

The only way is up

Great Walks goes from the horizontal to the vertical while attending an alpine climbing course in NZ's South Island.

Panorama at head of the Murchison glacier.
BELOW: Ice climbing.



“New Zealand's mountains are very similar to the Himalayas.”

guide who spent 27 years in the armed forces and has worked in Antarctica four times. With his help and a bit of co-operation from Tāwhirimātea, the Maori god of weather, I should feel capable of roping up, fixing a couple of anchors and front-pointing up a face in just over a week.

Our base will be Tasman Saddle Hut, a 14-bunk box built and run by the Department of Conservation. Perched on a narrow rock buttress overlooking the long sweep of the glacier and surrounded by summits of ice and rock, I can't wait to get stuck in. We manage to cover snow anchors, basic crampon technique and some self-arrest exercises – the essential practice of using your ice axe to stop a headlong slide into a crevasse – before the notoriously fickle weather of the Southern Alps closes in, leaving us hut-bound.

Weather pending

One of the first things Andy went through at AC HQ was the week's weather forecast and it made for grim viewing. Low pressure fronts were queuing up across the Tasman for their chance to shed their loads all over us. Severe weather is one thing that differentiates NZ from continental climbing destinations like the European Alps, and it is the Southern Alps' proximity to the ocean that

encourages heavy precipitation; the Tasman Saddle can easily get 2m of snow in a storm. The benefit though is that New Zealand's mountains are very similar to the Himalayas, so a lot of climbers come here to practice before heading to their main objectives in Nepal. It makes good sense to learn your skills at lower altitudes rather than trying to go up high straight away.

“The thing about mountaineering as opposed to many other activities is that it's not good to try to learn from your mistakes,” advises Guy Cotter, CEO of Adventure Consultants and master of understatement. “You need to know your limitations and what you decide to tackle should be within those confines.” When a four-time Everest summiteer gives me advice on my limitations, I listen.

“The mountains are an ever-changing environment and that's where mountaineering can catch people out,” he continues. “The slope you navigate safely one day might not be safe the next, and so understanding the dynamic nature of the mountains really helps.”

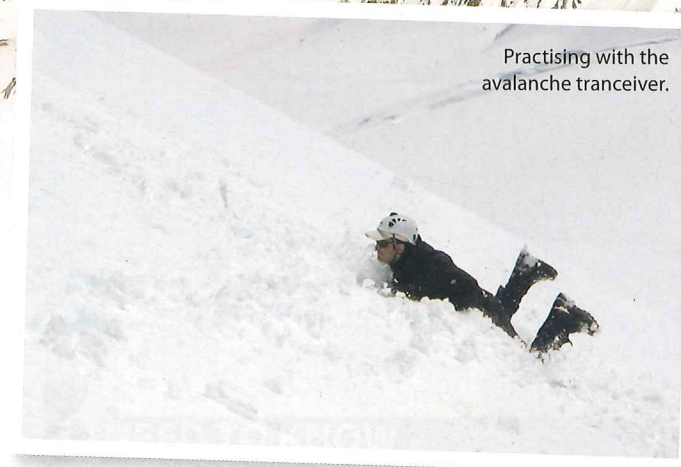
Practice makes perfect

Hut days are an accepted part of any mountaineering course or trip, so much so that even the example itinerary provided by AC includes one such day, spun as a welcome chance to practice rope

skills in comfort. Hence I find myself dangling from a roof beam practising hanging belays, self-rescue and ‘escaping from the system’. We also cover improvised pulleys, anchor equalisation and avalanche prediction (with the help of a plateful of rice and a couple of biscuits).

Soon the floor of the hut resembles the deck of the HMS Endeavour after a messy broadside, with rope, slings and cord strewn about like collapsed rigging. Despite the feeling that the hut is about to sink, we make it through two days without drowning or contracting cabin fever.

I fare slightly better when the clouds dispel and we once again emerge from the hut, which is when the differences between hiking and mountaineering become abundantly clear to me. This is not just high-altitude tramping – this is carrying the equivalent of a Himalayan tahr on my back. The sheer weight of the ironmongery hanging off my person is more than I'd take on a week-long,



Practising with the avalanche transceiver.

unsupported hike through Tasmania. The full-shank boots and crampons translate to a hefty extra load; I carry an axe and a trekking pole; my harness jingles with crampons, ice screws and cord; strapped to my pack is another axe, snow shoes, snow stakes; inside it is my avalanche probe and shovel; and wrapped around my torso is 25m of 10mm dynamic rope.

I can barely initiate forward movement but we manage to pick our way across the glacier to a likely-looking crack. Crevasse

I feel sorry for Mt Cook, I really do. The mountain now known as Aoraki stands at the pinnacle of the South Island's Southern Alps, jagged and monochrome and beautiful. By any fair scale she would represent Australasia's contribution to the Seven Summits, yet she has been denied that proud position in both variations of the list. At 3754m she was somehow overshadowed in Richard Bass' 1985 list by the diminutive pimple of Mt Kosciuszko in the Snowy Mountains, over 1500m her junior. Geography can be so cruel!

Such are my thoughts as we whizz past Aoraki's flank in a helicopter on our way to the stark, white head of the 27km-long Tasman glacier. In an effort to upgrade my mountain skills I'm embarking on a 10-day alpine climbing course with renowned Wanaka-based company Adventure Consultants (AC). As an avid ‘tramper’ for the last 20 years I'm reasonably happy with my wilderness proficiency but now, with the odd trekking peak under my belt, I feel the desire to extend my repertoire. Although my hiking to-do list is in no danger of ever being completed, I don't want to limit my horizons to the purely horizontal.

My guide on this journey of discovery is Andy Cole, a New Zealand and international mountain guides association-registered

Aylmer-Hochstetter
Traverse route.

rescue is on the slate for today – a terrifying confusion of axes, T-slots, prusiks, slings, auto blocks and hitches. Andy's pack, doubling as my careless partner, is unceremoniously tossed into the abyss to await my dashing salvage.

It all seems terribly complicated so I'm heartened when Andy, under close questioning, admits that he's never actually had to use this technique in the field. It's far easier to learn to avoid the crevasses in the first place, and that's one of the main principles to grasp here – the value of foresight and preparedness as well as rope and tool skills.

Ice, ice baby

Over the next few days we tick off more modules. Certainly the most fun part of the course is ice climbing. There's nothing like hacking your way up a towering serac using just a couple of ice axes, although my enjoyment is tempered slightly when an ice screw unclips itself (!) from my shoulder strap and bounces down the slope straight into a crevasse. Until now I hadn't considered how expensive the damn things are.

Eventually I have learnt enough to attempt an actual objective – a traverse between the summits of Mt Aylmer (2699m) and Hochstetter Dome (2822m). Unfortunately, the recent snow has rendered the route more of a vertiginous ridge walk than a climb. Nevertheless, the views to the west are stupendous and give me a sense of standing on the edge of the world.

Tāwhirimātea has not been overly generous but the times we have made progress have been exhilarating and quick to foster an addiction. It's easy to understand why climbers go through days of hardship just to stand on a summit for a few minutes.

By the time a second low front is due to hit the saddle we decide to get out while we can and spend the last couple of days rock climbing around Wanaka.



FOOD GLORIOUS FOOD

As the only hut occupants, we had the run of the well-appointed kitchen – pretty lucky considering the depth of recipes Andy threw together using only some battered pans and a couple of MSR Whisperlite stoves (www.spelean.com.au). A mountaineer at altitude burns an average of 6000 calories a day, twice the normal, and though I feebly protested that I wasn't a big eater my portions were always huge – and delicious! Fresh veges, pasta and pesto, ratatouille, thai curry – these are the benefits of entering the mountains by chopper. Even our breakfast muesli was a super-concatenation of oats, fresh fruit, almonds and boysenberry yoghurt.

A gorgeous view of the Southern Alps at dusk.

Although the course syllabus is comprehensive, Guy is quick to point out that clients are unlikely to come off the course ready to summit 8000ers. "We really want to see people consolidate their skills after the course before thinking they can go off and do extreme routes," he says. "The natural next step would be a guided ascent, where you would see how all those skills come together as a climbing partnership."

That'll be my next adventure and I can't wait. Where shall I go? Mt Aspiring? Maybe a trip to Mera Peak in Nepal? Aconcagua? A whole new world of verticality has opened up to me; my to-do list just doubled. It's great to be alive!

i NEED TO KNOW

The best time to go is late January to early February, although bad weather can occur at any time. Adventure Consultants' ACC course for 2014 costs \$3390 including flights in and out of the mountains. Include all the gear you'll need and it's an expensive trip, but you can't afford to compromise. Guy puts it succinctly: "People who go on the internet and compare course prices like they're shopping for a pair of socks – if you do that with mountaineering then you're going in the wrong direction."

See www.adventureconsultants.com for the full range of its NZ courses.