

A Weekend in the Mountains

Home <http://nofrillstech.net/>

Well, that at least was the plan as we set off for what was expected to be a pleasant early autumn weekend in Arthur's Pass; the same plan that many others would be following on that Easter weekend, hoping for a good hike before the real winter weather came.

There would be hikers travelling in cars, timetabled buses, even the tramper's train would do its bit to speed the hopefuls on their way, and to bring them back, safe, sound and refreshed to the city again a few days later. Indeed, the usual Easter routine for those who sought recreation in the nearby mountains.

In our case, we were four adults and a baby, our transport a light commuter van. We set off into light rain and wind-gusts towards the favourite track starting-point a couple of hours from the city. After a pleasant camp that night, the ladies would head back to the city; the men would have their trek, and come back on the trampers' train at the end of the weekend.

The rain was a good omen, as of course, the weather would improve overnight; there would be a beautiful day for all to enjoy the mountains in the morning, and a good drive back to the city for the non-walkers of our group.

That was still the plan, anyway, as the van we was increasingly buffeted by wind-gusts and pelting rain as we approached the Pass. Oh well, another good sign, a bit of early snow would mean good photos, and that extra sparkle to the mountain scenery.

By the time we reached the first roadside shelter, the winds were raging, the rain heavy and consistent, sheets of water lay on parts of the highway, mist was low under the tops, and the creeks beside and near the highway were rising, dirty white against the deeper green of the rain-lashed bush. Traffic was moving slowly, and our headlights were switched on long before we reached the turn-off to the shelter.

As the van made its way off the highway, we could see that the shelter was already full with what looked like a youth group, plus all their gear. Other cars were parked nearby, passengers still inside being unable to fit into the small shelter, rudimentary as it was, being built of river boulders and bush timber, and open on one side. After a quick look, we decided to push on to the next shelter, a couple of miles further up the road.

This other shelter was much smaller, no more than a barbecue site, with a roof and three low stone walls on a concrete slab, and hemmed in by heavy timber on a narrow stretch of road where the highway begins the rise to the Pass. But it was vacant when we arrived, and we were more than happy to park the van hard up against the open side, and sit out the storm. There was even enough wood in the shelter to start a fire.

At this stage, we were still confident of having our holiday as planned, and even the weather could not dampen(!) our spirits. We were off the highway, and safe for the night, which was coming early, as by this time the light was failing fast as the storm worsened. There was plenty of food on board the van, plus bedding. The baby seemed happy enough, if rather bemused by the unusual surroundings. As camping and hiking trips usually carry plenty of milk powder, staple baby diet was on hand, along with other make-do rations.

The three ladies then made up the van for the night, the men laid out their gear on the two wooden bench seats in the shelter, and we had moved in and making the best of things. After a brew of tea and a meal, the fire was banked, and we all settled for the rest of the night. The temperature was dropping, the wind and rain were loud enough to affect normal conversation and by now a thunderstorm had begun to be heard around the tops.

I remember dozing, and then waking, warm enough in my sleeping bag, thinking how fortunate we all were in the shelter, and not up a valley somewhere without such protection. The occasional crash meant that a tree had fallen, so it was not surprising that the sporadic traffic ceased within a few hours.

The rain increased in intensity until it fairly drummed on the roof of the shelter, and in the flashes of lightning, I could see that sheets of water now flowed across the ground. I began to think that there was the possibility that a tree could come down on or near the shelter. The storm was worse even than that of a tropical monsoon, and more forbidding in the close confines of the mountains.

Sometime in the early hours, the storm began to abate, the lightning and thunder ceased, and the sound of the rain was less intense. At about this time, I dropped off into a deep sleep, and remembered nothing more until the morning light woke me.

The following morning, the contrast with the conditions of the night before was profound. The air was fresh and still, and the sunrise was over a bright calm day. There was tree debris scattered about the shelter, but the van seemed unharmed, saved by being partly under the overhanging roof of the shelter. My friend roused the ladies, and started the engine to check all was well in that department. A quick brew on a spirit stove cleared our heads, and we then straggled out to the highway to see if the road was clear enough for the van to head back to the city after breakfast.

When we reached the highway, it became obvious that the van would be going nowhere that day, fine weather or not. Trees lay broken and scattered in either direction, and the nearest culvert was washed away to a depth of several feet. Across the highway was the edge of the braided river flat, with the river still running high. Huge scars and piles of debris were evidence of the water that had forced its way down the valley, almost eroding the highway, which was running along close to the river.

The railway line which was running closest to the river on the other side of the road, (at this stage, nearing the tunnel under the Pass), was actually hanging crookedly in the air where the footings had been washed away, some 70 metres or so. The tramper's train was also going to be a few days late, by the look of things. When we saw the real extent of the damage, we realised just how bad the storm had been that previous night.

Presumably, the same sort of damage had been wrought over a wide area, and we were effectively marooned, baby and all, until the road was cleared. Oh well, there was food, for at least a week if we were careful, and plenty of water about for our purposes, even for washing napkins. If the weather held, we would be having our weekend in the mountains, but with a difference.

Staying put would be the best policy until the Public Works personnel made contact with us, and presumably others similarly stranded, as they surveyed the storm damage and began to effect repairs. The van had a radio, but reception in the area was hampered by the mountains, so no news was available from that source.

As our inspection of the immediate hinterland progressed, we were hailed by two men making their way along the highway from the direction of the other shelter. When they reached us, they asked if we had seen two boys who were missing from their group. They seemed unusually distressed, and we could not imagine anyone venturing away from a safe campsite on such a night, so asked them what made them think the missing boys had come all that way to our campsite.

The full story was that there had been a landslide the night before which had encircled the other shelter, and the two boys were "missing". The shelter had been so crowded that a daredevil pair had actually pitched a heavy-duty tent outside as part adventure, and part crowd avoidance. The two adults really were hanging onto the idea that the boys were not under all that mud and debris, but were safe and sound elsewhere.

They wanted some of our group to go with them, and help them look for the boys, and did not want to have to ask other members of the group to poke about in the mudslide to look for their companions. The ladies of our group preferred to stay with the van, and there was the baby to be cared for.

So my friend and I set off down the damaged and cluttered highway with what we subsequently discovered were wardens, as they told us the youth group was actually young offenders on excursion to the mountains, to broaden their horizons, etc. The two that were missing were to be released after the weekend excursion, a matter of extreme irony under the circumstances.

Before we even reached the turn-off to the next shelter, we could all see the long brown scar that extended up the steep ridge above the parking area. At the turn-off, the full extent of the landslide could be seen, and how the mass of trees, rocks, and flocculated mud had slid down the steep slope, completely encircled the shelter, flowing out across the carpark. There could be no survival of individuals in a tent under those circumstances. That the actual shelter, with a dozen more people inside, should have survived that onslaught, was a tribute to the stoutness of its construction.

More loss of life or damage to vehicles in the parking area was avoided, we realized, because the motorists sitting waiting for the storm to abate had given up and gone home that previous evening before the worst of the damage to the highway occurred. Had our little group not elected to move on and sit out the rain in the next shelter, hiking die-hards that we were, we could have been in or under that same horrible quagmire, which lay thick, heavy, and impenetrable before us.

Only a dislike of crowded campsites had saved **us** from being here when the landslide occurred.

Some desultory effort was made to poke about in the mire, but tangled trees and the semi-liquid mud made any serious attempt at finding the two foolhardy campers impossible. That sort of effort required heavy machinery and sludge pumps, and such matters would have to be attended to when contact with the world was re-established.

After a quick look inside the crowded and untidy shelter with its other subdued occupants, my friend and I were glad to walk back to the turn-off, and head back to the rest of our group, survivors all, especially the baby. With time, we would simply drive back to town to our usual lives; not so easily done for those that we had just left.

Back at our own campsite again, we gave the ladies a quick resume of what had occurred, and then set about making the campsite more permanent, and collecting more burnable wood. Part of the activities included clearing the small carpark area against the time when the van would actually make it back onto the highway.

Some time later, the sounds of a small motor could heard, followed by voices hailing. Running out to the highway, we saw at our end of the rail subsidence a small auxilliary rail vehicle with three passengers on board. On seeing us, they left the vehicle, crossed to the highway, and walked to where we stood. They had made their way through the tunnel under the Pass, and were sent to check the road-rail link and make contact with any stranded motorists.

To our surprise, they told us, that, coming from that direction, they had disembarked from their buggy and pushed it across the suspended section of track, experience telling them that the bolted rails would bear the weight of the light vehicle, and the flanged wheels would overcome the slant of the hanging rails.

Apparently, some twenty miles of highway including the Pass were closed by the storm, and the settlement where their base was had dozens of stranded travellers waiting for the roads to open. The health and number of our group was duly recorded, and they would see that a message was relayed to the Railway on this side of the Pass. The two ladies and the baby in our group would be evacuated the next morning by the returning buggy.

Happily, there had thus far been no fatalities from the storm that they knew of. At this point, we told them about the situation at the next shelter and the problems faced there, so they off in the buggy to see for themselves. That accident report would be carrying bad tidings after all.

Apart from being hailed by the rail staff on their way back to their base, and this time actually witnessing the crossing of the washout by them pushing the vehicle, we saw no-one else that day. The rest of the day remained calm and clear, and the evening was brilliant with stars.

This was what we had come for, and belatedly, we were at last enjoying our weekend in the mountains. With so much rain, there had been little snow, but no-one was complaining. Plans were made for an early start when the rail buggy would come to pick up passengers from among our group.

Sure enough, when the sound of the rail vehicle was heard next morning, our passengers were ready, with the baby well-wrapped. We said goodbye to the departing group, secure in the knowledge that the railway was intact to the next settlement. We two that remained then set about some exploration on our own, as there would be nothing else to do for several days, this time heading in the direction of the Pass.

The damage was very extensive, every culvert being washed out, and some of the bridges. Those bridges not washed out were either buried, or left stranded in debris that covered the road. After a couple of miles, we turned back, and went back the other way, intending to walk past the turn-off to the shelter where the slip had occurred.

By the time we reached that part of the highway, we found that more rail vehicles had arrived on the nearby rail, along with a front-end loader which had scraped and filled its way up the highway, and was now unloading sludge-pumps and other gear from one of the railway repair vehicles. With them was the same buggy that had taken our companions east, and we were assured that each were safe and well, and on their way back home to the city on a bus.

With this news, we headed back to our campsite, not wishing to spectate further as the search for the two bodies under the mass of the landslide began. (Later, meeting the rail crew again at the Pass, we heard that search had revealed the two youths were found where their tent was last pitched, still inside and zipped up in their sleeping bags, though no longer so cosy. The muddy tide had rolled over them, rather than swept them along. Either way, they had no chance of survival.)

The following day, we decided to walk towards and even over the Pass, and see how far we could go, taking some food and warm clothing with us in case we did not get back that same day. The plan was to try and hitch the odd ride with any works vehicles which would be working back and forth over the Pass, like four-wheel drives, gravel trucks, or a front-end loader such as we had seen yesterday.

Well, to cut a long story short, it was a long day, but we travelled further than we had expected, scrambling and walking where we could not ride in the various vehicles working on, or driving through, different sections of the highway. Trucks had begun to move, and because of the nature of the terrain, fill was being bought in from special dumps to fill the washouts, and restore the bridge approaches where this was necessary.

Actually, it really was interesting to watch the repair process in action. No doubt, this sort of repair, large and small scale. had been going on in these parts since a road was first put through. The Pass settlement was crowded with stranded cars and people, so we did not stay long there, and easily hitched a ride further on. The road crews that we met were more than happy to contribute to our excursion, and were interested to hear of the state of the highway where we had been stranded, on the other side of the Pass.

Everywhere, the damage was just as great, even more so on this western side of the Pass, beyond the settlement. One large wooden trestle bridge I remember well, because it sat across a narrow gorge, with both approaches washed away, yet the deck was piled high with rocks and branches while the much reduced river ran sparkling in its bed some 40 feet below. Also a tribute to the bridge-builders of the time.

On the other side of this bridge, we scored a lift with a vehicle going well down the highway towards the coast, so when we disembarked, we were even able to have a snack at a local shop, and buy a newspaper that described the storm and early reports of damage.

Our return trip was shorter in time than the trip out, though we still had to scramble across the moraine on the way back, but we were back before dark at the campsite. Quite an interesting day, we had covered many miles, and would have some photographs to show for it on my friend's camera. The rail subsidence near the highway had been filled in during our absence, and awaited a compaction machine to complete the job.

Late the following morning, a road crew utility came through from the eastern side of the highway, and said that we could now drive out, but to take care on those parts recently and temporarily repaired. Our weekend was over, and we drove back to the city again; actually, we had been away no longer than we had intended when the trip was planned.

The unfortunate youths who perished in their tent were the only fatalities of that great storm. However, the mountains would still exact a toll on the unwary, or even the well-prepared. Only a year before, I had shared a hut with two young University climbers who were setting out to cross a high pass in a popular climbing region. We had a very pleasant evening talking of travel and of times in the mountains, and, parted the following day with expressions of goodwill, with the hope that we would meet again soon. Their ambition was, some day soon, to climb the great peaks around the world. Later that same season, I read the report of their deaths in a climbing accident, not far from the same hut where we had lodged together. As responsible recreational climbers, they had stuck to their reported route, and thus were easy to find, still roped together.