Tongariro Northern Circuit

TRACK GUIDE

Duration: 3–4 days
Distance: 45 km (loop)

Welcome to the Tongariro Northern Circuit Track, one of ten unforgettable journeys.

From alpine herbfields to forests, and tranquil lakes to desert plateaux, journey through a landscape of stark contrasts with amazing views in this dual World Heritage site. Winding past Mount Tongariro and Mount Ngauruhoe, you will be dazzled by dramatic volcanic landscapes and New Zealand’s rich geological and ancestral past.

You are strongly recommended NOT to attempt this track between early May and late October (outside the Great Walks season). The winter environment in Tongariro National Park is very cold and wet, with ice, snow and the risk of avalanche, as well as short daylight hours. Alpine-specific trip planning is critical for your safety. For more information, see ‘Outside the Great Walks season’ at greatwalks.co.nz/tongariro.

Plants and wildlife

Plants in the area vary considerably, from alpine herbs to thick swathes of tussocks and flax; from the hardy, low-growing shrubs of the Rangipo Desert to dense beech forests.

In spring and summer, you’ll enjoy stunning alpine flowers.

North Island robin/toutouwai are sparrow-sized birds found only in New Zealand. Males have dark grey plumage while the female is dark grey-brown. They are inquisitive, friendly and trusting, often coming to within a couple of metres of people. If they do approach you, don’t feed them.

New Zealand falcon/kārearea can fly at speeds of more than 100km/h and catch prey up to 6 times their body weight. The falcon does not build a nest. Rather, it makes a scrape on the ground under a rocky outcrop or in a forest tree into which it lays its eggs.

Blue duck/whio live only in clean, fast-flowing streams in forested upper river catchments. Nesting along the riverbanks, they are at high risk of attack from stoats and rats. You might see them on Waihoohonu Stream or Ohinepango Stream near Waihoohonu Hut.

Rifleman/tītitipounamu are New Zealand’s smallest bird. They are constantly in motion, producing a characteristic high-pitched cheep and ‘wing-flicking’ movement while foraging up and down tree trunks. The rifleman belongs to one of the most ancient bird lineages in this country, the New Zealand wren family.

Plan and prepare

It is important to plan your trip thoroughly to ensure you stay safe and have a great time. Before you go, know the Outdoor Safety Code – 5 simple rules to help you #MakeItHomeNZ.

1. Plan your trip
2. Tell someone
3. Be aware of the weather
4. Know your limits
5. Take sufficient supplies

TELL SOMEONE YOUR PLANS

Tell someone you trust your plans and when they should hear from you next. Include the national/international emergency service numbers: 111—Police for points of contact in New Zealand, +64-4-381-2000 for international. Find more information at www.adventuresmart.nz.

For in-depth local knowledge, visit:
Tongariro National Park Visitor Centre
Whakapapa Village, State Highway 48, Mount Ruapehu
Phone: +64 7 892 3729
Email: tongarirovc@doc.govt.nz
greatwalks.co.nz

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1. Plan your trip

Outdoor Safety Code

greatwalks.co.nz
Email: tongarirovc@doc.govt.nz

Tongariro National Park Visitor Centre

R160827
Lake

45 km (loop) Ketetahi

ROADEND SH47a to

Lake Rotopaunga

Rotoaira

Mangatepopo Stream

Roadend Shelter

Great Walk campsite

Sulphur Lagoon

Te Maari (1725m)
Rotopaunga

Bus Lake
(Te Wai Whakata o te Rangihiroa)

Mount Tongariro (1967m)

Keletahi Hot Springs

Te Rangihiroa

Mountain Hut

Emerald Lakes
(Ngā Rotopounamu)

Emerald Lakes, Photo: Daniel Deans

See on the track

1. Journey around Pupekaikore, one of the older steam vents on Tongariro, and take in its distinctive cliffs and domed summit.

2. Visit Soda Springs (Te Puna Parawhenua), a 15-m waterfall that emerges beneath an old lava flow.

3. Gaze down into Red Crater (1,868 m). Its colour comes from high temperature oxidation of iron in the rock. This is the highest point on the track.

4. Marvel at the other-wordly lava forms in the Oturee valley.

5. Keep an eye out for blue duck/whio in Waiohohonu and Ohinepango Streams.

6. Stop in at historic Waiohohonu Hut, built in 1904. This was the first hut to be built in Tongariro National Park.

Side trips – details overleaf

A. Blue Lake (Te Wai Whakata o te Rangihiroa)

B. Tama lakes (Ngā Puna a Tama)

C. Taranaki Falls Track (before Whakapapa Village)

This map is intended as a general guide only. For up-to-date track, route, hut and safety information visit www.doc.govt.nz and/or your local DOC Visitor Centre before you travel.

Information about parking restrictions is available from the Tongariro National Park Visitor Centre or the website at www.doc.govt.nz/tongarironorthern circuit-gettingthere.
**TRACK GUIDE**

**Tongariro Northern Circuit can be hiked in either direction. The track is well marked and signposted, but some sections may be steep, rough or muddy. See the Safety section for more information about how to stay safe on this hike.**

You are strongly recommended NOT to walk the track outside the Great Walks season (May to October), as harsh winter weather makes the track dangerous.

Walking times are approximate and will vary according to your fitness, direction of travel and the weather. Always allow extra time.

**Whakapapa Village to Mangatepopo Hut**
4hr, 9.4 km

Begin behind the Chateau Tongariro at Ngauruhoe Place and go along the lower Taranaki Falls Track. After about 20 min the Mangatepopo Track branches off from the Taranaki Falls Track.

Heavily eroded in places, the track crosses many stream beds. It can be boggy and challenging in wet weather and stream levels may become impassable and unsafe.

Ahead and to the right is Pupekaikire, thought to be one of the older vents of the Tongariro complex. To the left is Pupeonoake, a low scoria cone. Both Pupekaikire and Pupeonoake witnessed the last ice age when glaciers from Tongariro carved down through Mangatepopo Valley. The giant cone of Ngauruhoe and the flatter form of Tongariro are visible ahead. Ngauruhoe is a younger cone on the side of Tongariro.

For the last hour the track skirts around Pupekaikire until it reaches the Mangatepopo Track. The Mangatepopo Hut is 5 min off the main track.

**Mangatepopo Hut to Emerald Lakes**
3hr 30min, 8km

The track joins the popular Tongariro Alpine Crossing Track. This track follows Mangatepopo Stream up the valley, climbing into an alpine environment over a succession of old lava flows from Ngauruhoe. The youngest, very black, lava flows erupted from Ngauruhoe in 1949 and 1954.

The steep climb known as Te Arawhata, required for most of winter.

The main track continues past the rim of Red Crater, offering splendid views of Otutere valley and the Kaimanawa range to the east. From the high point of Red Crater, the trail descends down a steep scree slope to Emerald Lakes (Ngā Rotopounamu). The lakes remain frozen for most of winter.

The Tongariro Alpine Crossing continues from Ngā Rotopounamu to Ketetahi. Do not follow this route – instead, follow the Tongariro Northern Circuit Track into the Oturere Valley.

**Emerald Lakes (Ngā Rotopounamu) to Oturere Hut**
1hr 30 min, 4km

From Ngā Rotopounamu the track descends steeply into the Oturere valley with views of the valley, the Kaimanawa range and the Rangipo Desert. The track weaves through an endless variety of unusual jagged lava forms from early eruptions from Red Crater, which filled the Oturere valley.

This is a magical place to visit, especially on a clear day. Oturere Hut is nestled on the eastern edge of these flows. There is a pretty waterfall over the ridge from the hut.

**Oturere Hut to Waihohonu Hut**
3hr, 8.1 km

After leaving Oturere Hut the track undulates through a number of stream valleys and open gravel fields. Plant life here has been constantly repressed by volcanic eruptions, altitude and climate.

The track gradually sidles around the foothills of Mount Ngauruhoe, descending into a valley and crossing a branch of the Waihohonu Stream. Continue through a beech-clad valley before climbing towards the ridge top. Waihohonu Hut is in the next valley.

**Waihohonu Hut to Whakapapa Village**
5hr 45min, 15.4 km

The track follows the Waihohonu Stream and gradually climbs to Tama saddle (1,300 m).

This area can be very windy as wind is channelled between the mountains.

Whakapapa Village is about 2 hours from the Tama lakes (Ngā Puna a Tama) junction. After the first hour the track meets the Taranaki Falls loop walk. Follow the lower section of the track down the steps and along the Wairere Stream back to the village. Alternatively take the upper section of track through open tussock and shrubland back to the village.

The alpine lakes and summits of the mountains are sacred to the local Māori tribe Ngāti Hikairo ki Tongariro. Respectfully, they ask that summits are not climbed and waterways are not touched.

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**Elevation profile**

![Elevation profile graph](graph.png)

**Altitude (metres)**

- Whakapapa Village: 1,077 meters
- Mangatepopo Hut and Campsite: 1,200 meters
- Oturere Hut and Campsite: 1,500 meters
- Waihohonu Hut and Campsite: 1,700 meters
- Emerald Lakes (Ngā Rotopounamu): 1,866 meters

**Distance (km)**

- Day 1: 4hr/9.4km
- Day 2: 5hr/12km
- Day 3: 3hr/8.1km
- Day 4: 5hr 45min/15.4km

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**Safety on the Tongariro Northern Circuit**

- **Volcanic eruptions in Active Volcanic Hazard Zone**
  - There are several active volcanic vents along the Tongariro Northern Circuit Track. Volcanic risk exists at all times, especially during eruptions from Red Crater. Walkers should not attempt to cross any stream in flood.

- **Hypothermia**
  - A drop in core body temperature can become a serious problem.

- **Strong winds**
  - In alpine areas or exposed areas, you can be caught in strong winds. Winds over 65 km/h may knock you off your feet.

- **Ear and nose problems**
  - If you have had ear or nose problems, seek medical advice before you hike.

- **Prevention**
  - Wearing a hat, blocking your ears and using a headband can help prevent ear and nose problems.

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**Photo: Bruce Forster**

**Photo: Robert Dickinson**

**Photo: Jimmy Johnson**

**Photo: Stacey Faire**
History

Ngatoroirangi, the founding ancestor of Ngāti Tuwharetoa, the local iwi (Māori tribe), ascended the great mountains of the Central Plateau 30 generations ago. It was then that he named Tongariro and the many features of the surrounding landscape, declaring this area as home for his descendants. It is from these beginnings that Ngāti Tuwharetoa maintains its intrinsic responsibility to protect the mountainous area to which they belong.

The generosity and foresight of Ngāti Tuwharetoa saw the heart of the mountainous area made sacrosanct in 1887, with the intent that the Crown would stand alongside Ngāti Tuwharetoa to ensure the continued protection of Tongariro. This led to the establishment of the Tongariro National Park in 1894, a first for New Zealand, and fourth in the world.

In 1993, Tongariro became the first area to be inscribed on the World Heritage List under the revised criteria describing cultural landscapes. The mountains at the heart of the park have cultural and spiritual significance to Ngāti Tuwharetoa and symbolise the spiritual links between this community and its environment. The park has active and extinct volcanoes, a diverse range of ecosystems and some remarkable landscapes.

The continued occupation by Ngāti Tuwharetoa in this environment ensures the cultural, spiritual and environmental values are protected and shared with all those who encounter this dynamic landscape.

Side trip – Tama lakes (Ngā Puna a Tama) (1,314 m)

20 min return to Lower Tama from the junction; 1 hr 30 min return to Upper Tama from the junction.

Two in-filled explosion craters are named after Tamates, the high chief of the Tākitimu Canoe, who explored the area six centuries ago. Lower Tama’s volcanic debris is slowly washing in and filling the crater.

Beware of strong crosswinds on the ridgelines up to the Upper Tama lake lookout.

Side trip – Taranaki Falls Track

At the Taranaki Falls junction, turn right and go down the steps to the base of the waterfall. Then retrace your steps and continue along the Upper Taranaki Falls Track to Whakapapa Village.

Safety on the Tongariro Northern Circuit

STAY ON THE MARKED TRACKS

➢ The track is well marked but if you become lost you should stop, find shelter and stay calm. Put on extra clothing to keep warm and assist rescuers should you hear them searching for you.

➢ Pay attention to signs in the Active Volcanic Hazard Zone.

➢ Streams on the track may rise rapidly and become hazards. Walkers should not attempt to cross any stream in flood.

➢ Mount Ngauruhoe is sacred to Ngāti Tuwharetoa. Climbing Mount Ngauruhoe is discouraged because of its unique volcanic hazards and alpine environment. Talk to Tongariro Visitor Centre staff for more information.

BE PREPARED FOR ALL CONDITIONS

Volcanic eruptions in Active Volcanic Hazard Zone

There are several active volcanic vents along the Tongariro Northern Circuit. Mount Ngauruhoe, Red Crater and Te Maari. Volcanic hazard zones surround these vents. If you are in one of these zones when an eruption happens, you may be in danger. Volcanic risk exists at all times, including when the track is open. If you are uncomfortable with this risk, we recommend selecting an alternative track.

Strong winds

In alpine areas or exposed areas, you can be caught in strong and/or gusty winds. Winds over 65 km/h may knock you off your feet. Dress warmly as wind-chill danger is worse at these times.

Hypothermia (too cold)

Hypothermia (a drop in core body temperature) can become a serious problem.

➢ Prevention: wear warm and weatherproof clothing. Eat and drink regularly during your walk.

➢ Watch for symptoms: people may shiver, be clumsy, confused, have slurred speech, and deny they have a problem.

➢ Treatment: immediately make or find shelter; get the person into warm, dry clothing, put them into a sleeping bag, give them warm, sweet drinks, monitor them and seek immediate medical help.

Heat exhaustion

➢ Prevention: carry and drink water regularly throughout your walk.

➢ Watch for symptoms: headaches, thirst, weakness, dizziness, nausea or vomiting.

➢ Treatment: move to a cool shaded area to rest, remove excess clothing and give water to drink.