

I love hiking in Australia. There's just something about the Australian bush. It's lack of uniformity, maybe? It's the maverick of the floral world. And we mustn't forget that Australia is a very old, geologically and culturally important place. When we hike, we pass through history.

One of Australia's most popular and acclaimed hiking tracks, The Overland Track, has long been on my to-hike list. A different world, and probably as far from what I am used to hiking in South Australia. But you know what, it seems the closer I get to tick it off my list, the further along it gets moved. Every time I get the urge to head for Tasmania I end up booking a plane ticket to New Zealand.

Disloyalty maybe, but despite having already spent about 15 weeks in total tramping in New Zealand, there is so much more that I want to do and I find myself struggling to head to Tasmania instead.



Both Tasmania and New Zealand do lush forests and colourful mushrooms really well!

Tassie vs New Zealand

Everyone I speak to who has travelled to Tasmania from the mainland to hike The Overland, Three Capes, or South Coast Tracks says one thing: *"It's expensive but fantastic/well worth it/the best thing I ever did!"*. No doubt Tasmania differs from New Zealand in its types of spectacularness nor do we need to perform a comparison to work out which one is 'better'. From everything I have seen and know about walking in Tasmania suggests that it is awe inspiring. However, I contend that if you want a bang for your buck and a real backcountry experience, hop on a plane and head for The Land Of The Long White Cloud.

Cost to get there

Believe it or not, it's potentially cheaper to fly to Christchurch from Adelaide, than to Hobart or Launceston. Let me show you.

For the sake of this comparison, the pretend trip will take place from 22 January to 1 February 2017. This is 11 days in total and should be enough time to enjoy The Overland or a multi-day backcountry tramp or two around Arthur's Pass. It also takes into account the timetable of the Tassielink, a popular public transport option out to Cradle Mountain, the start of The Overland Track.

The cost of a return flight to do The Overland, flying Adelaide to Launceston and Hobart to Adelaide is around \$400 at the time of writing*. The cost of a return flight to tramp the South Island of New Zealand, flying Adelaide to Christchurch return is \$450.

Both flights arrive late in the day with shuttles out to the tracks the next day, Monday**, getting you to Cradle Mountain by 11:20 am (\$155 return from Lake St Claire to Hobart) with Tassielink and to Arthurs Pass by 10 am (\$80 return) with Atomic Shuttles.



This is near Mueller Hut, near Mt Cook on the South Island of NZ. No need to pay national park fees to access this part of the world.

Fees for hiking the tracks

To hike The Overland Track there is a \$200 Overland Track Fee and a \$30 Park Pass. Along with flights, transport to and from the track, that's a total of \$785. (This doesn't include the Lake St Claire Ferry.)

There is no cost to access and enjoy New Zealand national parks. The only fee applicable to tramping non-Great Walk tracks is for Backcountry Hut Tickets or a Backcountry Hut Pass. For the sake of this comparison, and even if you were staying in 'Serviced' huts every night, you'd pay only \$15 per day for 6 days of tramping that's \$90. Along with flights, transport to and from Arthur's Pass, that's a total of \$620.

**I used Skyscanner to check the prices of flights, and it's based on a solo traveller and the cheapest economy seat plus checked baggage.*

***One thing I noticed in preparing an itinerary to do The Overland is the lack of public transport options to the start of the track (Cradle Mountain) and from the finish (Lake St Claire). There are a number of private shuttle operators that will get you to the track (McDermott's, Outdoor Tasmania).*

Time & Distance

Despite Arthur's Pass being in a totally different country, you could potentially be taking your first steps on a track in less time than on The Overland. This would be different if you flew into Tasmania early and hired a car. But that would be tricky, as it's a one-way track - it starts at Cradle Mountain and finishes at Lake St Claire.

The first hut/camping spot on The Overland is Waterfall Valley. If you start hiking as soon as you arrive in Cradle Mountain you'll get there by around 5-6pm. The first hut on the Harman Pass Route in the Arthur's Pass National Park, if this is the tramp you choose, is Carrington Hut which you'll reach by 4-5pm.

So, despite NZ being 3,200km from Adelaide, it's possibly quicker to start hiking, once the logistics of it all are considered than it would if you only headed 1,200km south-east. Don't want to do the Harman? There are dozens of other tracks to hike in the region.

Popularity of the Overland Track

The Overland Track, being a 'Great Walk' is rigid in its rules. During the peak season, you must book, you must walk in one direction, and only 60 people can depart Cradle Mountain each day. Because of this, the track can be busy, and the campsites at night crowded. No doubt it's for good reason that it gets so busy - the scenery and experience is worth it. But this isn't everyone's cup of tea. In my experience, the tracks around Arthur's Pass are much quieter.

The Avalanche Peak Track, directly behind the village, is a popular day hike with dozens if not hundreds of people hiking it on a nice day, but the more remote backcountry tracks really make you feel like you have the place to yourself.



The markers leading up to Avalanche Peak. Leave Adelaide on Sunday morning. You could be standing right here at 2 pm the next day.

Popularity of Avalanche Peak

In 2009, I tramped from the village to Avalanche Peak then down the other side into the Crow River Valley. The track up to the peak was alive with tourists. I saw maybe 30 people all day. But as I descended the peak toward Crow Hut, I didn't see another soul until I arrived at the surprise of two lovebirds thinking they had the hut to themselves. Sorry, Sarah and Bruno! They left early, and I didn't see another person until I got to the Klondyke Corner the next afternoon. From which I hitch-hiked back to the village. (A nice two-dayer to start a month of tramping around the country.)

I must add, with the increasing popularity of the Te Araroa Trail (which takes trampers from the top of the North Island all the way to the bottom of the South Island, some 3000km), many of the previously quiet non-Great Walk tracks have picked up a notch. So, you will sometimes find a 24-bunker filled to the rafters. A peril of there being no booking system. Managing these numbers is something the Department of Conservation is actively working on.

Comparing them both

Yeah, I realise this piece isn't exactly comparing apples with apples. The Overland has more in common with a NZ 'Great Walk' like the Milford Track than the not-so-popular Harman Pass or Edwards-Hawdon Route. However, the backcountry huts around Arthur's Pass are quite similar to those on The Overland. As is much of the other trail infrastructure.

Outside of Australia's 'Great Walks' like The Overland, Three Capes, the new Kangaroo Island Wilderness Trail, and even the Bibbulmun, hikers infrastructure is light on.

A multi-day hike will usually stitch together many shorter tracks, and often doesn't venture that far into the backcountry. Or, requires a tent, a pack full of water, and a sense of self-sufficiency.



Rees Saddle on the Rees Dart Track. The trailhead is about an hour out of the adventure capital of New Zealand, Queenstown.

I guess what I am getting at is that I believe New Zealand offers cheaper, more accessible multi-day, genuinely 'wilderness' hiking opportunities than most of Australia. And this is what has kept me going back time and time again.

I like huts, I like having access to water so I don't have to carry a heavy pack. I like to immerse myself in the backcountry with the promise of some basic facilities at the end of each day. And this is why the New Zealand wilderness is so popular I suppose. It's accessible. More people can do it. The barrier to entry is lower. Just trying to get to The Overland Track is an adventure in itself!

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Have you ever visited New Zealand? How did it compare to hiking on home soil?