





TAKE *on the* TRACK

HIKE, CYCLE OR KAYAK ON NEW ZEALAND'S STUNNING QUEEN CHARLOTTE TRACK

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“PEOPLE TAKE ON the Queen Charlotte Track for lots of different reasons,” Juliet Gibbons says as she hands me my itinerary pack, water-taxi passes and map. We’re standing in the Wilderness Guides’ harbour-front office in New Zealand’s Picton, the jumping-off point for the 70-kilometre Queen Charlotte Track (QCT).

“They’re on a journey, or they want to reach a destination, or they’re looking to build confidence,” Juliet says. “There’s something about the QCT that draws in people

who are looking for something.”

I’m looking to unplug and have some time to myself, mixed with a little adventure. I’ve hiked the QCT before, camping along the way with a group of friends, and I’ve always wanted to return.

The QCT winds through the wilds of the Marlborough Sounds, from Ship Cove to Anakiwa, following a forested, hillside track that runs above the curving coastline. Nearly 20 per cent of New Zealand’s coastline is tangled up in the myriad inlets and coves winding

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around the three main drowned river valleys – Queen Charlotte, Kenepuru, and Pelorus – that make up the Marlborough Sounds.

Because of the QCT’s water access, you aren’t committed to hiking the entire track. Young kids fed up with hiking? Blisters or a turned ankle? Feeling tired? It’s easy to shorten the journey – just hitch a ride on a water taxi. Lodgings range from campsites to luxury, and you can hike, bike or kayak the three- to five-day track, or undertake a mix of all three. >>



Day 1 HIKING

I STEP OFF THE water taxi onto Ship Cove's wooden dock. This place, the starting point for the QCT, was a historical, sheltered sanctuary for Maori people and also Captain James Cook, who spent more than 100 days here between 1770 and 1777, taking on fresh water and timber for repairs.

Behind me rises one of the Marlborough Sounds' rumpled, dark green, densely-forested hills. The fresh smell of the ferns and trees mingles with the thick, salt smell of the ocean. I have six hours for my solo 14km hike before meeting my water taxi at the Endeavour Inlet, and my journey begins with a steady climb up the saddle.

The QCT was created to handle overflow from the popular Abel Tasman Coast Track, one of New Zealand's nine Great Walks. "The Queen Charlotte Track is a great walk in every other way without being an official Great Walk," Juliet had explained earlier. "More than 6000 people hike the Queen Charlotte Track every year, but you're hiking it during the best time. During the shoulder seasons, there's no one on the track."



The track winds around one of New Zealand's most beautiful coastlines.

I like hiking by myself, and the track is empty. Now that I've reached a ridge, the sound of the waves is replaced by birdsong, including the high-pitched squeaks of a fantail that flits from branch to branch as I pass. Whenever I stop, wekas – flightless birds the size of chickens with glossy brown feathers and ruby red eyes – materialise out of the surrounding bush, hoping for a hand-out.

I finish the hike within four hours and in high spirits. My water taxi drops me and my gear off at Punga Cove resort. A message from Juliet is waiting for me: I am supposed to kayak a section of the track tomorrow, but high winds are predicted.

"I also think the cycling may be beyond your skill," Juliet cautions when I phone her. "Tomorrow is the steepest part of the track, and it will be greasy. I've booked a water taxi for you at 11am. If the biking doesn't go well, you can take the water taxi to Lochmara Lodge and have more time to explore."



More than 6000 people hike the Queen Charlotte Track every year

Once I've revelled in a hot shower and draped every open space in my cosy chalet with drying gear, I join four other diners in the spacious restaurant, enjoying a glass of pinot noir and a meal of Marlborough king salmon. The meal tastes all the better because I feel as though I have earned it. >>





Day 2 BIKING (sort of)

I WAKE UP in my cosy chalet feeling warm, rested and content. Until I remember the bike.

I tend to crash bikes and therefore haven't ridden them for many years. After breakfast, I stare at the sturdy orange mountain bike Wilderness Guides has provided for me. I cautiously hop on and start off down the track.

I think I would have loved biking the QCT if I had any cycling skills. Feeling the wind on my cheeks, fern fronds slapping my shoulders, powering up and speeding down the undulating track, craning my neck for glimpses of the scalloped coves that flash by in blur of blue – I can understand why it's a popular cycling track. However, I'm not confident. If I continue on, I know I'll be walking my bike more than riding it.



The QCT offers a challenging yet rewarding experience for mountain bikers.

I reluctantly turn around in time to meet the water taxi to take me to Lochmara Lodge. Juliet was right, and her local knowledge, coupled with the fact that Wilderness Guides was able to amend my itinerary based on the weather conditions, meant I was able to stay safe and enjoy the track.

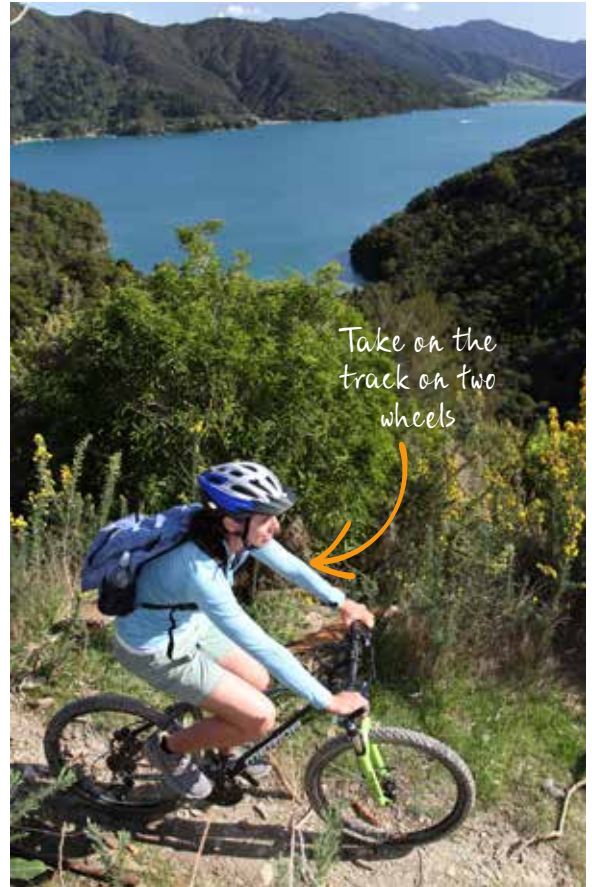
My decision means I have more time to spend at the extraordinary Lochmara Lodge, an 11-acre living art gallery, sculpture trail and wildlife recovery centre that focuses on education and conservation.

After a long bath in the secluded bathhouse with its ocean view, and another delicious dinner, I grab my torch and head out into the night, searching for the glow-worm dell. When I shut off my torch and the glow-worms shine in bright, electric blues, I can't tell where the dell ends and the night sky begins. »



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Day 3 KAYAKING

IT'S A SUNNY morning with calm seas. After breakfast, I walk down to the beach. Glenn Lambeth, my kayaking guide – aka The Governor – is waiting. “I’ve spent 23 years in the Sounds working for Outward Bound and guiding,” he says. “I think that’s why people call me The Governor. You’re in good hands. We’re going to have a great day on the ocean.”

Seeing the QCT by kayak offers a completely different perspective. While hiking, I saw a winding forest track with sudden, breath-taking views of secluded coves and bays. From the ocean, I’m skirting the edges of these bays, with their waterfalls of ferns that drop like green curtains to slivers of beach. By craning my neck, I catch glimpses of track through the trees.

We stop for lunch on a deserted beach and The Governor makes a pot of coffee. I lay back and bask in the sun, enjoying enjoying being still. In our everyday lives, we’re so connected and busy all the time. Spending time in a place where the WiFi is intermittent, the weather can have a big impact on your day, and the rhythm of walking or kayaking is meditative, is a gift. And I’ve enjoyed every minute of it. Even the biking.

“I’ve always said that only fantastic people come out to the Queen Charlotte Track,” The Governor says. “I don’t know how this place finds them. People who find themselves on the track tend to, well, find themselves.” ✈️



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Need to know

Plan ahead to make the most of your Queen Charlotte Track experience.

WHEN TO GO

Summer is the track’s most popular season. April to September has cooler weather and some facilities are closed.

GETTING THERE

The Marlborough Sounds can be reached from Wellington via ferry or take a 25-minute flight.
soundsair.com
bluebridge.co.nz
interislander.co.nz

WHERE TO STAY

Punga Cove offers a range of accommodation and an on-site gourmet restaurant.
pungacove.co.nz

Lochmara Lodge has chalet and unit-style accommodation.
lochmaralodge.co.nz

GUIDES

Wilderness Guides offers guided, independent and custom options for walking, kayaking and biking.
wildernessguidesnz.com

GETTING AROUND

Beachcomber Cruises can transfer gear and passengers, and has day-trip options.
beachcombercruises.co.nz

Travel info

Jetstar has great low fares to Wellington from Melbourne and the Gold Coast.

To book, visit
JETSTAR.COM

