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Pelorus Discovery

Magnificent river swimming, remote trout fishing and glass clear water.

By Nathan Fa'avae



The Pelorus River is at the northern end of the South Island in the Marlborough region. It flows approximately 90km from the Richmond Range into Pelorus Sound (an immense sea-kayaking destination). The river is renowned for its magnificent river swimming, remote trout fishing and glass clear water with numerous gorges. It is also measured as one of the cleanest and purest sources of water - drink a cupful and you'll surely agree.

The Pelorus valley was the site of a massacre of the Ngati Kuia and Ngati Apa tribes by the Maori chief Te Rauparaha, who came from the North Island coast, west of Wellington. The first Europeans to arrive in 1843 found a few remaining Maori people producing flax for Te Rauparaha. Halfway between Nelson and Blenheim, it's now mainly known for Pelorus Bridge: a campground, café and bridge to jump off on a hot day.

The upper 40km flows through Mount Richmond Forest Park and provides popular hiking trips in the valley. My history with the river dates back over 20 years when I started hiking into the reaches trout fishing and exploring the backcountry. With three DOC huts spread evenly along the riverbank it makes for easy trip planning. The river by nature tends to squeeze itself into a canyon at any opportunity, creating frequent deep slow moving pools followed by short drop rapids.

One particular section has always intrigued me. Between Middy and Roebuck hut there is 6 km of river. The hiking track for this section climbs high between 100-150 vertical metres above. I'd fished some of the river above Middy Hut but there was about 5 km that remained mysterious. It presented the question, "For the track to be so far from the river, what is down there?"

Something must be. A kayaker's curiosity engaged.

With our kids now all school age, Tide 5, Zephyr 7 and Jessie 9, Jodie my wife and I lined up a school holiday with plenty of activity. The first week we completed a seven day hiking trip in the Leatham Conservation area. After a night in town we then did a five day circumnavigation of Durville Island by sea kayak. Once that trip was cleaned up from we decided a river trip was needed to wash the salt out of our hair.

A few phone calls, emails and internet searching kayaking information on the upper Pelorus River resulted in nothing. We couldn't find anyone who had paddled the upper gorge, or even been in there. (After the trip we heard of a pair who apparently tubed it with their mountain bikes!) Step in Google earth to the rescue. The ability to zoom in on an aerial photograph of the river meant we could scout from our home office. We could tell there was plenty of white water but more pleasing, all the rapids appeared to have portage options. The river level was reading 20 cumecs at Pelorus Bridge, which I interpreted as a low water trip, ideal for our family on unfamiliar currents.

A quick call to Helicopters NZ and we had a chopper booked for 10 am the following day.

Boat choice was Gumotex K2 inflatable doubles. They have a sensible amount of room to load gear and retain predictable performance for manoeuvring through rapids. They are also lightweight, easy to repair and pack down small.

Only a 12 minute flight from Nelson airport had us on the banks of the river pumping and



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packing. A snack and a safety talk, we eddied out and began the river journey with the adventure element peaking nicely.

Almost immediately the drop-pool style of boating began. From one absolutely pristine pool to the next, interspersed with Grade One - Two rapids. I had my two girls on board for the first day and my youngest Tide, decided to blow her whistle whenever we approached a rapid, the whistle blowing became more frequent than a French referee's.

Every rapid was easy to scout and had a portage option. The river is littered with swimming holes, picnic spots and fun challenges. Once deep into Conical Gorge the trip has a real wilderness feel, no track, no people.

We opted to hike the kids around a few rapids and one we lined the boats through, a Grade Three choked up boulder sieve. I'd guess though in high flood it could be paddled. (I'll be back in my creek boat in the Spring - adults only trip).

Not sure exactly what to expect on the trip, we were rewarded like Lotto winners. We felt like we'd uncovered a treasure. With highlights a plenty and a great time to relax, we had to be diligent with safety given the children. This paid off as on one rapid Jodie got pushed off line hitting a submerged feature and subsequently wrapped the boat midstream. I was covering from the bank and was able to swiftly rescue my son and then promptly retrieve the kayak. It was a good reminder that there were real risks present. Our kids are confident swimmers and somewhat used to this level of recreation now.

Wishing to expand the privacy and wilderness aspect, we ended day one about 1km upstream from Middy Hut and the track. With blue sky and no rain forecast we opted to camp on the river flats. Absolutely superb camping and the kids spent the remaining daylight hours paddling themselves around the big pond we had made home.

After a good sleep, good breakfast and good fire brewed coffee we

rigged up and drifted off in hope of another day like the first.

I guess you had to be there but the trip just got better and better, the pools got deeper, the clearest water I've seen got clearer and the paddling was exciting.

Rest stops were spent with masks and snorkels drifting spotting trout and eels, followed by finding hot rocks in the sun to warm up on.

Day two could have ended easily at Captains Creek hut but we paddled on to another secluded beach camp. Out of sight but close by, the track provided a scenic trail run after a day with the paddle.

The third day had us emerge closer to civilisation as we left the Forest Park, however, the river hides itself well and it really wasn't until the fourth day when we arrived at Pelorus Bridge on the State Highway that we felt like we'd returned ... to chaos.

We paddled about 35 km, had three nights camping on the river and collectively, about 150 river swims. The final day of paddling the gauge was reading 7 cumecs so we'd be on a dropping river all week. I suspect a solid flow around 20 - 25 would be perfect.

The trip is a winner. While there is a hike in option it'd potentially ruin the experience by being such an epic. The helicopter ride literally heightened the atmosphere and probably was not much difference in price given the efficiency and convenience.

We took all our camping gear but it'd be feasible to do the trip staying only in the huts. For paddlers seeking action, I'd be happy to try the river at 50 cumecs. It could be touching Grade Four in parts but otherwise a flood run would most likely present a memorable Grade Three day trip.

For us it was an amazing family kayaking mission that we'll remember for many good reasons. We'll do it again, but not before further exploration of the untold rivers that have equal potential.

Pictures: Pelorus River had a bit of everything for a family paddle.



Editor note: While this trip report details what has been a wonderful kayak experience, it's important to note that both Nathan and Jodie are NZOIA Certified Kayak Instructors. Wilderness trips such as this require a level of experience, knowledge and skills to match the group.

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