by our small group was too much for Hilary and Sue. Let's hope time and funds will allow us to return."

The flexibility that our tours provide is a major draw card. Malcolm really wanted to do the challenging four-day Heaphy Track, but this was not within the capabilities of other group members. So our tour, which allowed Malcolm and another walker, Joe, do the Heaphy Track with Sue, while the rest of the group spent two days in the Nelson Lakes National Park with me really appealed. Ronny, another walker states "I like the flexibility of the planning and organisation of the tour to cater for people who have different preferences. Both Hilary and Sue are very friendly and caring people. I was made to feel I am not only a client, but also a friend. Thanks for making my first trip to New Zealand a very memorable one."

Anyone who has worked in the service industry will appreciate the importance of good customer service. At this point I should tell you about my mother Sue. Sue has spent the last 35 years caring for people from all walks of life in her capacity as a registered nurse, working in the operating theatre and pre/post op. She's the cheery person holding your hand and chatting away while you drift into a drug induced sleep before the dreaded operation, taking your mind off what could go wrong under anaesthetic. Compassion is her middle name.

The problem with being an experienced nurse in the state/private hospital system is that your skills are highly sought after. After 35 years when you are wanting to cut back your hours and take extended holidays in periods outside 'hospital holidays', it is rather difficult. And so it was, after 35 years of nursing, Sue decided to retire at the aged of 55. This happened to be perfect timing for me, as I was looking for a business partner for PureTrails New Zealand. Mum, who is an avid walker, having walked throughout New Zealand, as well as France, Spain, Italy and Nepal, and being in the target age

demographic, was the perfect candidate. Furthermore, she's a great cook and it's always reassuring to know that there's a medical professional with you while walking in remote wilderness locations!

Having completed most of the hard work such as applying for Department of Conservation guiding concessions, writing safety plans and designing itineraries, we are now starting to enjoy the fruits of our labour. And who could ask for a better job in a better 'office'? We meet the most lovely people and get to show them some of the best scenery and walks in the world. The tours are ideal for people on their own, or those with spouses who are unable to participate, as well as couples.

Friends are always asking me "Why are you designing tours for older people — why not for people your own age?" And the answer to that is simple, I absolutely love it! Having grown up on foreign soil many miles away, and not moving to New Zealand until the age of 10, I only met my grandparents on a few occasions as unfortunately they had all passed away by the time I was 11. So previous to my tourism jobs, I had never spent much time with or got to know older people at all. Hearing the stories and history of the lives of people in this generation is a real eye-opener for me. This last year I have been constantly surprised and inspired by the determination and abilities of people aged in their late 60s and 70s.

Last week, I did a six-hour walk around the side of Lake Rotoiti in the Nelson Lakes National Park with Verne, aged 78. A few weeks before that I did the Sealy Tarns walk at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park with Anne and John, aged 67 and 73. Sealy Tarns is a steep 500m climb to an alpine tarn with absolutely spectacular views of Aoraki/Mt Cook and the Hooker Valley [see cover photo]. The sign said 3-4 hours, we did it in five. But the satisfaction at having achieved such a taxing walk was awesome. Meanwhile, Jenny and Roger, aged 69 and 76, enjoyed the three-hour Hooker Valley walk.

Kath, aged 62, who biked the Central Otago Rail Trail with us writes, "Thank you for taking such good care of us! It's a wonderful idea to offer this sort of experience to oldies like us (especially those of us, like me, with lots of 'senior moments.')

Speaking for the both of us, I feel that we are very privileged to be able to share these experiences with such wonderful people.

If your interested in learning more about our walking and adventure tours of the South Island, write to us at P.O Box 1638, Christchurch, call us on 0800 222 775, or visit our website: www.puretrailsnewzealand.co.nz