



Photographic locations worth sweating for

Matiri magic, Kahurangi National Park

Peter Laurenson takes us deep into the heart of Kahurangi National Park, exploring the wild beauty of the Thousand Acres and Hundred Acres Plateaus. From limestone cliffs and reflective tarns to the rewarding climbs of The Haystack, The Needle and Mount Misery, it's a journey through one of Aotearoa's most dramatic and lesser-travelled landscapes – where every step offers a new photographic possibility.

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A TARN REFLECTING THE HAYSTACK ON THOUSAND ACRES PLATEAU
STITCH OF 3 LANDSCAPE IMAGES, F8, 1/500 SEC, ISO 125, 24MM

Kahurangi National Park is a place of amazing landscapes. The karst rock, weathered and sculpted over eons into the most fantastic basins, ridges and peaks, combined with beautiful forests, wetlands, rivers and lakes, offers endless photographic potential.

One location that stands out for me is Thousand Acres Plateau, and the smaller Hundred Acres Plateau sitting adjacent to and above it, forming part of the Matiri Range. Think distinctive rolling tussock and tarn shelves, defined by precipitous limestone cliffs that catch magic-hour light – all presided over by accessible peaks: The Haystack, The Needle, and Mount Misery.

Reaching the plateaus does require some sweat. Just east of Murchison, off SH6, Matiri Valley Road gives access to the Matiri

River valley. A bridge spans the river where the road becomes Matiri West Bank Road, leading to a carpark. From here, a gradual climb – initially up a gravel road – leads to scenic Matiri Lake and its namesake hut, situated about 40 metres above. The serious grunt starts at the northern end of the lake – a mostly steep 800-metre climb on a well-trodden track through native bush that penetrates the cliffs guarding Thousand Acres Plateau at 1100 metres.

Although it's a plateau, it's not flat above the treeline, and the trail can be boggy in winter and after rain. Poor Pete's Hut, a charming three-bunker, lies about a kilometre across the plateau. This is one overnight option. A 100-metre climb above the hut at dawn or dusk offers expansive views in every direction.

I opted to carry on north across Thousand Acres Plateau to four-bunk Larrikin Creek Hut. This is at the same elevation as Poor Pete's, but positioned to allow a dawn or dusk climb up to a cirque about 180 metres above, offering great views down Larrikin Creek, bordered on both sides by limestone cliffs. Allow eight or so hours to reach Larrikin Creek Hut.

Beyond the hut, the trail becomes a route requiring greater navigation effort. The best views of all demand much steeper, off-trail but open-terrain climbing – either about 200 metres up the flanks of The Haystack to gain the narrow, rocky ridge, or up the flanks of The Needle to the north. Both vantage points are magnificent. I climbed The Haystack at dawn, tracing its long, narrow ridge south to the true 1526-metre

summit, then retracing my steps and continuing down the sometimes broken ridge to a saddle before ascending The Needle (1438m). From there, I dropped south to Hundred Acres Plateau and walked across to Mount Misery (1383m), which appears just as a distant bump at first, but offers vertigo-inducing views over the cliffs that border the plateau to the north and west.

Between The Needle and Mount Misery is a cluster of lovely tarns that, in calm weather, reflect the land and skies. Collectively, all this amounts to pure magic. In poor visibility, though, be mindful of numerous sinkholes pockmarking Hundred Acres Plateau.



IN THE BUSH ON THE CLIMB ABOVE LAKE MATIRI
F8, 1/100 SEC, ISO 125, 24MM

POOR PETE'S HUT
F8, 1/640 SEC, ISO 125, 30MM





ON HUNDRED ACRES PLATEAU LOOKING NORTH AND EAST
TO THE NEEDLE (LEFT) AND THE HAYSTACK

STITCH OF 2 LANDSCAPE IMAGES, F8, 1/250 SEC, ISO 125, 31MM