

ACTIVE PURSUITS WITH PURETRAILS

Story: Belinda Carter | Photography: PureTrails



On a high - Sue Weller and daughter Hilary take a breather on an alpine tramp.
The photogenic mountain in the background is cloud piercer Aoraki/Mt Cook

Five go tramping on the Routeburn

Sue and Hilary Weller are a Christchurch-based mother/daughter team running PureTrails New Zealand, a relative newcomer to the tourist industry, which offers thirdagers more active holidays in the South Island.

Sue's daughter, Hilary, was doing a tourism module for a post-graduate business diploma at Lincoln University and working part-time for a backpacking bus company when she came across a couple of older backpackers who pointed out that there wasn't much on offer for older holidaymakers like themselves.

Meanwhile Sue, who was theatre nursing in Tauranga, was getting sick of not being able to plan her days off and have a life outside nursing. Private theatre nursing depends on the movements of the surgeons. At 55 Sue was looking to retire from that line of work anyway.

The Weller family, including husband John, have always enjoyed tramping and spent many walking holidays in New Zealand before hiking in Nepal, England, France and Italy and seeing what was done there.

"PureTrails was set up to provide a fun environment for the active mature age group. Most of our clients are in the 40 to 60 plus age group."

"We felt there was a need in the marketplace to cater for the active mature age group, who want a memorable experience but don't necessarily want the full-on physical demands that the 20s and 30s age group might prefer," Sue says.

They have been learning how to cater for this age group as they go along and their collective past work experience dealing with people helps. Setting up the company was hard work, Sue says. There have been a lot of regulations to work through, for example safety plans, but Sue says this was very similar to writing theatre procedures. They have also had to negotiate with Department of Conservation to obtain permission to walk on their land and all this took months to organise.

But this is now behind them and they are focusing on improving the tours they



offer and finding intriguing places off the tourist trails.

"People are active and they want to do more things, and they have more time to spend on leisure pursuits. There's such a lot to see and do in New Zealand," Sue says.

"Our trips are designed to be more flexible and provide more serious challenges to those that want it, but we also offer less strenuous options as well."

Typical of travellers on PureTrails trips is Canadian born long term New Zealand resident, Lorelie Kennedy who has been on two trips this year. Having more time and opportunity to do things as the family have grown up and left home is a draw card. "I think I should do as much as I can for as long as I can. I'm pushing the boundaries at times but am mindful of things that can go wrong, such as falls. At my age you take more time," says Lorelie.

Trips for older, active holidaymakers differ slightly from a younger age group. For a start the day's activities are likely to be shorter – 6 hours instead of 9 hours tramping. People can go at their own pace and take frequent breaks. Multi-day tramps, unless requested, are also out. Instead of roughing it in back country huts the tours are more likely to stay in bed and breakfasts and country lodges with homely touches like pikelets waiting their arrival.

"We get off the beaten track and enjoy some beautiful spots. Our hiking treks are on varied landscapes, mostly on Department of Conservation land, but some on private land. Apart from a couple of three and four daylong walk options most of our hikes

involve 5-6 hours of walking at a comfortable pace. Some in the Catlins, for instance, are a series of short walks."

Following the trails

Trips range from 3 to 24 days. A three-day high country experience, staying on a sheep station is one option. Longer options explore the southern lakes and mountains or the Marlborough Sounds and West Coast beaches. Another trip follows an ancient West Coast greenstone trail.

The mini bus holds 15 people and tours are kept small so people can get to know one another. The maximum number on each trip is 14, with a minimum number of 4. Being a young company PureTrails is flexible with the trips taken and also offers small group charter trips with adjustable schedules.

Sue says that a lot of their customers have been older women, recently widowed or single, and they can stay in single accommodation or be paired up with another woman on the trip. Lorelie's first trip was to the Routeburn in March. She is a keen trumper who often takes part in the multilevel walks offered by her Canterbury tramping club.

She walked the Routeburn with a small, unguided group in March, staying in huts with bunk beds. They were dropped at Glenorchy and picked up at Milford Sound and had to carry all their food and cooking utensils in heavy packs. Despite training with a pack filled with books beforehand, Lorelie found it hard going on the uphill parts and took frequent breaks to take photographs and admire the view.

Central Otago by cycle

One new trip that is attracting a lot of interest is the cycling tour of the Central Otago Rail Trail. This trail, which DOC opened to the public in February 2000, follows the old railway line (track removed) from Middlemarch to Clyde. The 150 km track can be cycled, walked or used by horse trekkers in either direction. PureTrails takes five days to make the journey by cycle, with side trips to Danseys Pass and St Bathans.

The first PureTrails trip there took place in late August, with further trips planned for early summer. Lunch in pubs provides a chance to meet locals and visit an area unpopulated by souvenir shops. "We visit lesser known locations away from the crowds so our clients can experience the real New Zealand," Hilary says. "Tourism hasn't taken off yet in this area and everyone is pleased to see us."

It was the lack of crowds that appealed to Nelson couple Christine and Murray Clark. "It was unspoilt and not commercial and it was nice to get away from the traffic," says Murray. In late winter there was hardly any traffic on the trail itself, although it is open to walkers, cyclists and horse riders in either direction.

"Being a rail trail there were no steep gradients or gut-busting hills," says Christine. That was an attraction, but they did not count on the headwinds. It was their first cycle trip although they have been on motorcycle trips in Bali and India. To get fit



before the trip the couple spent five weeks practicing on borrowed bicycles. "I am glad we did because we had to struggle with winds. You feel better for it, not so sluggish."


Lorelie's preparation plans were hampered by the late arrival of her cycle from Canada. Her legs were not as strong as she wanted and she ran out of puff. "There were moments when I cursed the headwinds like crazy. I pushed the limits on what I could do. I am not sorry, I am glad I did it. It was lovely."

The trip is supported by the dark green minibus, which carries heavy baggage and anyone who needs a rest. Hilary, aged 27, drove the bus while her mother cycled, was

impressed by the persistence of those more than twice her age. "They just kept on going and refused to give in even when faced with strong headwinds on the last day," she says. "It would have been cheating to have gone on the bus instead," says Lorelie.

"We were a determined bunch," agrees Christine. "We wanted to finish it, even biking in the rain. It was a big achievement, just doing it."

At the end of the trip, cyclists can head back to Christchurch on the mini-bus or take Taieri Gorge Railway's vintage train from Middlemarch to Dunedin.

For more information on PureTrails visit www.puretrailsnewzealand.co.nz 

Walking up to the Mt John Observatory at Lake Tekapo on a cloudless day.

