

A Wilderness Waterway Episode

by Nathan Fa'avae





The Haast-Hollyford Highway is a long-standing proposal to link Haast via the Hollyford Valley to Milford Sound and Te Anau in the South Island, it dates back over 100-years but has never happened due to costs and needs. In the past 10 years it's come up on the radar as tourism operators mostly, are looking at ways to get people in and out of Milford Sound easier and quicker. There's no doubt it'll be a magnificent scenic highway, as it'll traverse through Mount Aspiring and Fiordland National Parks, and gouge through the Olivine Wilderness Area, but at what stage do we stop putting roads through such places?

Geoff Spearpoint wrote of the Olivines "The Olivine Wilderness in Mt Aspiring National Park is one of New Zealand's premier wilderness areas. The landscape here is in grand proportions: ice, mountains, forests, flats and gorges. It is a playground for the fit and adventurous, those looking for big challenges and able to look after themselves on nature's terms. There are no huts and tracks in the entire area, and air access is not allowed."

It's unlikely this road will ever be built due to environmental preservation and cost, currently estimated at \$1 billion. The project lost valuable momentum when it was uncovered that an Australian mining company was investing in the project with the long-term goal of being a step closer to mine exploration in the area. It was being sold in the pretext as a benefit to tourism. I find it concerning that such concepts are even open for discussion now, as a country, we actually don't have many areas of large untouched wilderness remaining, I believe we should guard what we have.

The main proposed route, if you started from Milford, is to have the road down the Hollyford River, up the Pyke to Red Mountain, then down the Cascade River and out to Haast. This summer as we schemed up what adventures we could do, we decided that following that route would be an amazing trip, and a chance to open some discussion with the children on the trip, five of them, what they thought about a road being built in the area.

Our plan was to paddle down the Hollyford River, across Lake McKerrow to Martins Bay. From there we would hike around the coast to Big Bay, then up the Pyke River through Red Mountain into the Cascade. We had arranged for a helicopter to transport our paddling gear from Martins Bay into the Cascade, where we would collect it and spend two days paddling out the Cascade to the road end near Haast.

We were road tripping around the South Island for five weeks over the school holidays, so we planned to attempt the trip anytime in the New Year. The weather forecasts were not pretty, with front after front battering the region, but we did spot a weather window in early January and decided to give it a go. We figured that any 10 day trip in that part of the country was going to have all weather conditions, so there came a point where we needed to simply get out there amongst it and ignite the adventure.

As predicted, the first few days were glorious. With four adults and five children, we had two inflatable canoes and two double pack rafts as the flotilla, loaded with camping gear and supplies. We had arranged for a resupply and our hiking gear to be flown in with the helicopter who was scheduled to relocate our paddling gear.

The Hollyford is an amazing river trip, generally easy Grade Two but there is one Grade Four rapid midway to Lake McKerrow. There is a portage track around the rapid mainly used by jet boaters winching craft through. We seriously contemplated paddling the rapid, but with fully laden inflatable canoes and being only a few hours into the trip, we opted to line the boats down the side.

Drifting down the river with views into the huge flanking mountains, it's a river trip you don't want to end. You could easily live that life for a week, or more, but with high flows we reached Lake McKerrow easily on the first day, with about 35 km covered, aided by some sailing down the lake. Foreshore pebble beach camping in pristine wilderness at it's best, we had an amazing evening under the stars, cooking on a driftwood fire and enjoying the calm of a Fiordland night.



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Day two was my eldest daughters birthday so there was no rush to get underway, we had a leisurely breakfast and brisk swims in the lake. With loaded boats we had a few kilometres on the lake to reach the tidal channel that flows to Martins Bay. The transition between lake and ocean was rich with activity, wetlands, sand dunes, fresh water meeting salt water is clearly a nutritious environment for life, marine, birds and lush vegetation ... schools of whitebait darting around our boats.

Once at the ocean we swapped our paddling kit for tramping and started the hike to Big Bay. The trail onward from Martins Bay is for experienced trampers only, with only a vague route to follow. It's a wild place, which is why we were drawn to it. We camped in the south end of Big Bay that night, dinner on the beach with massive waves rolling in, our desire to be disconnected and 'out there' was official. The only other sign of humans was a cray boat that came in late to anchor for the night, departing again before daylight.

Predictably the weather changed. It started with a few drops pitter pattering on the tent, and grew to heavy drops, which soon became outrageous down pouring. Ominous black clouds sat on the horizon like a naval battalion positioned to strike if needed. It was decided a few hours of walking to the DOC hut at Big Bay would be just plenty for such a day. It later cleared up and the children enjoyed the sand dunes which offered up a massive adventure playground. Deer cautiously but somewhat casually wandered around the dunes, keeping their distance and an eye on us.

Relaxing at Big Bay doubled as a rest day, the next three days ahead we perceived would be solid

challenges. The plan was to hike for a day into the Pyke River and camp below the gorge. From there we'd move through the gorge and climb over Red Mountain, hopefully descending into the Cascade River, which would mean we had just one more day traversing the Cascade Gorge to be reunited with our paddling gear and boats.

Reaching the Pyke Gorge went well, with half the day on a track and the other half making our way up the river. If you can imagine a spot where Fiordland National Park meets Mount Aspiring National Park, and the Olivine Wilderness area - well, that's it. Words cannot capture it. With a few hours daylight spare it allowed a few adults to scout the gorge, check out a safe passage to take the children through the following day.

That night our fireside team talk presented a few options. The gorge was not safe to take the children into, the high water meant it couldn't be crossed. Our only option going forward was to climb Red Mountain but the weather was poor and forecast to get worse. Added to that, our food rations were getting low. The difficult terrain and long days meant that everyone was eating more than budgeted for, so we were all having to limit what we ate. With all those considerations, the trip reports we'd read had all said the Pyke





find a safe passage through the Pyke in the conditions in front of us, it felt like we'd be poking sticks at a sleeping dragon to keep going. In the end, the vote was to make a plan B. The fire burnt down, we crawled into our tents, somewhat relieved we had a more achievable and safer alternative.

Plan B consisted of me running about 20 km back to Big Bay, using the radio at Awarua Lodge, getting the helicopter to collect me from there and flying into the Cascade, to retrieve our kayaks and gear, then getting it dropped in the Upper Pyke. Which is what I did. Six hours after jogging from camp I landed in a helicopter with all our gear, and food resupply barrel which the kids were opening before the chopper departed.

So, our intention to reach Haast was put on hold for another trip. Our new trip was to paddle the Pyke to Lake Wilmot, then further down the Pyke to Lake Alabaster. Then finally down the Pyke back to the Hollyford, roughly 45 km. Once at the Hollyford it was an overnight tramp back to the road end where we began. Our A to B trip was instead A to A, but we still had days of adventure and paddling in front of us, fresh food supplies and new country to explore. The expedition launched into gear



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again. Life in the Pyke turned out to be an incredible journey through more untouched wilderness, it was near impossible to absorb the beauty and isolation, it was to be treasured in the moments we could travel through it. The Upper Pyke had some fun Grade Two rapids which we suspect may have been a first descent. Once we joined the track from Big Bay we knew people had paddled from there to the Hollyford, mainly Grade One scenic river features. The lakes made the trip even more interesting adding another dimension, campsites are aplenty but with more rain in the air, we opted for a night at Olivine Hut. After three days down the Pyke we met the Hollyford and loaded our back packs for the hike out: it was two half day walks, with a night camping in between. Hidden Falls hut was empty but we wanted to camp by the river; we didn't have a forecast but the sky looked like bad weather was coming. We decided that as it wasn't raining we'd enjoy the evening and see what happened. What happened was at 11pm the skies opened up and dropped rain like you only get in that part of country: we were just a ridge away from New Zealand's highest rain fall recording station. By 1 am the camp was flooded, the river was rising rapidly so it was a manic break camp and run to the hut. Saturated but happy, we settled into the hut bunks dry and warm with torrential rain loudly colliding onto the roof. The last day hiking out the waterfalls had all come to say goodbye.

As you can probably assume, we all thought a highway through this area would destroy the magic. We all agreed that the area is highly worthy of visiting, but it should be with boots and a pack, or by boat and paddle. I believe there is enough to see for tourists who wish to view New Zealand from the comfort of a high speeding bus. There needs to be places where people and wildlife can wander in absolute wilderness, this was one of them.

PS: Give me a year to get a story on paddling the Cascade River.

