



Photographic locations worth sweating for

Upper Cobb Valley, Kahurangi National Park

In this article, Peter Laursen revisits New Zealand's Cobb Valley, retracing a trail he first explored with his son over two decades ago. He shares his journey through tranquil beech forests, past rustic huts, and up karst slopes to the summit of Xenicus Peak. We join him as he uncovers the valley's breathtaking landscapes and abundant opportunities for distinctive landscape photography.

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Branching west off SH60 before Upper Takaka, tar-sealed Cobb Valley Road traces the Takaka River, then becomes the gravel Cobb Dam Road. At 1,050 metres, it crests a ridge to reveal Cobb Reservoir, stretching west for about six kilometres. Beyond the lakehead is Trilobite Hut and the trail-end car park, giving access to the upper Cobb Valley.

I first visited here with my eldest son, Ben, when he was seven. The 13-kilometre trail leading up to Fenella Hut at 1,100 metres is a pleasant stroll through gradually ascending grass and tussock lands, interspersed with sections of tranquil beech forest. Either side of the valley, the Lockett Range to the east and the Peel Range to the west tower overhead.

Between Trilobite Hut and Fenella Hut, there are another three rustic huts along the route—tiny wooden Chaffey Hut, then historic and rather quirky Tent Camp, and then Cobb Hut. All three offer interesting photographic possibilities, both inside and out.

While I did recall how suited the trail was to young children, the scenery unfolding as I climbed seemed more impressive on my second visit 22 years on. Dominating the head of the valley are the bulbous karst slopes of 1,525-metre Xenicus Peak, and it is the presence of karst that provides the memorable and photogenic landscape.



THE TARN ABOVE FENELLA HUT
STITCH OF 5 PORTRAIT IMAGES, F8, 1/160 SEC, ISO 125, 24MM



A PUDDLE ON THE TRAIL
F5.6, 1/15 SEC, ISO 125, 59MM



XENICUS PEAK, VIEWED FROM NEAR FENELLA HUT AT DAWN
STITCH OF 4 LANDSCAPE IMAGES, F5.6, 1/25 SEC, ISO 125, 24MM

Just along a short spur from Fenella Hut is a great vantage point to Xenicus Peak for sunrise and sunset. By climbing a little further on another trail, you can access the karst slopes, bejewelled with small tarns, which in calm weather reflect the surrounding landscape on their mirror surfaces. There is scope for distinctive landscape photography almost everywhere.

The trail above a beautiful tarn near Fenella Hut soon becomes just a cairned route, but it remains easy enough to follow up to Pt 1186, from which panoramic views to Cobb Lake to the west, Waingaro Peak and the Lockett Range to the east, and Cobb Valley to the south unfold.

Beyond Pt 1186, you can continue on down to the Cobb Lake Track, which then loops back to Fenella Hut, making for a scenic circuit. On my second visit, I also turned west from Pt 1186 and climbed Xenicus Peak. This is not so straightforward though, requiring route-finding and a head for steep terrain. The view from the summit is outstanding, at least on a good day. Unfortunately for me, the fine, clear dawn weather changed unexpectedly to rain and strong wind gusts. The panorama taken of my companion, Bruce, as he battles towards the highest point tells the story—rain spots can work sometimes.



XENICUS PEAK IN RAIN AND HIGH WINDS
STITCH OF 6 PORTRAIT IMAGES, F8, 1/200 SEC, ISO 125, 24MM



TENT CAMP IN COBB VALLEY
F8, 1/320 SEC, ISO 125, 24MM

INSIDE RUSTIC TENT CAMP
STITCH OF 3 PORTRAIT IMAGES, F4, 1/20 SEC, ISO 400, 24MM