

New Zealand: A high country masterpiece

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By [Chris Barton](#)

Island Saddle, at 1347m, lies on the edge of Molesworth and Rainbow stations. Photo / Chris Barton



It happened on the third day. I still don't know what did it. We arrived at Lake Tennyson for morning tea and got out of the minivan to stretch our legs. I was taking photos, walking back towards the lake from a welcome blot on an otherwise uninterrupted landscape, a Department of Conservation long drop.

I'd become fascinated by the flora, wild flowers among the tussock and other strange ground cover I'd never seen before.

It wasn't a dramatic revelation, more like a slow dawning. Maybe it was the high country air. Whatever it was, the place had got to me.

Maybe it was something to do with this land's ruthless indifference to the silly tourist photographing grasses, or our insignificance in the high country vastness where the mountains, valleys and rivers stretch on forever.

It's an indifference that demands respect, but doesn't care if you don't show it - an aching beautiful shrug at the folly of human presence.

Signs of the folly litter the ground: a rabbit carcass submerged in the shallows of the pristine lake; patches of the invasive hieracium scar the hillside of a perfect alpine garden; and an ordinary locked farm gate stands bent and mangled by hoon trying get through after 7pm closing time.

There are scars of heroic folly too. Power pylons run through the middle of valleys and over hills alongside the roads, built in the 1950s and 1960s, that make this tour possible. The pylons are relative newcomers to a land that reads as a history of glaciations - terminal and lateral moraines, glacial outwash plains, hanging valleys and waterfalls, cirque basins, tarns and aretes.

But these sentinels to the march of progress - electricity to the Nelson and Buller regions and high voltage cable that connects the North and South Islands - are reminded from time to time who is really boss.

A day earlier, as we pass a river-valley plain, our tour guide Geoff Swift, points out three pylons that were uprooted by a storm. Later, we see how a mini-tornado dealt to a stand of beech, snapping trunks at the midpoint like matchsticks.

This is land familiar with drought and snow each year - a harshness that shapes its beauty. The marvel is that it's still being farmed, despite the legacy of severe erosion from burning off tussock, overgrazing by sheep and a plague of rabbits.

We're on the final leg of a three-day Molesworth tour - a journey that has taken us through south Marlborough country, the land that lies inland between Blenheim and Hanmer, behind the Kaikoura ranges.

At its heart is the 180,476ha Molesworth Farm Park, which unites the original high country stations of Tairāroa, Molesworth and St Helens and is managed by DoC. Landcorp runs farming operations under lease.

It is home to about 10,000 cattle - herefords and angus crossed to create a resilient and early maturing hybrid.

There is much to discover - the land, people, history and vegetation. You immediately feel lost, but that's okay. Three days in a minivan covering 420km means a lot of looking out of the window at passing scenery.

Even with a stunning landscape, and Geoff's commentary, that could get a little boring. Fortunately the tour is well thought-out, with plenty of time to stop and take in the scenery and history - braided rivers, brooding mountains, scree slopes, wild farmland and the even wilder types who worked it.

In January, the summer was unusually wet which means the ubiquitous rye grass provides a technicolour show in gradations from green to yellow to brown and often with a tinge of pink.

Which provides a perfect contrast to the tall blue wildflowers of "blue borage", the name given by high country musterers to Vipers Bugloss (*echium vulgare*). Bees like these flowers, and we pass a number of hives which produce a delicately flavoured honey.

Then there are the tall, white gentian flowers among clumps of short tussock and pasture grass. There's plenty of yellow too - dandelions and buttercups and something Geoff calls Maori onion, but which I think is also known as golden star lily (*bulbinella hookeri*). If you have any interest in plants you rapidly become an amateur botanist out here.

Among the natives like the thorny matagouri, hebe, tauhinu and mountain flax are plenty of introduced plants. Broom, wilding pines and the flatweed, hieracium - are all considered a curse.

But it's hard not to admire the pink flowers of sweet briar introduced as an ornamental around homesteads. Its fruit was reportedly made into rosehip jam, used to mask the flavour of poison when controlling the rabbits.

I'm normally botanically challenged, but here the high country air appears to have affected my brain and I've become slightly obsessed, driving Geoff mad asking the names of everything. I pore over the books in the van to locate the correct species.

Geoff points out the spaniard grass also known as taramea and speargrass, but it's not yet in flower. I'm also taken by something he calls sheep moss - musterers often mistake it for a stray sheep on a mountainside.

I think he means *haastia pulvinaris* or perhaps *raoulia mammillaris*, also known as vegetable sheep.

Geoff may not be a botanical expert, but he has lots of stories to tell about the history of the place and the people.

Many of the stories involve the demon drink and end badly - the fellow who drowned crossing a river, a poor blighter cooked alive in a vat of tallow at the rendering works

near Blenheim, and the reprobate who packed his saddlebags with whiskey bottles, telling fellow musterers he was going on a blinder and would meet them in 10 days' time.

At the 250ha expanse of Isolated Flat, an outwash plain, bounded by the Awatere Fault, Geoff tells the story of the two blokes caught in a snowstorm. One died of hypothermia, the other took his coat and made it to civilisation. He told the local constable who promptly rode out into the storm to fetch the dead chap.

Then there's the story of Red Gate where the Severn and Acheron rivers meet. The gate is so-called because of the splendidly named Ivanhoe Augarde, a worker at St Helens Station who shot himself in the guts there in 1868. That was after he shot German Charlie, who worked at Tarndale, and who was supposed to deliver a love letter of Augarde's to a Miss Kate Gee, who lived in the Upper Wairau.

Word got back that Charlie had opened the letter en route and entertained various groups of men along the way with its contents. Augarde was not amused.

While we make the journey from the comfort of a 4WD air-conditioned minivan, many others have gone this way before, staying at a string of accommodation houses - Tophouse, Rainbow, Tarndale and Acheron - made of cob, a mixture of wet clay reinforced with dung and tussock.

At the confluence of the Acheron and Clarence rivers is the oldest, the Acheron, built in 1862 and used until 1932 by travellers and stockmen moving through the inland route between Nelson and Canterbury. Two shillings and sixpence (25c) bought a bed, meal and stabling for horses.

It's hard to pick out a highlight in this tour. The day travelling through Molesworth itself and then through Jollie's Pass for an overnight stay at Hanmer Springs was captivating.

But so was the next day travelling up through Jack's Pass to Lake Tennyson on the boundary between Molesworth and St James stations, across the alpine Island Saddle at 1347m, and then alongside the Wairau River to State Highway 63 near St Arnaud.

I'll never forget an idyllic picnic lunch next to Coldwater Creek. Geoff hadn't seen people dip bread in olive oil and scoff it straight. "That must be an Auckland thing," he says, giving us the whole bottle of Awatere River olive oil to take home. Then there was the drive through craggy ravine of Hell's Gate, capped off by a breathtaking walk across the Lee Creek Hut swing-bridge with a raging torrent below.

But the highlight is the first part of the trip and that's because of the people who took us into their homes and made us feel so welcome. It began in Blenheim before we set off on the Molesworth tour. We spent an afternoon learning about the tyranny of the vineyards, as they march across Marlborough, swallowing the farmland flats and a way of life, but producing some worldclass wines in the process.

After sampling a few, we spent a pleasant evening at Brickweld House Bed and Breakfast, where our hosts Jenni and Tony Walsh, poured us another and directed us to an excellent Chinese restaurant for dinner.

Next morning it was into the van. "Those are the last grapes you'll see for a while," says Geoff. "We're heading up the Awa-tree." We soon got used to his defiantly local

pronunciation of the Awatere, the lazy braided river we followed for the next day or so, stopping in on some of the locals along the way.

We had our first taste of what it's like to be a merino farmer and how much work is involved in keeping the fleece pure at Glenorkney Station, a 1200ha property running 3500 stock - merinos and breeding cattle.

Simon and Linda Harvey have farmed for 20 years and surprise us by their dedication to minimising impact on the environment. by selective breeding to increase natural resistance to worms and other diseases in the sheep, reducing the use of pesticides and chemicals; trialling many types of pasture cover to improve soil conditions; and by reducing stock numbers to take pressure off higher slopes in this fragile environment.

I'm impressed too by their resourceful son Edward's nifty, solar-powered automatic gate-opening device.

After a superb lunch - roast hogget washed down with a Dashwood sauvignon blanc - we head further up the Awatere to stay overnight at Duntroon Station. After a dip in the pool we take a walk up the track to the airstrip. "My men are out the back somewhere - you may run into them," says our host Trish Oswald. She's talking about her husband and son. The view from the airstrip is pure high country magic - rye grass bending in the breeze, surrounding mountains that stretch for miles, and a braided river with white cliffs below.

We meet husband Robert on the way back. He's covered in grime. "Been for walk have you? Good on ya." At dinner Robert is transformed into a country gentleman. He barbecues a perfect medium-rare steak and Trish brings out hot plates and mountainous portions of assorted dishes.

And of course, there's fine wine. The conversation is varied and fascinating. Both talk with depth about what it's like when drought hits and the complex steps they have to take to save stock.

The next morning we're en route to Molesworth. Morning tea is at Nicky and Bill Stevenson's Upcot Station, where we're greeted by their daughters Melanie, Louise and Sarah who give us a guided tour - the hen has just had chicks, there are five new puppies, we must meet the goat, the lizard has died, and this is where they do their home schooling. Barefoot, wide eyed, chattering endlessly, they're the epitome of a carefree childhood and show while they may not have the mod-cons of city kids, they have something money can't buy. Nicky is working with their eldest daughter somewhere on the farm, so Bill pours the tea and the kids cluster around hoping there will be enough egg sandwiches left.

One thing I've learned from this trip is that gorgeous scenery alone is just half the story. When you combine place with people, especially when it's country hospitality, something truly magic and memorable occurs.

** Chris Barton travelled courtesy of Air New Zealand, and the Molesworth Tour Company.*