



Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For: Moria Gate Loop, Ōpārara Basin

by Peter Laurenson

Moria Arch, Northeast End
Nikon D750, Nikon AF-S Nikkor 24-120mm f4 lens
Stitch of 3 portrait images @ F13, 1/80s, ISO200, 24mm



Moria Arch, Northeast end

Nikon D750, Nikon AF-S Nikkor 24-120mm f4 lens. Stitch of 2 landscape images @ F11, 1/125s, ISO100, 24mm

Good news! For this worth sweating for location, there is less sweating required than in previous locations I've described. The challenge this time is more about getting to the trailhead. The 4km Moria Gate loop track only takes a couple of hours to complete, but being located in the heart of Buller, not far south of where the Heaphy track comes out on the West Coast, it's not a place you just pass through. Only those on a mission go there. It's a destination well worth the effort though. En route to Moria Gate are a host of other distinctive and photogenic spots to check out as well. For me, Moria Gate is the highlight.

A Moria Gate mission starts from Westport, where you follow State Highway 67 north for 98km to Karamaea. That's only about an hour's driving, but it's along the rugged West Coast, exuding an abundance of character and mining history. The Denniston mining site, situated 600 metres above sea level, is a great place to learn all about that aspect of the region. A bit further north, inland from Hector, is the Charming Creek walkway, with its mining tunnel and impressive waterfall. Then, on the big hill between Seddonville and Little Whanganui is Lake Hanlon, offering mirror reflections on a fine day. After that comes Karamaea, but the journey to Moria Gate is not complete yet.

From Karamaea, drive north for about 12km to reach McCallums Mill Rd, where you turn right onto a gravel

surface for another winding 13kms where you find a car park. The road is a bit bumpy in places but doable in a 2WD vehicle. Now it's time to start walking.

The Moria Gate loop track, which can be walked in either direction (here described anticlockwise), winds through beautiful West Coast rainforest, offering glimpses of the upper Ōpārara River. On my summer visit, the tannin-stained water glowed orange and red like Lucozade. In calm stretches, lovely mirror reflections doubled the visual impact. The highlight though is the arch, cut through limestone by the Ōpārara River, which you descend to via a mossy stone staircase. Beneath the arch is a sandy space with otherworldly river-sculpted stone formations and ceiling. At either end of the arch are its openings, offering spectacular contrasts to the dimly lit cavern. It's a challenging space to capture photographically – so much visual stimulation, combined with big lighting variations.

When you eventually drag yourself away from Moria Arch, there's still the Mirror Tarn and more river views to enjoy before looping back to the car park. And from there, you have the option to follow another trail to the vast Ōpārara Arch. Its size has made this arch more famous than Moria Arch, but some of the most beautiful things come in small packages.



The Moria Gate Track

Nikon D750, Nikon AF-S Nikkor 24-120mm f4 lens @ F11, 1/80s, ISO100, 24mm



Moria Arch, Southwest End
Nikon D750, Nikon AF-S Nikkor 24-120mm f4 lens. Stitch of 5 portrait images @ F13, 1/80s, ISO200, 24mm



Moria Arch, Northeast End Left, Southwest End Right,
Nikon D750, Nikon AF-S Nikkor 24-120mm f4 lens. Stitch of 5 portrait images @ F11, 1/80s, ISO200, 24mm