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Ultimate family hike

Dear Reader: Recently I met up with Adrian and Pia and discussed adding this alongside the other article in the same issue as it helps clarify and add to the article preceding. There is some double up of information but in deference to Wilderness Magazine kindly giving us permission to print the article I have chosen to print it as they had it. Ed

WILD PEOPLE

Ultimate family hike

An Auckland family who had never tramped before, used the school holidays as the perfect excuse to hit the trail – the Te Araroa Trail that is.
By George Driver

FOR SEASONED trampers, the Te Araroa Trail can be the challenge of a lifetime. But what would it be like doing it with no tramping experience and with a family of five?

"It was absolutely and utterly amazing," Pia Wittwer says.

With her oldest child about to leave the nest, Wittwer says she was looking for a big family adventure. She decided on spending two months walking south from Nelson on the TA.

The challenge started nearly a year out. The family had never been on a tramping trip and Wittwer says the logistics of planning a thru-hike was immense.

"It took a lot of research, and a lot of trial and error," she says. "All of the information I could find was geared towards either solo hikers or a couple – there's nothing out there on how to prepare a bigger group for a two month hike."

One of the biggest challenges was planning a menu to please five people, including children aged 11, 16 and 18. Wittwer developed a rotating eight-day menu, scrutinising every gram for nutrition and calories. Her homemade kumara fruit leather became a staple.

"You have to make sure your children are still eating a healthy diet," she says. "It's a lot different to planning as a couple – you can't be miserable and hungry with kids. My spreadsheets were legendary."

Getting physically prepared was the next hurdle. The family did training hikes in the Waitakere Ranges, Tawharanui Regional Park and even an urban walk from Auckland City to Wenderholm.



PIA WITTWER

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When they finally set off in December, it all fell into place and over the next two months they walked as far as Wanaka.

Hiking with two teenagers, the TA could become as much of a psychological challenge as a physical one. But Wittwer says there were fewer squabbles than at home.

"We said that if we found everyone was miserable, we would stop and do something else.

"But within a week, everyone slotted in and the kids were adamant that they didn't want to stop. We were very surprised.

"We all had the odd melt-down at some point. But being a group of five, we could always head to the back, or the front of the pack, and take some time out."

The hardest part came during a river crossing in Canterbury, when the entire family were swept off their feet.

"We linked arms to cross the river, but my husband slipped and fell, and we all went down and got washed down river.

"Our oldest son was out first and managed to pluck his siblings out – we lost some things but nobody got hurt."

Cedric,
Tobias,
Adrian, Pia
and Fiona
at Travers
Saddle

The best part?

"The adventure of it. Being outdoors and moving through different terrain every day, not having the distractions of technology and everyday life and being part of a bigger group having fun.

"You get into a different state of mind and it's long enough for it to become the new normal. Coming back, it feels weird not to pack up and go 'where are we going today?'"

Wittwer says the sense of community on the trail was also a highlight.

"The trail is magic. You get to know quite a lot of people and you meet up with them at different stages. Because we were doing something quite different we got quite famous. We'd meet a lot of people at the huts who had already heard about 'the TA family'. The kids also got to meet a lot of people from around the world."

Wittwer's advice to other families considering a TA holiday?

"Just do it. It's great fun and really good as a family. It challenges everybody, makes you talk, go through difficult things, which is something we don't get enough of." 