

Kaimanawa Forest: Tree Trunk Gorge Track

An easy walk along a broad track, through majestic red beech forest

Location: Kaimanawa Forest, Kaimanawa Road, off SH1, ca. 12 km south of Turangi

Access: Car parking at Pillars of Hercules car park or at Urchin camp ground

Length: 6 km each way

Configuration: There-and-back

Grade: Undulating; well-graded and broad track with occasional stream crossings

Status: off leash; permit required - contact DoC office, Turangi

Cafes and restaurants: none nearby

More information: <http://www.doc.govt.nz/Documents/parks-and-recreation/tracks-and-walks/tongariro-taupo/kaimanawa-forest-park-brochure.pdf>

Kaimanawa Forest offers opportunities for a range of walks, some of them of a full-day's duration or longer - though to take your dog, you need to obtain a permit from the DoC office in Turangi. The longest and most challenging walks are mainly in the north of the forest, and are accessed by a lengthy stretch of gravel road. Shorter and easier walks, however, are available in the west of the forest, within a few kilometres of SH1. One option in this area is down Kiko Road, but perhaps the best options are in the area of Urchin camp ground, either from Tree Trunk Gorge Road or from Kaimanawa Road. At one extreme, there's the 1 km Kaimanawa Forest loop walk which starts beside the camp ground and runs through beautiful red beech forest. At the other, there's a 20 km or more Umukarikari loop (or U2U) track, which runs along a ridgeline above the treelike, and offers outstanding views across to Toupo Lake. Or if that's not enough, there's a there-and-back walk of 23 km each way up to Waipakahi Hut.

For something in between, we concoct a walk starting at the Pillars of Hercules car park on Kaimanawa Road. After a quick look at the pillars, from the suspension bridge, we head off along the track to Urchin camp ground. This is an undulating track that winds its way for a kilometre and a half between majestic red beech trees and totara, with just a few steeper sections to test the calves. We then skirt the campground and take the Tree Trunk Gorge track towards Tree Trunk Gorge road.

This old road used to be part of the Tongariro Power scheme, but has now subsided into a mossy trail which gives easy walking. After 15 minutes or so, the dogs run ahead, and we find them waiting for us in the stream, noses dripping with water and a look of satisfaction on their faces from a long and welcome lap. After that, the track heads uphill, but always at a steady gradient, so that we gain height without effort.

For a while, there are no views, but nearer at hand there's plenty to see. Leather fungi make book-shelves on the tree trunks; moss hangs like gargoyles from the branches. Epiphytes promise a magical other-world if we could just climb and reach them. We take a rest on a

huge log, and prise away the bark and red-rotten wood in search of the small insects that have so mightily felled the tree, and are now half-way to consuming it. Later, as we near the end of the track where it joins Tree Trunk Gorge road, the bush opens out, and we get views west to Tongariro. That's where we're heading next. Time to return, then move on.

