

RAKAIA GORGE WALKWAY

Classification: Walk

2hrs 1 WAY / 4hrs RETURN



Introduction

The Rakaia Gorge Walkway offers several unique features of geological and historic interest. For a significant part of its five kilometre length, it traverses the edge of the Rakaia Gorge.

Route

The walkway passes through several forest and shrub communities (3) before climbing the gorse-lined ferryman's track to the site of his cottage and the ruins of a homeguard fortification point (4). Continue along one of several glacial and river carved terraces to a good lookout point (5).

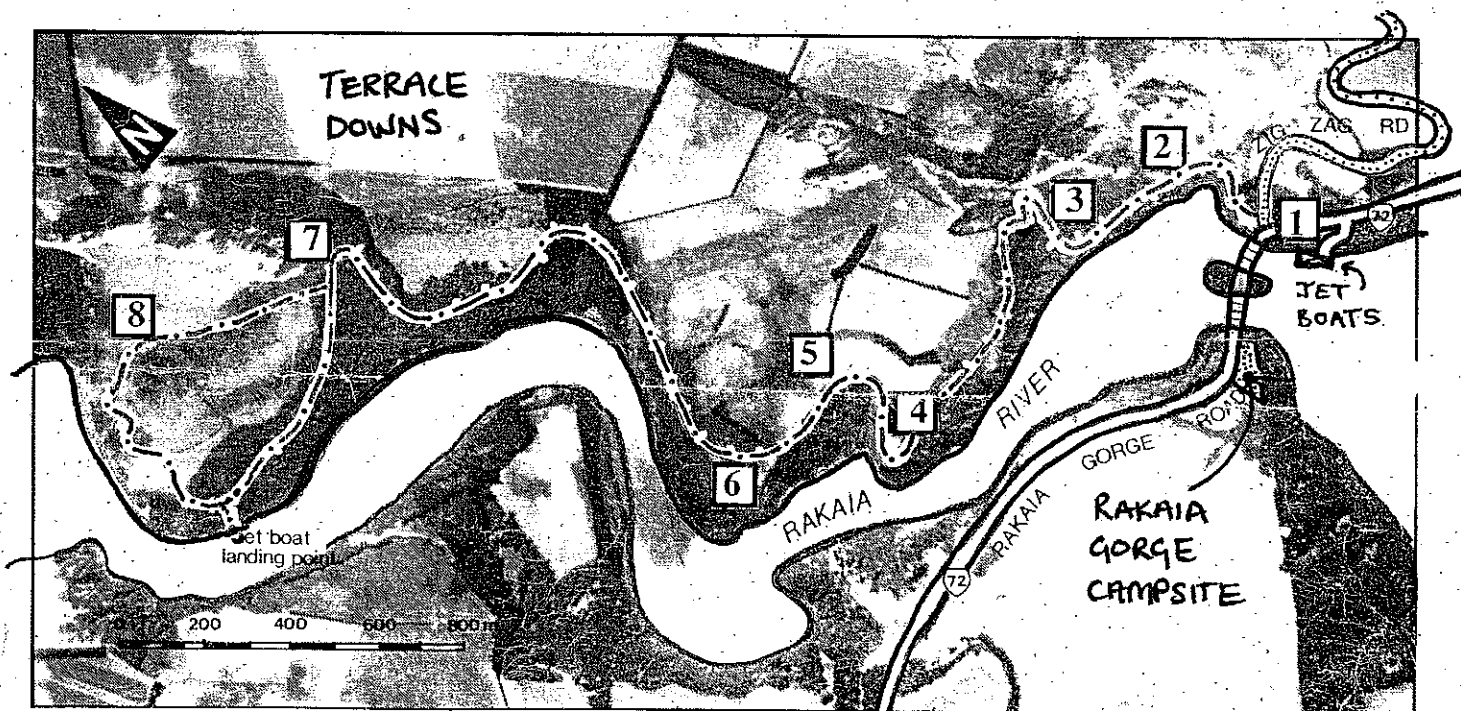
The walkway follows the rim of the gorge through spectacular geological areas, showing lava flows of rhyolite, pitchstone and andesite (6). It then descends into a gully under a canopy of montane forest and shrub, to the site of the Snowdon coal mines (7). The entrances to several coal mine shafts can be inspected, along with the remains of equipment that was used for extraction. The track then climbs out of the creek to a signposted junction. The walkway forms a loop from this point, with the right-hand track climbing across tussock covered terraces, and providing the most direct route to the lookout point (8).

The alternative left-hand track passes through the bush, with a steep climb to the lookout point. A side track descends to the river to provide access to the walkway for jet boaters, rafters and canoeists. Interpretation signs have been placed along the length of the walkway to point out aspects of the area's geology, plant life and human history.

Much of the regenerating bush on the steep sides of the gorge from near the Snowdon mines to the lookout has been gifted as a scenic reserve by Mr and Mrs E Tilley, until recently the owners of the Terrace Downs property. This property is currently being developed as an international golf course and resort. Glimpses of the development can be seen from higher points of the walkway.

Geology

The oldest exposed rocks in the area are those of the bedrock greywacke, a hard, fine-grained sandstone. They are overlain by more recent igneous rocks formed by volcanic activity which gave rise to lava flows of rhyolite, pitchstone and andesite. Coal measures overlie the rhyolites and andesites and vary in thickness from a few centimetres to about three metres. These in turn are overlain by a sill of igneous rocks that were formed as part of the Mt Somers volcanic eruptions.



Points of Interest on Map

- 1 Walkway start
- 2 View of the bridges
- 3 Sign about plant associations

- 4 Ferryman's track, cottage site and Homeguard Fortification site
- 5 Lower Gorge Lookout Point
- 6 Sign explaining geology of area
- 7 The Snowdon Coal Mines
- 8 Upper Gorge Lookout Point



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

METHVEN

MT HUTT



Protect plants and animals

Remove rubbish

Bury toilet waste

Keep streams and lakes clean

Take care with fires

Camp carefully

Keep to the track

Consider others

Respect our cultural heritage

Enjoy your visit

Toitu te whenua
(Leave the land undisturbed)

Seven main periods of glacial advance have been recorded in the Rakaia River. Downcutting of the riverbed occurred between ice advances, producing the terrace sequences flanking the gorge. The accumulation of outwash gravels have formed what are now the Canterbury Plains (Nga Pakihi Whakatekateka o Waitaha).

Vegetation

The Rakaia Gorge walkway passes through several regenerating forest and shrub communities. Although probably affected by occasional fires in the past, the steep sided gorge slopes are in many places clothed in a well-formed regenerating forest cover which undoubtedly would have disappeared if the topography had been less rugged. With the coming of Pakeha settlement, tall tussocks have been replaced by short tussock grasslands in an attempt to provide better grazing for sheep.

The more common trees include kowhai, wineberry/makomako, laceback/houhere, korokio, mountain-beech/tawhairauriki, matagouri/tumatukuru, marble leaf/putaputaweta, cabbage-tree/ti kouka.

History

In 1851, John Bryan opened the Windwhistle Accommodation House and provided a ferry service across the river. Bryan's cottage was situated on the northern bank of the Rakaia River beside a narrow point in the gorge, so that travellers from the south could 'cooee' Bryan over the river. Bryan would then descend the ferryman's track and bring the travellers across in a flat-bottomed punt pulled by a rope.

The upper Rakaia ferry, accommodation hotel, cottage, ferry reserve, sheep run (485 hectares) and sheep were put up for sale in 1869 due to Bryan's ill health. The hotel was burnt down in 1878 and never replaced.

A proposition was received in 1874 by the Provincial Government for the construction of the bridges at the upper Rakaia, making use of the small island at the gorge. Initially turned down due to lack of finance, the bridge on the northern side was eventually completed in 1882. This bridge is of particular interest as it is one of only two bridges in the world built from the Bollman-Truss design. The wooden bridge on the southern side was completed in 1884 and replaced in 1945 by the existing concrete bridge.

The Selwyn Company Home Guard, formed during World War II, built a rock fortification near the side of the ferryman's cottage in sight of the bridges. This may have been part of the war-time defences for the bridge.

Snowdon Coal Mines

Julius von Haast first reported coal seams a few kilometres upstream from the Rakaia around 1871. Within a few years of this report, Mr George Gerard, owner of the 16,800 hectare Snowdon pastoral run, had driven in shafts to a distance of 30 metres at two

levels, to work a seam about three metres thick. Gerard worked these mines for a number of years to meet local requirements. By 1904 the mines had been closed, due mainly to their inaccessibility. Today, the coal mine portals and relics from the last century make this historical site one of the most interesting on the walkway.

New Zealand Walkways

The New Zealand Walkway System is designed to provide a network of accessible walking tracks throughout New Zealand, suitable for people of all ages and abilities, and particularly for family groups.

In many cases, walkways pass over privately owned land, as well as public land. Walkers are asked to observe the gazetted by-laws of New Zealand Walkways, and in particular to note that:

- * all wildlife, plants and natural features are protected.
- * animals and firearms are prohibited.
- * no unauthorised vehicles are allowed on the walkway (this includes mountain bikes).
- * people must remove their own rubbish or litter.
- * light no fires.

Walkways are administered nationally by the Department of Conservation, under provisions of the New Zealand Walkways Act 1990. Other organisations, such as regional, district and city councils, are involved with walkway management.

Walkway Information

Distance: To upstream high point 5 kilometres.

Time: 3-4 hours return.

Location: Entrance off State Highway 72 on northern edge of the Rakaia River, upstream of the Rakaia Gorge Bridge. Seventy-five kilometres from Christchurch; 51 kilometres from Ashburton and 11 kilometres from Methven.

Facilities: White water jets operate on the river. It is possible to walk one way and be brought back by jet boat, or vice versa.

Note

This walkway goes over private farmland. Please show your respect to co-operating landowners by keeping to the track, not disturbing stock or taking from taking dogs or horses on the walkway.

Further information

Contact:
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