

AUSTRALASIA'S LEADING MARINE LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE



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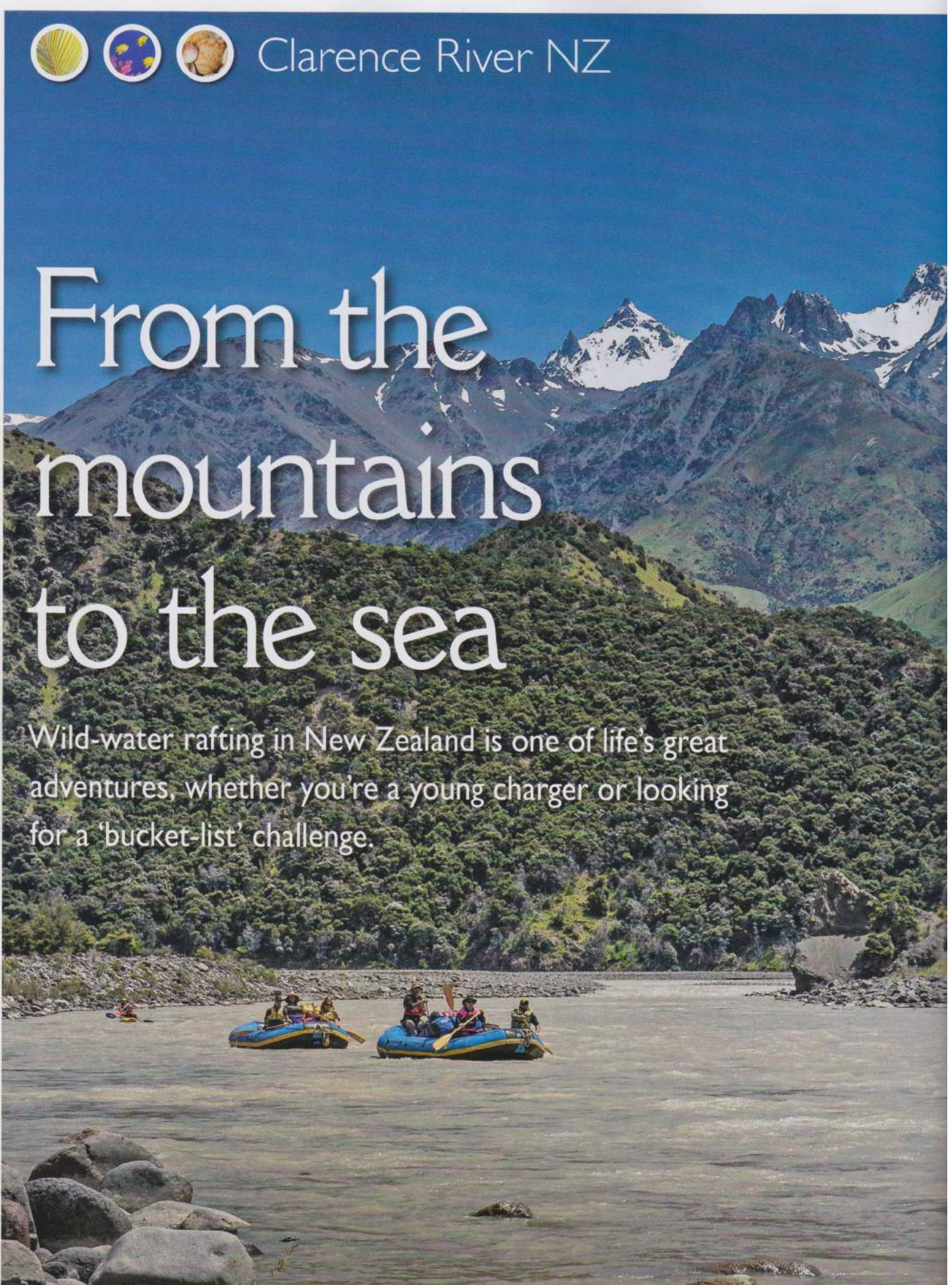
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Clarence River NZ

From the mountains to the sea

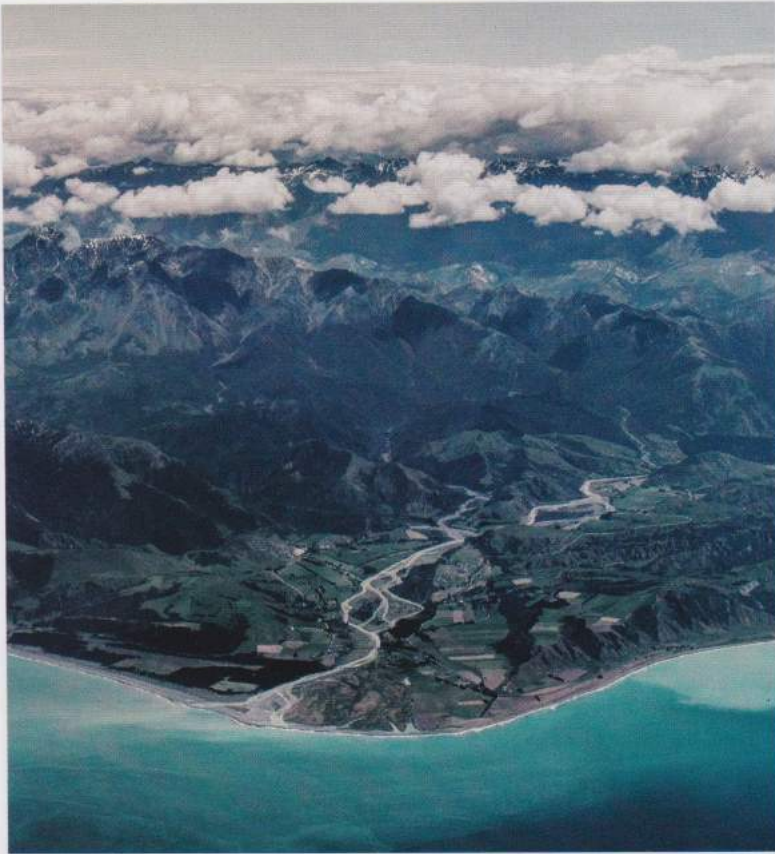
Wild-water rafting in New Zealand is one of life's great adventures, whether you're a young charger or looking for a 'bucket-list' challenge.





By Andy Belcher

AlzoNobel



we could see the stunningly beautiful snow-capped inland Kaikoura Ranges and the Clarence River winding its way between them



P104/105: The landscape briefly opened up to reveal the dramatic snow-capped peak of Mount Tapuaenuku. Above: In-flight view of the stunningly beautiful snow-capped Kaikoura Ranges and the mighty Clarence River making its way between them.

When Ellis Emmett, of Go Wild Productions and a founder of Adventure Leadership Expeditions, invited my companion Annie and I on an eight-day rafting trip down New Zealand's Clarence River from the South Island's mountains to the sea (it would be a journey of nearly 150km with a descent of 1km), my first stop was to see my doctor.

Having a blood condition with low immunity and anaemia caused me to have some doubts about taking on such a huge physical challenge. In fact, I consulted three health professionals who all came back with the same answer – live life and go for it! So we did. It seemed like a great opportunity to get away, have fun, meet new people and, above all, take up a new challenge.

The check-in lady at Rotorua airport asked if my camera bags weighed less than seven kilos. I replied: "Yes, I think so." She wasn't convinced and insisted I go back to have the bag weighed and, unfortunately, it tipped the scales at about 10kg. Not wishing it to be checked in as general luggage I removed my D3 camera with its long lens from the bag and simply slung it around my neck. Problem solved.

The flight conditions were cloudy, but the skies cleared as we approached the South Island. Tracking down the eastern coast towards Christchurch was spectacular and suddenly I was very happy to have my camera at arm's length. Below us we could see the stunningly beautiful snow-capped inland Kaikoura Ranges, with the Clarence River winding its way between them towards the sea. I don't normally take photos through aircraft windows, but this one surprised me. It worked remarkably well. I had good reason to be excited as this was the route we would soon be paddling.

GETTING STARTED

The meeting place was Ellis and Sanna's beautiful lodge in Cheviot just south of Kaikoura on the South Island's eastern coast. It's named 'The Tree House' for good reason – two huge tree trunks form the centre of the house and everything is built around it.

During the evening, 22 enthusiastic paddlers gradually assembled at The Tree House. They were of different ages and nationalities but, at the tender age of 70, I was clearly the senior member of the group by far. Everything needed for the trip had to be transported aboard our four rafts



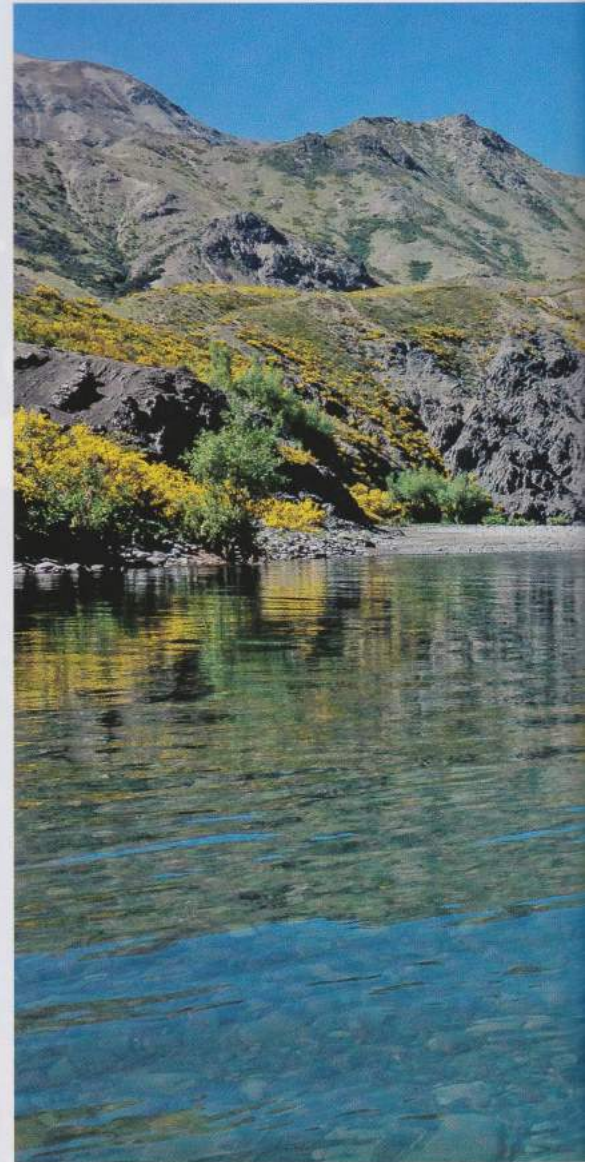
Above: Ellis and Sanna's amazing lodge, The Tree House, at Cheviot.

so, early the next morning, we all raced around packing our belongings and food into waterproof containers and drybags. The rafts and gearbags were soon loaded onto trailers and we were on our way to the Acheron-Clarence confluence, via Hanmer Springs.

On arrival at the put-in at Clarence River, the rafts were unloaded and our gear secured to them. Ellis welcomed us all and gave a rather serious briefing. He emphasised the importance of securing lifejackets snugly so they would not ride up if we were suddenly thrown into the water. Paddling techniques were also displayed and discussed.

I asked if any Maori legends were associated with the Waiau and Clarence rivers. According to legend, the Waiau-uha (Waiau) and the Waiau-toa (Clarence) were male and female spirit lovers living in the Spenser Mountains. For some reason, they were transformed into rivers, the sources of which were not far apart. When warm rains melted the snows and caused floods, it was said that the parted lovers were lamenting and that the rivers were swollen with their tears.

Our adventure began and our heavily laden rafts were soon gliding over the crystal-clear water of the Clarence. We needed to paddle as a team and so friendships were quickly formed. As we negotiated our first rapids, paddling instructions like "forward, back right, back left" came loud and fast from our experienced leaders. If we did not perform well

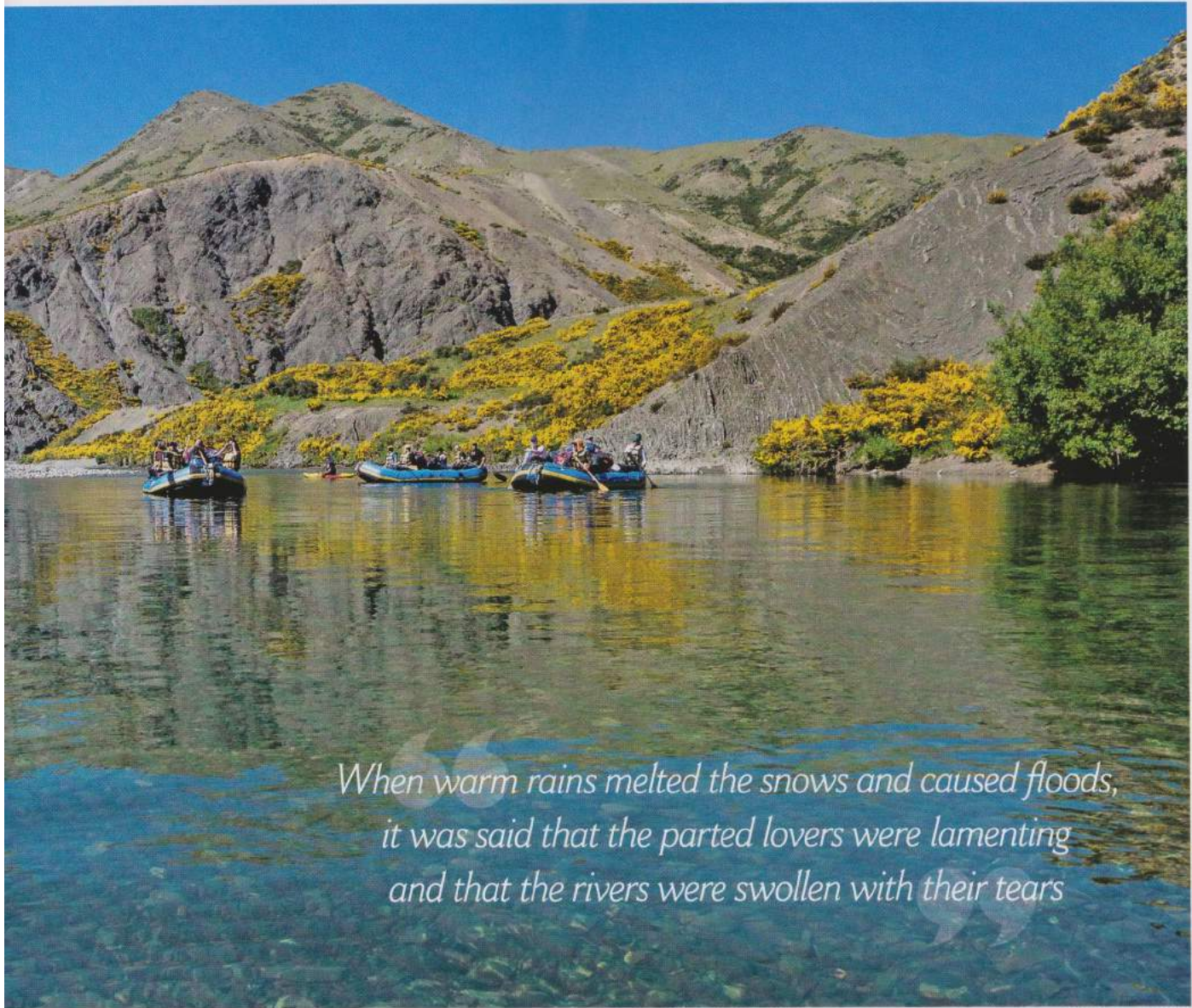


enough Ellis would shout loudly "come on, dig it in" in a way that it could not be ignored!

Waves of adrenaline began to consume me and I could see we needed to react quickly and accurately if we were to navigate the river safely. Colliding with broken tree stumps on the riverbank or crashing into huge boulders in the central flow of the river were situations to be avoided.

Spectacular broom flowers adorned the riverbanks and our first campsite. Although broom is considered a noxious weed, its bright yellow colour definitely enhanced my photos.

Setting up our first camp was a challenge. Some members of the team, including us, needed a little practice at erecting tents and inflating airbeds. Ellis, however, is a master of delegation and as a result we were soon relaxing around a campfire enjoying hot food. As conversations flowed and laughter erupted Annie and I began



*When warm rains melted the snows and caused floods,
it was said that the parted lovers were lamenting
and that the rivers were swollen with their tears*

to realise what a fun and caring group of people we were sharing this adventure with. We were all looking out for each other and working brilliantly as a team.

FOUR SEASONS IN ONE DAY

The Clarence River is rated Grade 2, so the rapids are normally not too extreme. With perfect, fine weather on the first two days, the journey was so relaxing and enjoyable we started to believe this would not only be a great holiday, but an absolute breeze. Halfway through day three we stopped on the riverbank for lunch. The simple pleasure of standing around an open fire in great company eating delicious salami and cheese toasties made this overcast day extremely enjoyable.

New Zealand then decided to switch on its four-seasons-in-one-day option. It started to rain and, to top it off, the temperature dropped



by about 15°C. This meant donning thermal underwear and paddling hard to stay warm. As the rain became heavier, the side streams carried more water, quickly changing the river from crystal clear to muddy brown. It continued to rain throughout days four and five and the rapids became fuller and faster and certainly more challenging.

Above: With fine weather and crystal clear water the first two days were very enjoyable.

Left: Our intrepid leaders Sanna and Ellis.



Our entry into the Clarence River's steep-sided gorge, with its sheer rock faces, could be likened to a rollercoaster ride – albeit a lot wetter. The gorge is on a fault line, which has lifted huge areas of rock and sculptured the landscape. We passed a large landslide caused by the same earthquake that had rocked and destroyed so much of Christchurch. Seeing the intense power of the river and its ever-changing spectacular scenery was a sensory overload.

Being a photographer certainly had its advantages. Before some of the wildest and most challenging rapids, I was encouraged to get out of the raft and take photographs from the riverbank. The rafts were often engulfed in water and photographing the paddlers' facial expressions was entertaining, to say the least.

The Department of Conservation's aptly named Snowgrass Hut was a welcome site on a cool rainy evening. Shrouded in mist around the hut were many large kanuka trees, their white flowers giving them the appearance of being coated in snow. The warmth of the hut, the hot food, and the good company lifted our spirits after a strenuous day's paddling.

Next morning the sun appeared again and was welcomed by all. Some of the more adventurous members of our group were soon launching themselves from the top of a 20m cliff and plummeting into the cool water below. A large 45-degree scree slope also became their playground. As we progressed along the gorge, the landscape briefly opened up to reveal the dramatic snow-capped peaks of Mount



Top: This large landslide was caused by the same earthquake that had rocked and destroyed so much of Christchurch.

Above: Snowgrass Hut surrounded by large kanuka trees, their white flowers giving them the appearance of being coated in snow.

Right: The water was still brown and wild long after the rain stopped.





After a fun-filled day, a nice wash, and a good meal over a campfire, sleeping was easy



Above: Nathaniel was one of two kayakers who paddled with us.

Right: The more adventurous members of our group launched themselves off a 20m cliff and plummeted into the cool water below.

Opposite top: The rafts were often engulfed in water and photographing the paddlers' facial expressions was entertaining, to say the least.

Opposite bottom: The sun has emerged again as the team jumps for joy.

Tapuaenuku, which, at 2885m, is one of the highest peaks in New Zealand. The view easily rivalled anything I saw in *Lord of the Rings*.

Most of us had not washed for four days and the body odour was becoming, well, overpowering, so a warm, sunny evening at a beautiful campsite prompted most of us to wander half-naked to the riverbank with soap, shampoo and towel. After a fun-filled day, a nice wash, and a good meal over a campfire, sleeping was easy.

On our last morning, the mighty Clarence didn't want us to become complacent so it turned on gusts of wind which whipped up a sandstorm in our camp. As Annie was packing inside the tent, the wind ripped out all the pegs and dragged the whole tent away with her still inside it. I had never seen this strange phenomenon before. We managed to overcome this small drama and finally got ourselves onto the water.

As we exited the gorge, the landscape opened up. The native bushland was superb and we spotted groups of wild goats and deer. The course of the river would often divide and choosing the right path with the best water flow was sometimes difficult. We got it wrong on a few occasions – the raft caught on the rocks and we had to climb out to pull it free. By mid-afternoon we finally reached the Pacific Ocean. Our journey was complete.

BEAUTIFUL EPILOGUE

On the way back to Christchurch, we had a few more neat things we wanted to do while in the area. North of Kaikoura we stopped to walk along the Ohau Stream, where we came to a small pool under a waterfall – here, hundreds of seal pups were practising their swimming skills with gay abandon. It was a treat to behold.

Next day we went out bright and early with Dolphin Encounter Kaikoura. Only 10 minutes from shore we were surrounded by a hug pod of dusky dolphins. They could only be described as acrobats of the sea. My camera's motor-drive was working to full capacity as two or three of these amazing creatures launched themselves into various airborne acrobatic manoeuvres.

Once in the water, I swam rapidly round in circles and screamed silly noises through my snorkel. I found that the duskies, unlike other dolphin species, would come very close, indeed, and interact with me. I briefly lifted my head out






of the water to see a huge albatross nearly landing on Annie's head!

As I stepped back onto the boat, raving about my encounter, the unthinkable happened – a huge sperm whale surfaced beside us with dolphins

cavorting around it. 'Wow' was the only way to describe the scene.

As the boat started on our return journey, we all moved to the front deck rail to watch dozens of dolphins riding the bow wave. I lay down and precariously leaned over the bow. With my arm stretched out, I managed to place my little GoPro camera within a couple of feet of the dolphins and captured some great video footage. After all this activity, we sipped hot chocolate between furious spells of garbled verbal excitement.

We were finally on our way home and one more treat awaited us. Hanging from the ceiling inside Wellington airport was a huge, 13m-long 'Gollum' catching his favourite meal of 'juicy sweet fishes'. This wonderful sculpture, created by Weta Workshop, demanded my camera's attention. If you are travelling through Wellington, don't miss it.

Our journey down the mighty Clarence River and beyond had certainly been amazing. A few words perfectly sum it up: a great adventure with great people in a great environment. Thanks Ellis and Sanna for helping us expand our horizons and conquer the unknown. 

Top: Paddling through such a beautiful landscape was no hardship.

Above: The Ohau Point waterfall pool, 27km north of Kaikoura, is usually full of baby fur seals from May to October.

Right: Don't miss this amazing 13m sculpture of 'Gollum' from Lord of the Rings when passing through Wellington airport.



The author would like to extend special thanks to Dennis and Lynette Burman, Dolphin Encounter (Kaikoura) and to Ellis and Sanna Emmett of Go Wild Productions. Go to andybelcher.com for details of his Digital Photo Workshops, Photo Tours, Model Portfolios and Tourism Photography.