

NEW ZEALAND GUMBOOTS

Mike waited in the queue of cars and trucks seeking to leave the interisland ferry at Picton after the three-hour trip from Wellington. He was rather impatient but reminded himself that he was on holiday, taking a break from the stress of his job. His boss had forced him to take two weeks off. After nine months of working 80-hour weeks on the project, now complete, he had earned a holiday but had been reluctant to go.

Mike's mind back tracked over the last nine months. He had arrived from Australia in the early summer and thrown himself into the new job, feeling he had to work hard to ensure he buried the memory of a fractured relationship and a business investment that went badly wrong. He had worked relentlessly, partly to forget and partly just to stay busy. He had stayed away from social interaction. Sad situation for someone just turned 26. He had taken the two weeks off only because his colleague, Wayne, had said he could use his holiday house at Hokitika on the west coast of the South Island.

Mike finally drove off the ferry at 9.30am and headed south-west. It had been recommended that he stop at Lake Rotoiti, almost halfway along his trip, for lunch. Grabbing some food at the only store, he drove down to the lakeside. He pulled over next to another car. His attention was drawn to noise from a small group of people close by. A man and two boys were throwing stones into the water and having fun. They seemed to be dressed identically – sweat shirts to keep out the cold, jeans and knee high gumboots. Mike watched them closely as he ate. The man, presumably the father, was probably in his mid-30s. The boys were probably 12 and 14. Mike realised his interest was piqued by the gumboots which were wet and so looked new. All three pairs were marked with the label Skellerup Perth. Mike had come from the centre of Adelaide, one of Australia's hottest cities, and gumboots were rare beasts, especially being worn by ordinary people. He'd never given them much thought but now he felt excited at seeing them being worn in such a natural situation.

Mike got out of the car to throw his litter in a nearby bin. The man noticed him and said Hello. To make conversation Mike said: "Nice day for it. Looks like you're having fun." The man introduced himself as Craig, his sons as Daniel and Sam. "Why don't you join in," Craig said. Mike looked doubtful and was about to make an excuse about getting back on the road when Craig said: "Have you got a pair of gumboots in the car? Would save you from getting wet." Mike said no, he didn't, and before he could say any more Craig had walked to his car and extracted another pair of gumboots. He checked Mike's foot size and gave him the boots, 'Perths like the others', and size 10, one size bigger than Mike needed.

Mike was both excited and amazed: "So you had a spare pair?" he asked as he pulled the gumboots on. "Always do," Craig said. "One of us is always getting too wet." Mike waded into the water with some stones and joined the competition to throw stones that reached a small buoy in the water. The light pressure of the calm lake water on his gumboots provided a wonderful feeling of security. Mike liked the feeling and became practised at dodging water that was too deep for them. They continued their games for half an hour during which time Mike and Craig exchanged information about each other. Having exhausted the game, they went for a walk

around the water's edge and invited Mike join them. He agreed but eventually they drifted back to the cars. Mike pulled the gumboots off, commenting that he would need to buy a pair. When Craig pulled up the boot lid went to put them inside he noticed there were three pairs of hip waders and several fishing nets. "Wow, you are prepared," Mike commented. "We're doing some whitebaiting in the Nelson bays area," Craig said by way of explanation. They said their goodbyes and Mike drove off, the enjoyment of the last hour and the feeling of wearing gumboots for the first time firmly implanted in his mind.

Mike drove through the coastal town of Greymouth. His attention was grabbed by the number of teenage boys and older men wearing gumboots in the town. He wondered whether there was any reason for it and then decided it must be normal footwear in this part of the country. It had rained on and off most of the day. He had an idea and pulled over across the road from a shop selling fishing gear. Mike walked in and quickly spotted shelving laden with gumboots. He spent some time trying various pairs on and was helped by a shop assistant who was wearing Perth knee high gumboots as part of his shop uniform. Mike decided to emulate him and purchased some Perths. Mike emerged from the shop and tossed his shoes into the boot and drove on. Twenty minutes on he arrived in Hokitika, another town on the sea. As he drove through the town looking for his friend's house he noticed again men and women wearing gumboots. He was enjoying the sight as well as driving in them.

He eventually found Tressider Street, one back from the beach front, and pulled over at No 9. He was getting his bags out of the boot when he noticed two boys were throwing a basketball at a hoop in front the house at No 11. His attention was grabbed by the fact that both were wearing the same Perth gumboots. One of the boys noticed the newcomer and came over: "You must be Mike, Wayne's friend from Wellington. He said someone was coming down. Going to be here a while?" Mike said he'd be there for two weeks and the two boys introduced themselves as Jono and Mark. They were both 14. Jono, who lived next door, commented: "New gumboots, eh? Good to see them - you'll need them around here. Wayne's got a pair here you could use or we could have lent you some."

Just then a four wheel drive arrived and turned into No 11's drive and stopped. A man in his early 40s stepped out and Jono introduced him to Mike as his father, John Boyle. John was a stock and station agent, just home from work. He was wearing ankle length gumboots called Red Band. They exchanged pleasantries about Wayne, the trip down from Wellington, the weather. As they chatted another four wheel drive pulled over to the side of the road. A teenager got out, greeted "Mr Boyle" and unloaded some fishing gear out of the back. Another teenager got out from the other side and walked around. Both were wearing glistening wet black rubber waders pulled high to the hip, the boots with a light covering of white sand on them. John introduced Mike to them – his son James and his friend Craig. They had caught very little fish casting off the beach about a mile away.

John helped Mike with his bags up to the rear of No 9. As they climbed the stairs Mike commented favourably on John's gumboots and noted they were obviously new. Mike told him about his Greymouth purchase. "Weather here gets very wet and if you want to get out and enjoy the outdoors you'll need them. We have

some spare pairs – could have lent you one.” Mike didn’t ask the question that seemed obvious, why would they have spare pairs? But he threw his gear into the house and joined John who had invited him next door for a drink. At the door of No 11 John said there was no need to remove his gumboots. “They’re new and anyway we wear ours inside downstairs – not up in the bedrooms though.” As they walked in Mike could see James was hosing down his waders while still wearing them – Craig had already gone. James then went to a door in a side room, disappeared for a minute and emerged topless carrying a pair of knee high gumboots. These had contours over them, the shaft and the foot. James could see Mike eyeing them and said: “These are a bit different – they’re Marathons. Farmers wear them. Good for keeping the shit off. Best gumboots in the business,” he said. He sat at a chair and pulled them on and Mike agreed they looked a step up on the Perths.

Jono and Mark joined them and they had cold drinks with potato chips. They all provided Mike with information about Hokitika, what there was to do, where to go. Mike commented that it wasn’t much fun doing some things on his own. John agreed, but pointed out he had to work although Mike could visit the stockyard later in the week. James had a suggestion: “Well it’s first week of the holidays for us so we could come with you to some of these things. Ever been whitebaiting? How about we take you whitebaiting on the river tomorrow?” Jono and Mark agreed that was a great idea – they had nets enough for everyone. “Who knows,” John said, “we could be having whitebait for dinner tomorrow night.”

By the time Mike took his leave night had fallen. He made a fast trip to the supermarket to stock up on groceries. He enjoyed walking around the market in his new favourite footwear, gumboots – no one seemed to notice and he was hardly the only one. Mike returned to the house and unpacked his belongings. After a meal he had a good look around the house. It was a large two-storey house which had been in Wayne’s family for more than 40 years. He found interesting books to read, writing materials and board games. But the best thing he found was what the boys had effectively warned him of: in a shed at the rear of the property was a treasure trove of gumboots. There was a pair of Perths like he had just purchased, a pair of the Marathons that James had been wearing, a pair of the short Red Bands, a pair of bright yellow boots and, best of all, a pair of waders. It was these that Mike took inside and, after ensuring the boots inside were clean, tried them on. Wayne and him were the same size. Mike pulled the boots up to his crotch and a wave of excitement ran over him. Wow, what a feeling. He spent the rest of the evening in the waders, watching tv and thumbing through some books.

The boys had arranged to come for him at 9am the next morning. He was up and about by 7.30 and had his breakfast with the waders on. He heard some noise next door and looked out the window to the scene below. James was back in his waders and Jono and Mark also had them on. This was going to be another red letter day, Mike thought. They came knocking at the door at 8.55. He opened the door and there was James with a pair of waders in his hands. “Oh, so you found Wayne’s waders? You won’t be needing these – they’re Dad’s.” He held onto the boots and put them along with everything else into Mike’s car. Under James’s direction they drove about 15 minutes to the river mouth. They unpacked the gear, including four nets, one a set box net, the other three hand held ones.

They waded into the side of the river and placed their nets and waited. Mike felt the water running past his boots just below thigh level. What a tremendous feeling. They were there about two hours with three other whitebaiters within 100 metres of them. At the end of the incoming tide they had half a bucket of the tiny fish and decided they had enough. Just as they were pulling the nets in Jono yelled out a curse. He was standing in the river too deep and the water was rushing into his waders. Jono was not amused but the others thought it was worth a laugh – except they had to ensure Jono wasn't dragged in further and pulled him out. On the bank he removed the waders and water poured out. Jono was distinctly unhappy about staying in wet waders until James went and pulled his father's ones, those they had brought for Mike, and Jono could put them on after drying his feet with a towel. They were several sizes too big and Jono couldn't wear socks but that seemed to be the least of the problems.

They brought the whitebait home and had some lunch together. Jono replaced his socks and everybody kept their waders on while discussion over the meal was what to do in the afternoon. Jono thought it would be good to do some walking around the seaside rocks. There was a swell running so the waders would be a good idea. They drove down to the rocks and spent an enjoyable day ducking the big waves. No one got completely doused in water but Jono tempted fate several times. They met a couple of other boys, one in Marathons who had managed to get very wet and another in waders who was dry. Mike was now a big fan of gumboots, especially waders.

They returned home at the same time as John did from work, this time wearing Marathons. They told the story of the day as John made whitebait fritters from the day's catch. Mike took a trip to the chip shop, still in his waders, to get the chips to go with the fritters. The chip shop was full of people and no one batted an eyelid at the sight of a customer in waders – possibly because everyone was wearing boots of some description, including of course the people working in the shop.

They spent the evening together getting to know each other better. John talked of his job working for a stock and station company based in Greymouth. He was both an auctioneer of stock but also an advisor to farmers and spent two days a week visiting farms in the area. His next visit was to two dairy farms on Thursday and Mike jumped at the chance of joining him on the trip. He had never been to a dairy farm. John also invited Mike to the stockyard sales which were held each Friday.

The boys discussed options for what to do on Wednesday, the next day. They agreed they would have a go at surfcasting from the beach. That night Mike washed the sand from his waders and went to bed with them on for the first time.

The next morning everyone piled into Mike's car, all wearing their waders for the short trip to the beach. They spent the morning trying unsuccessfully to hook some fish. They were joined by a group of four other boys – one in waders, one in Marathons, one in Perths and one in dirty white boots. The surf was wild and the boys in knee highs got fairly wet but didn't seem to mind. Afterwards they all headed into town for lunch and there were plenty of admiring comments about their waders. Hokitika was a fishing town so no one was surprised at the sight.

They returned home after lunch and, despite some light rain, decided to play a game of soccer. Off came the waders but on went the Perths. Rather than get his own ones muddy Mike opted for Wayne's Marathons and joined in the football action. There was plenty of sliding in the wet grass. The field they played on was next to an abandoned quarry and at one stage the soccer ball was kicked into the quarry. They all went over to locate it but noticed quickly that the mud was deep and they were in danger not only of having mud creep into their boots but also they could get stuck. Jono suggested they go back home and get their waders. They did and also found some long black rubber gloves. They spent half an hour trampling through the thick mud looking for the ball. The ball was finally found and they looked at each other and laughed at the sight – they were covered in mud right up to the top of their waders and the gloves were covered in brown muck as well.

They returned home and took turns at hosing the mud off each other. But even that became fun as Jono sprayed Mike and he responded. At the end of that game their waders were glistening wet.

The next day was Thursday and the day John had promised to take Mike with him on his visits to two dairy farms. They left early, both in their Marathons, for the 40-minute drive to the first farm. There they were just finishing the milking. The workers consisted of two teenage boys and a couple, their mother and father. Mike noticed they were wearing black yellow trimmed gumboots which John said were dairy boots. John introduced Mike and then with the farmer sat down next to the cow shed and discussed a variety of issues the farmer was seeking advice on.

Mike wandered around the cow shed and chatted to the two boys who introduced themselves as Chris and Tony. Chris, 15, and Tony, 17, asked Mike if he wanted to come with them down to the pond where they needed to remove weed. Mike knew he would be waiting a while for John and agreed. The boys took him first to a shed on the side of the house where they changed into waders – and gave Mike a pair to wear. Mike was delighted and more so when they walked down a hill to a large area covered in water and weeds. The boys had grabbed three long handled forks and Mike and the two boys waded in to remove the weeds. They worked solidly pulling out the long, stubborn weeds but Mike was also conscious of the depth of water. Before he knew it he had gone too far and felt water rushing into his right boot. Almost at the same time it happened to the boys but rather than be horrified they were delighted and went in deeper. Mike knew there was not a lot he could do so stayed in as well and felt the water rushing into his left boot. They eventually emerged from the pond, sat on the bank, removed their waders and drained out the water. Mike squeezed his jeans and socks dry and sat in the sun. The three chatted for an hour about the attraction of wearing gumboots and waders, why townies didn't wear them, what the best brands were. The boys were stunned to hear that until this trip Mike had never worn any. The trio eventually walked back to the house, retrieved their Marathons and put them on. A few minutes later John arrived with the farmer and noted the wet pants and got a brief explanation of the problems in removing weeds from a deep pond.

Mike and John stayed on for lunch and afterwards drove another 25 minutes to a second dairy farm. There was no activity in the dairy shed but the farmer was working on the milk pumps with his son, 16, and his son's friend. One of the boys,

Phil, was wearing Marathons but the other, Dan, Mike noted, was wearing cut down waders. They looked very impressive. The farmer broke off to have his discussion with John so Mike took up his position at the pumps, helping to clean the filters. When they had finished the two boys suggested to Mike he join them on a trip to the far side of the farm to check on fences. He readily agreed and they rode out in a four wheel drive.

They stopped at the outer reaches and sat on the grass for a while and talked. The boys were astonished to hear that Mike had never worn gumboots before his visit to the coast. Dan admitted to owning six pairs of gumboots – the cut downs, a pair of Marathons, a pair of Perths, a pair of dairy boots, a pair of Red Bands and a pair of waders. Mike asked Dan about the cut down old waders. Dan removed the boots for Mike to try on and Mike pulled them on, getting that same satisfaction he got from pulling on waders. The boots came to just over the knee.

Mike and John finished up at the farm and drove back to Hokitika. The boys had spent the day on homework projects which they hadn't enjoyed at all. They were looking forward to some time off so Mike joined them all at a movie at the cinema in Greymouth that night. They wore sneakers – with the exception of Jono who kept his Marathons partly hidden by his pants legs. He just couldn't be without them. James had brand new sneakers, white with small black flashes. Craig was wearing brown cowboy boots which, Mike noted, were tall and attractive.

The next morning Mike was cleaning up before the day's adventures began. He was wearing Wayne's waders again. He went to open a window upstairs and noticed the house at No 7. There was a man who looked the same age as Mike in the back yard pulling on waders. He expertly tied the tops to his belt with straps and then proceeded to wash a Mitsubishi van. Mike watched closely, loving the sight as water sprayed onto the boots. He moved downstairs and out the back door, picked up a spade as if he was about to dig something and said hi to his neighbour. The fence between the two houses was virtually non-existent so the neighbour got a good look at the newcomer in waders. The neighbour introduced himself as Mark Stevens. He was a fisherman but not out that day because of the heavy swells. He invited Mike over and they sat at some outdoor furniture, both draping their booted legs over a chair. Mike told him about his holiday at Wayne's home and how much he was enjoying it there. Mark commented on Mike's waders. "Yes, they're Wayne's. Love wearing them. Will get a pair of my own when I go back north." They discussed the pleasures of gumboots and Mark invited him inside. In one of the rooms Mark showed Mike a treasure trove. Mike counted the lineup:

Two pairs of black waders, one hip and one thigh, in addition to the ones Mark was wearing

One pair of old waders cut down to just above the knee

One pair of Marathons

One pair of Perths

One pair of Red Bands

One pair of shorter Marathons

One pair of boots called Bullseyes

One pair of white PVC boots

One pair of Skellerup orange forestry boots

One pair of English boots called Hunters
One pair of firemen's boots with rings on top to pull them up
One pair of dairy boots

Mike and Mark spent a fun hour trying on all the boots and comparing them. Mark admitted that he wore gumboots 24/7 – not just when he was out fishing. Mike was not at all surprised. They agreed to meet that night for some more boot fun.

Mike spent the day with John and the boys at the stock sale yards in Greymouth. He wore Wayne's Marathons, like all the farmers who were bidding for stock. The boys tired of the sale activity and took Mike on a walk around Greymouth. They came across many of their friends from school, all wearing Perths or Marathons. Mike couldn't think of anything better.

That night he returned to Mark's house wearing his waders but also took the Marathons, his own new Perths and Wayne's yellow boots. The yellows prompted some discussion because they stood out from the black crowd but the rubber was thin and flimsy. But the evening finished with both men in their waders.

The next day was Saturday and Mike had promised he would go and watch the boys play rugby. Jono and Mark's game was at 10am, Craig and James at 11.30. The morning dawned with heavy rain and Mike didn't need any encouragement from the four boys to get his waders on. They were all similarly booted as were a number of the spectators. They were good games to watch despite the bad weather.

That afternoon they were all discussing the games when a four wheel drive with a trailer stopped outside. The two teenagers who climbed out were cousins from Christchurch. Two motocross bikes were on the trailer and the boys had come over for the trials being held in Greymouth the next day. The boys, Dion and Richard, were wearing motocross boots and commented they would have brought their gumboots if they had known it was going to be so wet and muddy. It didn't matter as John furnished a couple of pairs of Marathons for the visitors to wear. They took the bikes over to the hilly track and the riders spent an hour practising around a circuit that was becoming more muddy by the minute.

On the Sunday they all tramped out to the motocross and spent the day dodging showers of rain. The track and surrounds had become even muddier and it was hard at times just walking around. The waders took some punishment but were up to the test. Dion and Richard finished second and third in their age group – under 19 – and after a quick change of gear said their goodbyes and headed home to Christchurch.

Mike spent the night with Mark because Mark had offered to take him fishing the next morning. Mike wasn't at all pleased with the 4.30am start but once awake and out in his waders he was ready for the day. They drove down to the wharf where Mike got introduced to the skipper, Brendon, and the other crew, Matt. They commented favourably on Mike's waders. Brendon himself had yellow PVC leggings with PVC boots sticking out from the bottom. Well before the sun came up they were out in the channel. They spent six hours bobbing on the water, pulling in nets laden with fish and returned to Hokitika with the holds filled with snapper and terakihi. By

the time they had berthed a small truck had arrived and a young man wearing white knee length boots was there to help unload the day's catch. The skipper had things to do so Mark, Mike and Matt adjourned to the fishermen's lunch spot, joining a handful of others at tables all wearing waders.

That night Mark joined Mike, John and the boys at Mike's place for a barbecue of fish that Mike had brought home from the fishing trip and meat. Mike had declared it was a waders-only night and so everyone came dressed appropriately. Mike couldn't have been happier to see a room full of waders. Jono, ever the one to be different, arrived with the tops of his waders turned down, exposing the white insides. So they all emulated him for a while before Mike decided that waders were to be worn at full length and even Jono had them pulled back on properly.

But the highlight was Craig arriving later in the evening in a pair of waders that were yellow from top to bottom. No one had ever seen yellow waders – they were obviously from overseas. Craig said he had picked them up from a recent migrant from Spain. They all wanted to try them on and Mike had first go. Other than the unusual colour the other notable thing was that they were extra long and Mike decided they gave even more pleasure than the standard black Skellerups. John then added to the testing regime by going home and bringing back a pair of chest waders he hadn't worn for ages. Mike tried these on too – they were certainly different!

The next day Mike sat down and had a think. He was enjoying himself too much in Hokitika and his new lifestyle to contemplate returning to the big city. If he could get a job locally he could move lock, stock and barrel. He couldn't see himself on a farm or fishing all day, despite the obvious attraction of being able to wear gumboots all day. But a look in the local phone book told him there was no one working in the field of project management which he could work as a consultant across many industries on the coast – farming, fishing, forestry, mining. Coincidentally all four had one thing in common! He would make sure that the projects were hands on, giving him the chance to get down and dirty on the job.

He phoned his boss and said he was resigning effective immediately. He spoke to Wayne, told him his news, thanked him for the use of the house and promised he would leave just as soon as he had found other accommodation. In fact, when discussing it all with Mark that night his neighbour offered him a room at his place and Mike leapt at the chance. He told John and the boys who were delighted he had decided to stay. He moved in with Mark on Wednesday and "celebrated" by going out to buy a new pair of Marathons, having left Wayne's behind. Mark persuaded him not to invest in a pair of waders because he could share Mark's three pairs.

On the Thursday Mike took a fast day trip back to Wellington where he packed up all his belongings, left the apartment behind and was back in Hokitika before the end of the night. It was such a quick trip that the only person he saw that he knew was his landlord who thought it unusual that Mike was leaving so quickly and that his former tenant, who he had only ever seen in a suit or casual clothes, was wearing gumboots when he came to say goodbye.