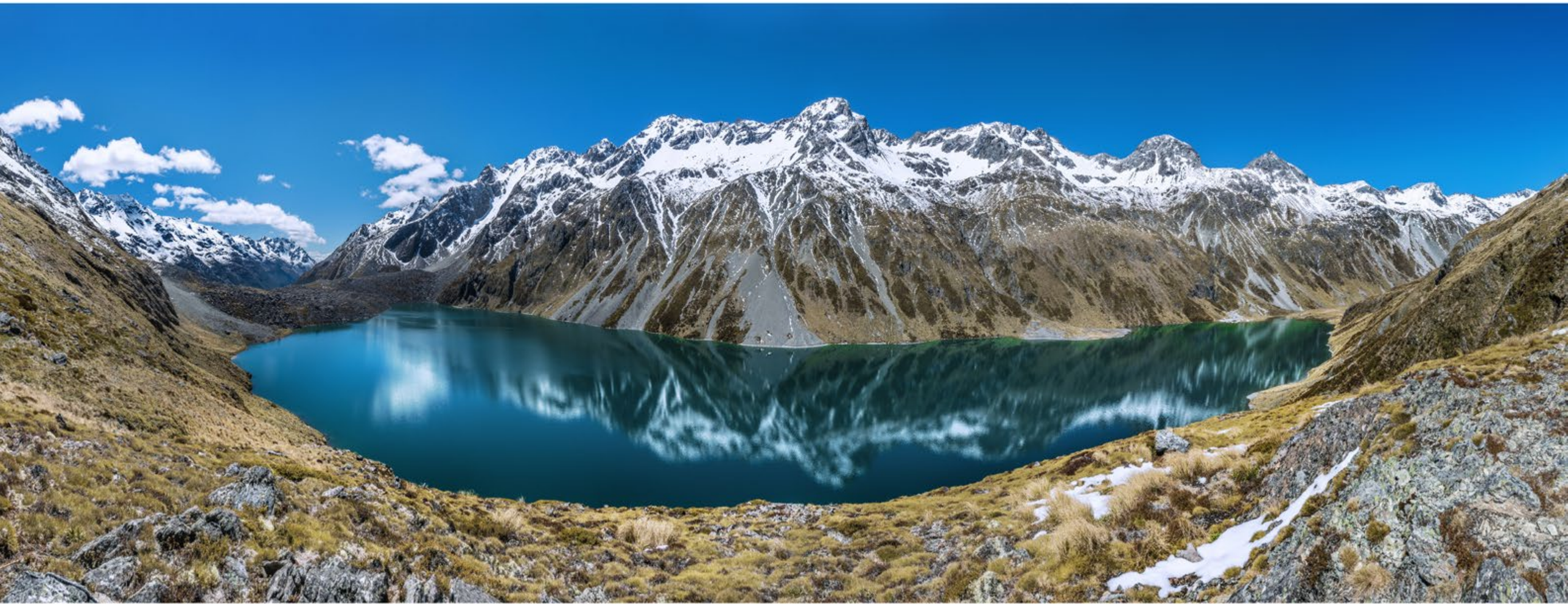

Photographic locations worth sweating for

Rotomairewhenua/Blue Lake
Nelson Lakes National Park

Tucked away in the heart of Nelson Lakes National Park, Rotomairewhenua, also known as Blue Lake, is one of Aotearoa's most remarkable natural places. Renowned for having the purest natural freshwater in the world, this remote alpine lake is surrounded by rugged ridgelines, native forest and stark mountain terrain. This time, Peter Laurenson takes us to this extraordinary location, exploring the lake's unique water clarity, the journey required to reach it, and the exceptional photographic opportunities found in this quiet and fragile landscape.

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BLUE LAKE VIEWED FROM THE TRAIL UP TO LAKE CONSTANCE
STITCH OF 2 LANDSCAPE IMAGES, F10, 1/125 SEC, ISO 100, 81MM

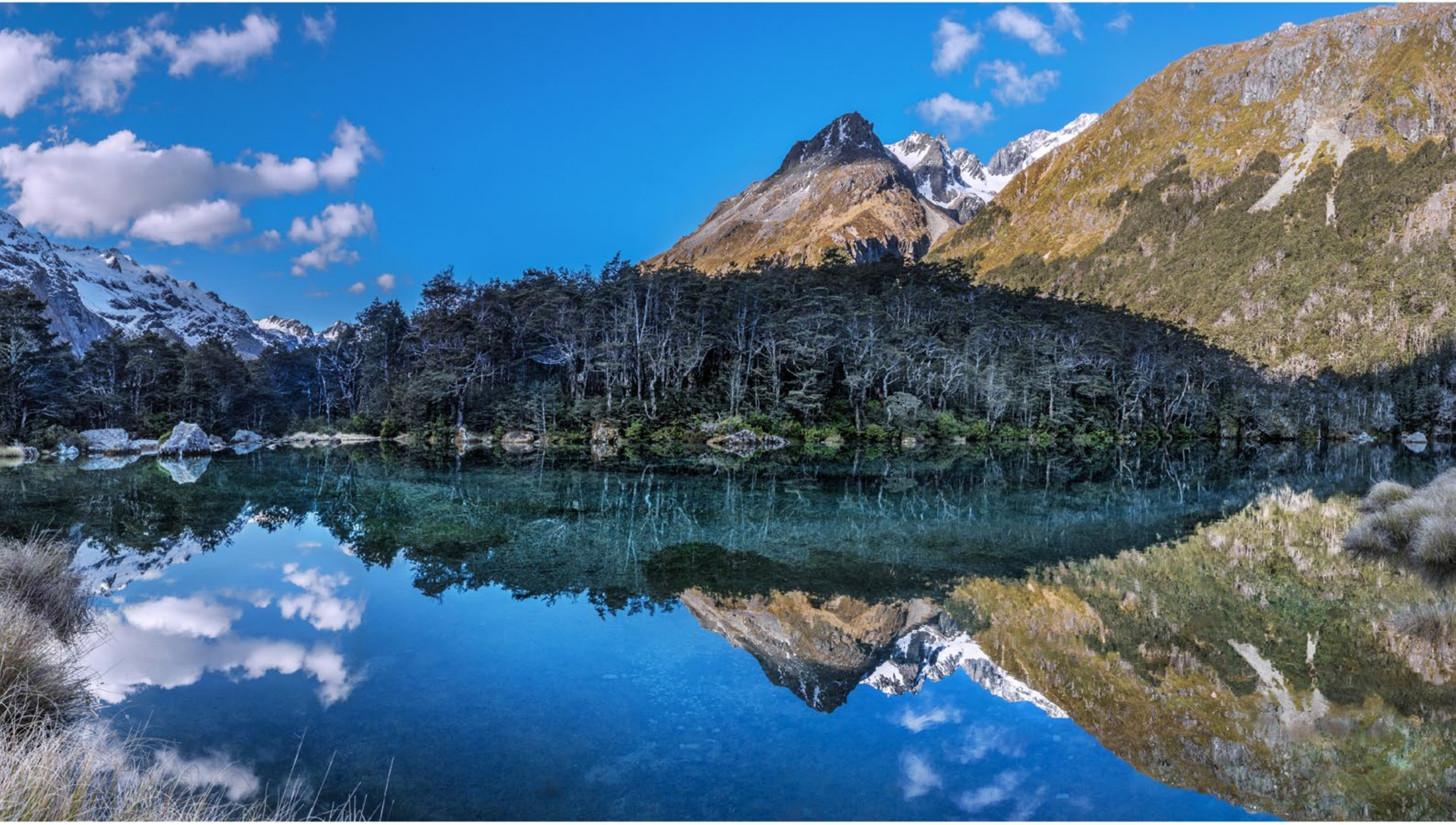
It's fitting that Nelson Lakes National Park is home to the purest natural water in the world. That title is held by Rotomairewhenua/Blue Lake, nestled west of Franklin Ridge and north of Rotopōhueroa/Lake Constance, about 18 km south of Lake Rotoroa.

Rotomairewhenua translates as 'Lake of peaceful lands'. Once used by Māori for the cleansing of bones, today the lake's water is recognised as the purest in the world. Bathing or washing in the lake is now prohibited to safeguard its purity, particularly important since harmful algae, or lake snot, has been detected nearby and the number of trampers has dramatically increased since Te Araroa opened.

What does 'purest in the world' actually mean? Laboratory measurements show that theoretically distilled water has an underwater visibility of approximately 80 metres. Actual scientific underwater measurements in Rotomairewhenua/Blue Lake range between 70 and 80 metres of visibility. By comparison, a typical swimming pool has underwater visibility of less than 10 metres. Two factors explain Rotomairewhenua/Blue Lake's water purity. First, the lake's water originates from nearby Rotopōhueroa/Lake Constance, which sits about 1340 metres above and to the south, fed by the Spencer Mountains to the west and Franklin Ridge to the east. Gravity draws this already very clean mountain water down through a massive wall of landslide debris that acts as a sieve, filtering out nearly all suspended particles and organic matter. Second, Rotomairewhenua/Blue Lake's water has a rapid turnover rate. Its entire volume is replaced about every three days, helping to prevent nutrient build-up and pollution.

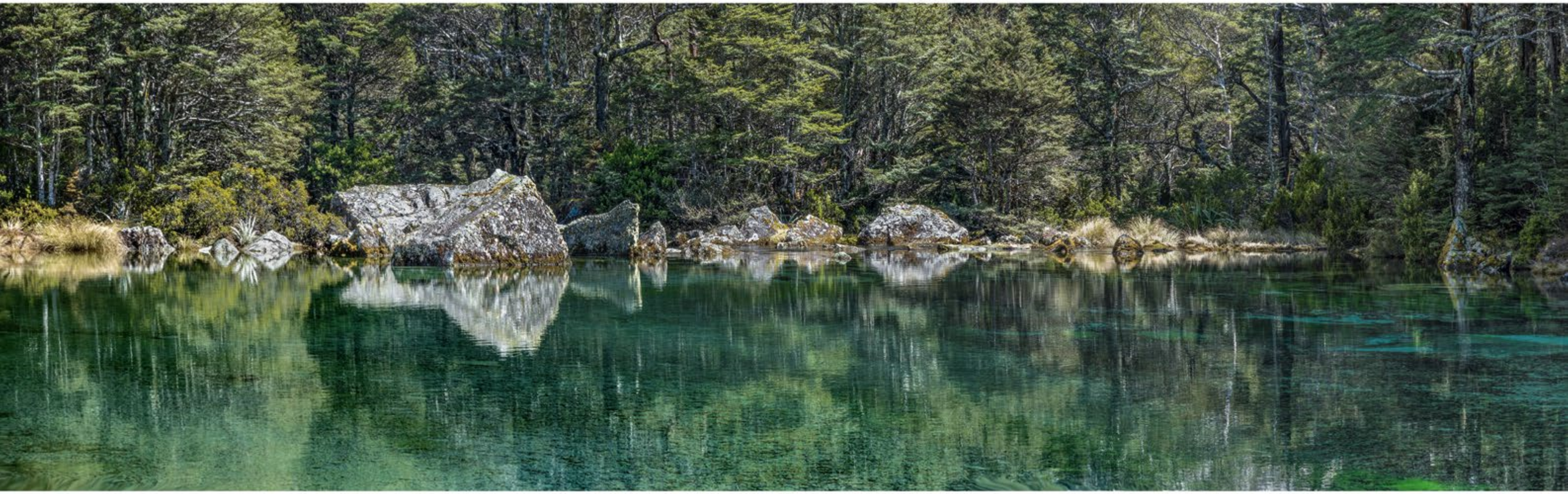
BLUE LAKE FROM THE NORTHWEST
STITCH OF 5 PORTRAIT IMAGES, F10, 1/320 SEC, ISO 100, 24MM

EASTERN SHORE OF BLUE LAKE
F8, 1/100 SEC, ISO 100, 145MM



EVENING VIEW OF NORTHERN SHORE OF BLUE LAKE
STITCH OF 5 PORTRAIT IMAGES, F8, 1/160 SEC, ISO 100, 24MM

What does this water purity mean for photographers? If you visit the lake in calm conditions, its surface becomes a mirror reflecting beautiful rock formations and native forest along its northern and eastern shoreline. Add to that reflections of the mountains towering overhead. And there's more. Because the water is so pure, it's easy to see through it to the lake's textured floor. All this offers dramatic, varied and distinctive subjects for landscape photography.



EASTERN SHORE OF BLUE LAKE
STITCH OF 4 LANDSCAPE IMAGES, F8, 1/100 SEC, ISO 100, 145MM

There are several options to reach Rotomairewhenua/Blue Lake, but the most direct is via water taxi along Lake Rotoroa to Sabine Hut. From there it's about an 18 km walk up beside the Sabine River to Blue Lake Hut, requiring a 700-metre climb. This can be done in one long eight-or-so-hour day, or broken up by staying a night at West Sabine Hut. Because Te Araroa joins the track at West Sabine Hut after dropping down from nearby Travers Saddle, hut bookings for both West Sabine and Blue Lake huts are required, or bring a tent.

If you have the time and inclination, rather than retracing your inward steps, return to West Sabine Hut, then cross Poukirikiri/Traverse Saddle (1787 m) and exit down the Travers River to Lake Rotoiti; or carry on south past Rotopōhueroa/Lake Constance and follow Te Araroa over Waiau Pass (1870 m), exiting down the Waiau Uwha River and the Saint James Trail; or climb directly west above Blue Lake Hut to cross Moss Pass (1785 m) and exit down the D'Urville River to Lake Rotoroa. All these options require appropriate prior tramping experience, gear and weather conditions. And they all offer magnificent landscape photography.

This set of images was taken on a new camera replacing my Panasonic Lumix TZ200 which, after seven and a half years of use and abuse in the mountains, had sadly started to malfunction. To be fair, the TZ200 is not weather sealed, so credit where it's due for lasting as long as it did. Its great features were its very compact and lightweight size, full manual and Camera Raw settings, through-the-lens view and a huge zoom range (24–360 mm). After much Google searching, I decided to go for a Sony RX100 VII. Although also not weather sealed, this Sony has newer sensor tech and a significantly faster focusing system. Although its ZEISS Vario-Sonnar T* 24–200 mm has a smaller zoom range, it is faster (F2.8–4.5). And the RX100 is even smaller and lighter than the TZ200. I'm happy with the results from its maiden voyage.