

GORGEOUS GORGES Feb. 25- 27 1994 by Tony Gates

The weather was utterly perfect. The moon was full, the men fit and well prepared, and the river low. It was the annual Waiohine Gorge tubing trip, one of the true Tararua classics.

If there were an area designed specifically for tramping, it would be the Central Tararuas. It is not all that frequently visited by us, maybe this story can inspire you. Open tops, beech forest, big valleys, big rivers and gorges, huts, and river flats are all found in the Central Tararuas. It was the Waiohine River we were here for this time, with its scenic deep gorge.

Andrew, Tony, Nigel, Pete and Darryl all met up near Carterton, shuffled cars, then aimed for Powell Hut for the night. First problem, nice tiny pack couldn't fit everything. Solution, extras into a sack over the shoulder. Second problem, torch won't go. Solution, none immediate. Camp at Holdsworth Lodge. No way. Share torch light? Possible. Utilising the prolific moonlight was the obvious solution. Sweat poured off us as we fair sprinted up past (grotty) Mountain House to (the luxurious) Powell Hut (two tickets, gas on tap, and a warden!). A well-deserved brew was consumed on the porch at 11 pm, watching the Wairapara bathed in moonlight.

Saturday, and we zoomed off into the murk. A few clear spells as we raced over Mts Holdsworth and Isabelle, then the looong descent to Mid Waiohine Hut. Warm and sunny, lovely tall Podocarp trees, and deep pools in the river. However, not much water flowing down the rapids. And not very inspiring for those who knew the best gorge in the Tararuas further down, the gorge has even deeper pools, cruisy rapids, and scenery non-river trips never see. And its amazing scenery, with sheer cliffs, branches from trees on both sides touching, and always the river.

Non-tubing trips will never know these places, so here's how you do it. To successfully get down these Tararua Gorges, one firstly needs a lot of guts. A few basic items of equipment are utterly essential, such as wet suit, truck tube, helmet, and a very small pack. To keep stuff dry, so named canoeist "dry bags" are probably the best bet. We saw some people stuffing their sleeping bags into several plastic bags only to find their packs weighing maybe 50 kilos - mostly of water! Screw top plastic containers are good, with food in sealed wrappers to keep it dry. And Nigel discovered the merits of having a "nano-pack" (small).

At Mid Waiohine Hut, we cooked up a huge stodgy brew that fired up our bellies well and good. With all our necessary stuff loaded into dry bags, wet suits squeezed on, pump like mad to get our tubes ready, we set off into the puddle that was the mighty Waiohine Gorge. After several gorge trips, we had worked out tying a car tube inside a truck tube provided maximum floatation and ease of carrying the thing when tramping. Much to his dismay, Darryl's car tube somehow got pierced substantially by the valve-holder on the truck tube, and his set up was looking pretty sad. That is until he found another tube in the bushes behind the hut, someone had most likely carried their tube all the way there, been intimidated by the river, so just left it there. Lucky for Darryl! Once in the river, the puddle didn't last long, in fact by the time we reached the swing bridge down from Aokaparangi, we had already enjoyed a couple of swims, and were looking forward to many more. The water was warm-ish, and there was plenty of it further down. Some others in the gorge planned to walk wherever possible, which is OK, and is a bit faster than floating in places, but once in the long deep pools with no way around, the truck tube reigns supreme. Swimming may be OK, but floating is much better. And a lot more fun, as we found out. You could lie effortlessly on the tube, drifting down the rapids (and waterfalls!) and paddle by hand where necessary. Some waterfalls and rapids, ahhh, you do not go down! There were some waterfalls that, just as you floated past the point of no return at the top, you thought there was a chance of actually not surviving the rapid alive. You pop out at the bottom, hopefully (though not always) intact, and hey, you realise you are still alive! So you go to float the waterfall again! Exhilaration. But the tube, not the most hydrodynamic of vehicles, often takes an unplanned course, as the river appears to have a mind of its own. No

two rapids are the same. From below, sometimes you would look up at the rapid towards a friend floating down, he tips out, and a pack or a tube continue to float down river without its owner. The owner is left clinging to a rock like a drowned rat. Most of the time you wish for more current in the water, as it gets a bit slow floating in places.

Presently, we came to Mangahuka Stream, a pleasant open area we usually stop at for a brew. We knew by then that we were through the worst (best) of the gorge, and Hector River was not far away. Then it would be a short, exciting stretch down to Totara Flats. The sun was still beating mercilessly down, and we wallowed in the delightful water. We drifted past Mangahuka Stream, then past the really "tight" part of the gorge, the part that never sees the sun. Then we were there, in the wide open valley below the Hector River confluence. Huge grassy slips, gentle rapids, and happy men. A rather surprised young deer gawked at us drifting silently past 10 metres away, then bolted for the bush.

Rounding the last corner, we disturbed two empty handed fly fishermen. Then we were there, at the famous Totara Flats. We had sunshine for about half an hour at our campsite at the mouth of Totara Stream, so our wet suits etc. dried out well. Everything basically dry. A simply gorgeous spot, watching the fishermen prove who is best (the big one got away), and battling the sandflies. We saw many young trout jumping just before dark, apparently they like it near the mouth of a side stream. More stodge for dinner - delicious. The full moon tried hard to keep us awake.

Sunday was a sun day. A late lazy start, plenty of time to spill out all our remaining supplies, waterproof, and tidy up. What a sight trooping across Totara Flats, resplendent in our helmets, with tubes and wet suits. The warden at Totara Flats Hut (another two ticket hut!) was suitably impressed. Back in the river, five minutes down from the hut, we further inflated the tubes to make it easier, dressed up again, and were soon on our way again. Gentle rapids, standing waves, and good times. Even saw an eel under us, in a deep pool.

The lower end of Totara Flats is a delightful area, one of the nicest in the Tararuas, and we saw it from the best perspective, from the river. Long slow rapids carried us lazily down until Makakaka Creek, below Cone Saddle, where there is a series of bottomless pools, and a couple of exciting rapids. It certainly didn't take long for us to reach Clem Creek, where we had lunch, and a few maniac rapid runs. Felt like we were nearly out then. Walls Whare, at the road end, more people, then Waiohine Shelter, and it was all over. Everyone was exhilarated, slightly exhausted, and busting for the next gorgeous gorge.