

# mystic river

Passengers with Wanaka River Journeys are in for an enchanting mix of scenery and storytelling.

BY TIM BREWSTER

**MYTHOLOGY AND GEOLOGY** are constant companions on a Wanaka River Journeys' jet-boat trip up the braided Matukituki River into Mt Aspiring National Park. The twin passions of operator Brent Pihama become evident immediately after introductions and a safety briefing on the boat.

Starting with a *karakia* (Maori prayer), the former commercial diver has developed a compelling narrative encompassing the traditional Maori myths of creation, natural history and anecdotes of human endeavour in the raw, glacier-carved landscape.

Along with the usual spins and thrills of a jet-boat ride, the trip includes a 50-minute guided nature walk through the mossy groves of native beech forest, and the option of a helicopter flight with a snow landing below the jagged peak of Mt Aspiring/Tititea, which dominates the alpine landscape above the valley floor.

How the kiwi lost its wings – a favourite with a young Singaporean girl on our trip – the legends of Tane Mahuta, the creation of Mt Aspiring/Tititea and the poems of J.K. Baxter are all tied in with observations of the plant and bird life.

Pihama also recounts how the Matukituki River and its ever-changing path of water was forged by glaciers which reached their peak 14,000 years ago, carving out the valley with an ice pack hundreds of metres deep and extending further than 100 kilometres from their source.

"The best part of the job is the people,

passing that information on, seeing the huge pleasure they get so they can go away knowing more about the area," says Pihama. His knowledge and enthusiasm reflect the strong connections he and Sue, his wife and business partner, have formed with the landscape after two decades of jet boating the rivers and exploring the wilderness.

When they first moved to Wanaka to start a family, Pihama spent much of his time travelling around the world doing commercial diving work, after a career in the military where he trained as a diver with the Special Air Service Regiment.

As the family grew older the travel, physical demands and potentially dangerous work of diving became less attractive, prompting the Pihamas to set up Wanaka River Journeys three years ago. Now the husband-and-wife team are in daily contact, with Sue handling the bookings, driving the shuttle bus and coordinating trips.

With a third boat on the way and new trips in the pipeline, the couple's own journey into the world of adventure tourism is well under way.

**Wanaka River Journeys**  
0800 544 555  
[www.wanakariverjourneys.co.nz](http://www.wanakariverjourneys.co.nz)

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