

BROKEN HEELS & BICYCLE WHEELS

A traverse of New Zealand via
Te Araroa and Tour Aotearoa



LARRY BLAIR

For the thousands of drivers who didn't run me down.

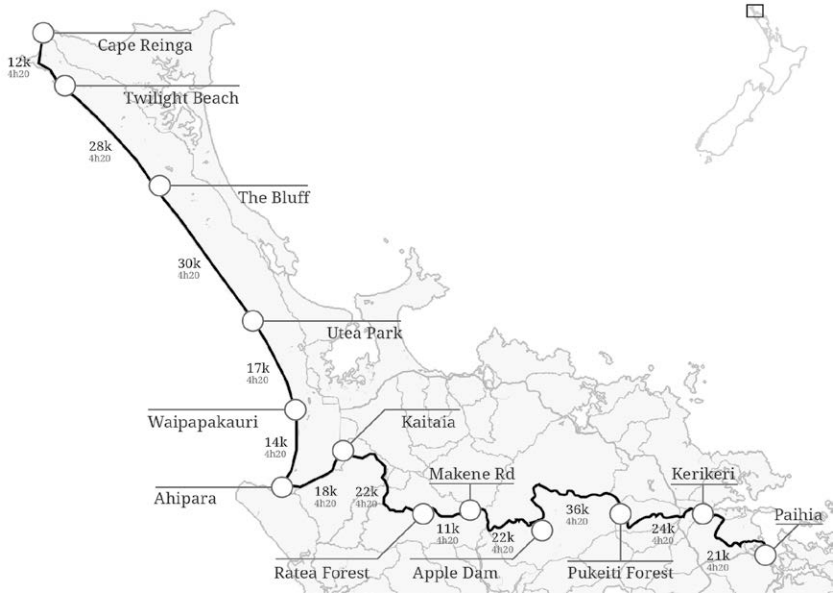
And Mum.

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PART ONE

TE ARAROA



1

Fists balled at my sides, I take a deep breath and shout with all my breath –

"FUUUUCK!"

In the movies we'd cut to a top shot, disturbed crows flying away. But this is reality. There's no-one to care, and not even the shrieking cicadas pay my greatest anguish a cursory silence.

I stand deflated. Before I shouted, I was walking Te Araroa.

Now I'm just walking home.

2

3,000km starts with these steps, crushed under my pack, dripping and alone as I depart from the Cape Reinga lighthouse.

I'm tackling Te Araroa, New Zealand's 'long pathway' - a 3,000km walking trail from Cape Reinga to Bluff. For me it's a grand adventure that's also a desperate one; I've been so miserable for the last year that the commitment to have a crack at this top-to-bottom traverse has, at times, been all that's kept me going. And now it's here, here's my crack - it's a rather emotional day.

For Māori the Cape is the jumping off point of departed spirits as they head off to Hawaiki. It's a special place and one deserving of more than I have the bandwidth to give it. I try to have a soulful moment but I can't; this is the start of my journey, I have waited so long and am anxious to get going. I take a stupid photo and climb back up, passing two Germans heading down – they're starting today as well.

Te Araroa starts gently with a day one distance of 12km. You aren't allowed to camp just anywhere on the first leg along the beach – the only sites are at 12km, 30km, 60km, 87km and at the end at 100km. The length of later days has me worried, but today is just for my mind.

I climb down to Twilight Beach and enjoy the lonely peace, figuring out what I'm doing. It's mid-September 2018 - the rain is a nuisance but at least it's warm.

I reach Twilight Camp about 2pm. There's grass, toilets, water and a gazebo. It's designed like a city would design a bus shelter - all angles and gaps, a lot of amenity but no real protection.

A tatty, mouldy notepad with a heart on the front sits on the bench, held down with a tent peg. An impromptu visitor book. I leaf through. It's full of two things – hope for an adventure ahead, and tales of aggressive campsite possums eating everything not nailed down.

As dusk settles I am joined by the German couple, a young Australian, an old Canadian and four Aucklanders finishing up a three day tramp around the reserve. It's a nice bunch to start and chat with.

I spend a lot of time sitting, watching the surf on the beach. It's surreal that I have finally started my journey.

*

We all worry about the possums. Though a sleepless night follows, the possums amount to nothing but a snuffle outside the tent.

The family of four are first to set off in the morning and I follow shortly after. The trail takes us a few kilometres through scrubby coastal Manuka and brush before the big reveal – the endless expanse of Ninety Mile Beach.

The next few days of maps are just one straight line, south east down the beach. Today is 25 kilometres of beach walking, to a campsite at the Maunganui Bluff. Roughly halfway is

Matapia Island, which I can just make out on the horizon, brought close by the spray of countless waves. I look on with foreboding.

On the beach-front a baby seal's corpse writhes with maggots. I recall a 'cute friend on the beach' shared by a walker last week, it's big brown eyes shining at the camera – I suspect they are one in the same. More foreboding. But here we are, and here we go – I get plodding.

The hours pass and the cliff behind me disappears into the ocean spray. Visibility of the island comes and goes too; it is just me and this walking fog. I think of the wee seal, unable to beat the long shallow surf back to sea, stuck in this purgatory of nothing in each direction. The surf is huge. When Charon manages to get his boat through the waves and finally take the pups, it must be a blessing.

I decide I'll lunch halfway, when the island is to my west. But it never moves. I walk hours and the island stays put. It's just the endless waves, the island tease, and fading into the spray behind me the silhouette of the Australian following behind.

It's eight hours of this. As my feet begin to feel the pressure of the same relentless angle and gait, I mull on the meaning of grit. I like to think I have grit, but why? What compels someone to walk this path? I had joked earlier, "I've told too many people, I can't back out now" and meant it as a joke, but I realise it is actually true. My grit at the moment is to prove to those who may doubt me that I can do this. All who have ever thought little of me, I'll show them what I can do. This realisation is sad; why am I putting six months of effort

into proving wrong those long-lost or irrelevant? Whatever man, it's just this beach; there's nothing for it but to walk on forward. I already sense the simple joy of that, and the positive message for the future.

The Aussie shared a wee motivator he has, something he read – *'I can give up, but not today'*. It reminds me of that guy in *Touching the Void* – "I was sure I was going to die, so I thought I might as well keep going". It's dark stuff, but it holds water for me. A year ago when I decided to do this, it was to be a pilgrim in my homeland, to connect with more of New Zealand. What a great adventure – write a book! But as the year of limbo passed by, and books, podcasts and videos were released about the trail, and I couldn't get on with anything else, it became something else. Just something to do. A reason to be. I said I would, so I will, and then you know. Who cares. My life was something like this endless beach, alone with a hazy nothing before me, my only vision the dark silhouettes following behind.

Real positive stuff! In the later hours, I put on some music.

Eventually I stumble into the Maunganui Bluff campsite. There's a flushing toilet with no door which is quite fun. It's only recently I have discarded teenage self-consciousness and I find it liberating. I almost want someone to walk in on me and see how little I am concerned.

The Aussie arrives and we think we're it for the night. The younger bucks, the only ones with the grit to get through. But we're to eat humble pie as the 65 year-old Canadian arrives in better condition than both of us, then the Germans right at dusk, shattered but showing their gumption too.

We have a bit of yarn as we make our respective meals. It's nice to not walk this alone, to have others around walking for their own reasons. There's irony in this 'lonesome road' being so much more communal, connecting and social than my real life. Here, when I'm alone, it's understandable. Back home I began to pile moments of similar loneliness with failure and hopelessness. It's so freeing to unburden myself of that!

Cape Reinga is the jumping off point for spirits. While I didn't feel it at the time, I hope it proves to be one for me too. Not as a point to the afterlife, but maybe I have left some of my life's baggage there to revisit on my way out rather than keep carting it about on my walk and after. I say goodnight to the other tired wanderers and settle in to bed, feeling like I'm living again. Despite some incoming blisters it feels pretty bloody good.

*

I get up at 5:45am to a starry night. My tent fly seems to amplify the light - it feels like morning inside! The damage is done and I can't return to sleep, so I get ready to leave early. High tide is set for nine and the trail notes say the tide reaches the dunes 'at points'. When I make my way along the sand I quickly find the points are all of it - I make a harrowing run back to a dune, racing from a shin-deep wave speeding across the wide shallow beach. I can picture the Canadian's smile as he watches back at camp - I wave back and sit for an hour to wait for the tide.

I'm not used to being stopped because of tides and am annoyed at having to wait - it's another long 30km day ahead

– but it’s a blessing really. I safety pin a cloth to my hat to shade my neck (proper hiker now) and write my trip notes. Later the young Australian labours over the dunes and we have a good chat about motivations and things – I am jealous he is doing this ten years my junior, he’s an onto it dude.

I find some double-uses for my gear, something that never fails to please a tramper. Combining my gaiters creates a quite large mat on which to avoid sand and damp grass when I’m not wearing them. A spare bootlace linked between corners of my packs ‘brain’ (the removable top) creates a shoulder strap bag for towns.

The day of walking takes its physical toll. After an hour my knees grizzle; after four hours I relent and take ibuprofen. Those pills are like gifts from the gods. Blister-wise, I swap a medium-sized sock for two thin ones on the problem foot, after wrapping everything in lambs’ wool.

While physically it’s a challenge, mentally I’m prepared for a big day. It passes relatively well, with a little music and a bit of thinking. It’s such a simple thing, just one foot in front of the other – always forward, and tomorrow the same. I find it so freeing, out of the ‘what did you do to end up like this?’ funk I have been in of late.

There’s nothing to look at, nothing to bump into. It’s the unchanging stride and pace that kills me, the relentless and repetitive gait. The Aussie said a guy walked with his eyes closed for six straight minutes to play a game with himself, but I barely break 30 seconds.

After eight hours the Aussie and I slump in to Utea Park and

are made instantly welcome. The hosts here are something else, driven by kindness, connection and compassion over making money. It's hard to believe it's real! Tania rushes off to make us hearty smoothies packed full of the fruit and nutrients our bodies crave.

I'm given a cabin for \$20 and sit down to examine my feet. It is here I discover disaster. A blister I didn't notice on my little toe has grown to epic proportions. Swollen beneath the toe beside, every step rolls the blistered skin. I lance the bubble and it erupts, squirting goo a good 30cm. Startling, disgusting, but kind of fun too.

As bad as mine are, they are nothing compared to the German girl across the way. She's on day four of her recovery and only today just able to hobble about.

Blisters are the topic of conversation here. Our hosts regale us; there was the man who wrapped his feet in strapping tape only to remove all his skin with it and sit in a puddle of blood. Another sat on this very porch and calmly removed every single one of his toenails from his feet, before 'putting them in a salt bath'.

"He wanted to keep the nails?!" I exclaim, to much ridicule – he was bathing his feet!

Utea Park shows how good begets good. All around are positive messages left by travellers, and everyone is kind, smiley and friendly. A microcosm where everyone is cool.

*

It is with a little sadness that I rise on day four to re-lance

and re-bandage my aching blisters. It's a shame to leave, such is the wonder of this little wounded walker sanctuary. But today is just a 17km day, on to the Waipapakauri Campsite.

The Australian pushes on the full 30km today, so our little posse is broken. The Canadian and I take a very leisurely morning with sun, coffee and books waiting for the tide at 11am. It's so chill compared with our earlier days; just as I get into the walking groove we are almost there. No seal corpses today - the only beach thing of note is a crappy maroon sedan speeding by at 100km an hour a mere metre from my right, breaking the otherwise unanimous hand-waving 4×4 standard beach driving I encountered.

I'm glad this holiday park is here but the contrast with Utea Park couldn't be more stark. The owners have sold and are leaving next week, the shop is bare and things are running out and down. Flat grass is flat grass though, and I have a lovely night and kip. The owner opens the bar especially for Canada and I to grab a beer – it goes down a treat. I bandage my blisters with my remaining plasters, the wacky-shaped ones no-one uses.

*

Day five is the final 14km of 90mile beach, coasting in to Ahipara. My blisters are crotchety but I finish with neither tunes nor drugs.

While I hobble about making use of cellphone reception to let people know I'm alive, Canada heads in to town. He brings back fish and chips and beer. What a legend! Having run out of dinners I was going to make do with a tin of beans from the

campsite shop, but now I eat both.

*

Last year the trail climbed from Ahipara into the Herekino Forest and the great Kauri there; but now to slow the progress of Kauri die-back the trail takes you up to Kaitaia. So on Day Six I lance, strap and hobble onto the 18km sealed road, heading to the wee township which seems like a metropolis now. It's brutally hard walking with my bad foot and I stop three times to try to lesson the pressure and friction.

A local guy pulls alongside. "Want a ride?" I thank him but decline. Seconds later I would kick myself if it wouldn't hurt so much, but he's already gone.

The curb isn't that boring and I amuse myself thinking about pain, people who throw cans out windows, and guessing what kind of vehicle is coming based on it's tyre noise.

I collapse into Kaitaia and an OK motel. Feet up and slowly recovering, I decide to give them three nights rest. By then I expect they'll be ready to return to the trail and take me into the bush, which is much more my comfort zone.

****(end of preview)****

What do you think? Consider buying the book! There's another 240 pages including this not working out and the whole Tour Aotearoa biking adventure. You'll find the whole book for sale on my website. Cheers! - Larry

<https://lawrenceblair.com/>