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 JACKIE'S JOURNEY
THIS GOLDEN LAND

We liked the feel of the place right away, from the relaxed atmosphere to the friendly and welcoming community



Enjoy breathtaking views across Blenheim and the Wairau Valley



The Rotary Lookout is a place to admire the view (and catch your breath)

Jackie Norman sold her home in 2016, bought a motorhome and embarked on full-time life on the road with her husband, Gareth. This issue, she visits the Wither Hills in Blenheim

We ended 2019 and began 2020 in the food and wine-growing region of Marlborough. Blenheim had been a place we passed through on our way to and from the Cook Strait ferry, but now we had the opportunity to spend several weeks here. We liked the feel of the place right away, from the relaxed atmosphere

to its friendly and welcoming community. Even the local children greeted us with a pleasant 'good morning' as they whizzed past on their bikes. Town and country are successfully and beautifully entwined, and even in the most urban of places, you can enjoy a stroll along the river and admire the thriving flora and fauna. There was nothing we liked more than spending a leisurely Sunday morning perusing the Marlborough Farmers' Market. It's a must-visit, whether you're after top-quality, locally grown produce, or just wanting to sit in the sun, listen to the music and watch the world go by.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Yet another wonderful thing about Blenheim is its variety of walks; long hikes, short jaunts and some of the most picturesque dog-friendly places in the country. Much thought and planning have gone in to making the area fun and welcoming. The vibrantly colourful Pollard Park is a favourite with locals and visitors alike. You can also follow the Taylor River on foot from the centre of town out to Taylor Dam. This walk is pure joy for the senses, with crystal-clear water, wildflowers of all shades as far as the eye can see and forests of fragrant wild fennel.

Taylor Dam was the first place we visited

IMAGES BY GARETH SCURR & JACKIE NORMAN



The 'twin tanks': one of the landmarks walkers pass getting to the top of the Wither Hills

on our arrival in Blenheim when we were on the hunt for somewhere peaceful and scenic to park up and have lunch, and it was all of those things. Aquatic birdlife abounds here, and you can walk right around the dam, passing through a picturesque patch of forest before wandering along a riverside trail.

As a bonus, there is also a free-camping area close to the entrance, with 10 spaces for self-contained vehicles. While we didn't stay there, it is popular, so it pays to arrive early. What will always remain in my memory, however, is that it was there I first set eyes on the golden spectacle known as the Wither Hills.



At the top of the hills, we were higher than the planes flying over the vineyards

ALWAYS ANOTHER HILL

Being a wine-lover, Wither Hills was a name already known to me. And as soon as I saw those enormous and inviting ranges, I became obsessed with climbing to the top. Luckily, I didn't have to wait long, and one sunny afternoon we quite literally headed for the hills.

The Wither Hills Farm Park is a real jewel in Blenheim's crown. Named after early landowner, Charles Bigg Wither, it includes more than 1100 hectares of rolling-to-steep hill country for all ages to enjoy.

With more than 60km of walking tracks and mountain bike trails from which to choose, it's no surprise the hills are enjoyed by thousands of locals and visitors a year.

We started on one of the most popular routes, the Rotary Lookout. This 25-minute (one-way) uphill walk takes you to one of several excellent vantage

points and looks out across the whole of Blenheim and the Wairau Valley. Because it was a weekend, there many people walking the track, but they all turned around from the lookout and walked back the way they had come.

But I couldn't help thinking that there was so much more to see. The track led far up into the hills, and the tall, golden stalks I had come here to see had only just started to sway in the wind. And so we continued; and then on some more, stopping continually to admire the views as they stretched out even further beyond each hill.

Each time we reached a landmark or new valley, we kept on walking to the next, and the next. As we hiked towards Taylor Dam Lookout, we were higher than the planes that soared over the vineyards below — a lush, green oasis amid the parched, arid hills.

THE LONG WAY HOME

At last, we reached the top and were rewarded with panoramic views of Cloudy Bay. Except for a couple of mountain-bikers, we hadn't seen a soul since the lookout, and as the sun belted down, we were unbelievably grateful for the sudden appearance of a drinking fountain.

The higher we had climbed, the fiercer the winds got, until we couldn't hear one another, and we'd lost hope of our sunhats remaining on our heads. But we had conquered the Wither Hills, and it had been worth every step.

It was when we began our descent via the Forest Hills Track that we realised how far away we were from where we had parked the van.

We'd only planned to walk around eight or nine kilometres; when we arrived exhausted, back at the car park, at last, we had clocked up 17km. But what an



We were exhausted by the time we reached the van



I have never been so glad to see a drinking fountain

epic and memorable hike it was.

You can keep going all day, but of course, you don't have to. The Gentle Annie and Quail Stream walks are easier and shorter, both with great views.

But, now, every time we see the instantly recognisable peaks of Wither Hills from the road when driving through Blenheim, we smile at each other and say, "Wow. We've been up there." ■

Wither Hills is a massive public area and a working farm. It pays to know the following before you go:

- Access to the Farm Park is via Rifle Range Place, Forest Park Drive, Weld Street and Redwood Street.
- No dogs are permitted. Respect the stock, do not disturb them and leave all gates as found.
- Despite the scale of the hills, the tracks are well-maintained and most only require an average level of fitness. Sturdy footwear is recommended, particularly after rain.
- Take note of fire-advisory signs during summer when dry and windy conditions can be a potential hazard.
- The top of the hills are exposed and often have high winds. We advise choosing a calm day if possible.