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Into the Woods, the Water ... and Up the Mountain

By Nick Marnell



Jett Bates, in blue, with fellow adventurers at the foot of McCoy Glacier, New Zealand. Photo provided

What do you do when you graduate from high school and feel unsure about what you want to do with your life? If you're Jett Bates, you hop on a plane, join nine like-minded adventurers and spend three months traversing the rugged outdoors of New Zealand.

"I wasn't ready to go to college. I wanted to do something, but I wasn't sure what," said Bates, 19, who graduated from Miramonte High School in 2013. "I'm kind of an outdoors guy, so I wanted to do something outdoors." He and his family did their research and Bates signed up for a wilderness expedition through the Wyoming-based National Outdoor Leadership School.

Last September he flew to Auckland and then to Nelson on the South Island, where he met nine fellow adventurers, ages 18-22, and two instructors. They packed their gear and prepared for their 80-day expedition.

The first third of the excursion was sea kayaking. The group headed to the north end of the island and spent a couple of nights learning technique before they set off. Each day they rose before dawn, cooked, packed up camp and using their maps and navigation instruments, made their way along the coastline.

During this stretch came Bates' first harrowing experience.

"We were stuck on a beach four nights," he said. "The weather finally cleared up and we had to get out of there. I was in a bay, in my kayak, heading into the wind and the waves, and my boat flipped. I got sucked into the middle of the bay; I was spinning in circles." An instructor who was nearby paddled out and set Bates and his kayak back on course.

Then came the mountaineering portion of the expedition. The guys set camp in the Southern Alps in a river valley at the foot of McCoy Glacier. It was where the group experienced the worst weather, and where Bates had his closest call.

"I tried to cross the river by myself," Bates recalled. "I was standing in the freezing cold water, my pants got loose, I tripped and I fell in with my backpack on. The water was rough and deep. I started floating; I was so cold that I couldn't move. Thank heavens someone was nearby. He undid my pack and dragged me out. I was definitely scared."

But Bates said he loved the physical challenge of the mountaineering. "The days were hard, but the views from the top of the mountains were the reward," he said.

And the gang learned a cruel lesson in the mountains. "You're supposed to purify the water," said Bates. "But when you get up in the mountains, you think, 'It looks so clean, I'm not going to purify this.' One guy who didn't ended up sick for three days."

The final leg of the expedition was backpacking 75 miles through Nelson Lakes National Park. "It looked like nobody had been up there in 20 years," said Bates. Yet, that was where the group had quite the serendipitous experience.

The young men split into two groups as they tramped through the park. A splinter group, nursing minor injuries, took a flat straightaway to the camp, while Bates' crew took the scenic route over rougher terrain.

The injured party passed a group of huts along the roadway. Hanging out by those huts were three Kiwi hunters - and three dead deer. The travelers had been eating pasta and cheese almost

every night, said Bates, so one of the hikers asked a hunter if they could have some meat for the night. The hunters gave the crew a whole deer. The hikers tied the deer onto a stick and walked five miles to camp, lugging dinner on their shoulders.

"We ate the whole thing that night," said Bates.

Attesting to the challenge of the adventure, the group finished short one member who tore a knee ligament and had to be flown out of the wilderness by helicopter.

"I couldn't believe I did it," said Bates, as he talked about his post-adventure feelings. "I had the most fun backpacking because we had the most freedom. The mountaineering was the most challenging, but it was scary at times."

As tough as the experience was, he said he'd do it again in a minute. "Not another organized program, though," he said. "Maybe some rock climbing, or hiking in, say, Arizona or Utah."

And what about the effect on his life?

"It turned me into even more of an outdoorsman," said Bates. "I think it would be really cool to be a guide, or to work as a firefighter."



Tents set up on the bluffs offer escape from the elements.



The group gathers to enjoy the view. Photos provided

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