



ASPIRING TO GREATNESS

A mountaineering course in Otago's Mt Aspiring National Park is about more than learning to navigate, using crampons and wielding an ice axe. It is also an introduction to the climber's psyche and an insight into the extraordinary working life of New Zealand's professional mountain guides.

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Mt Aspiring. The northwest ridge route is on the left of the photograph.



CONTRADICTION.

A logical incompatibility between two propositions. It’s a word, but I now consider it a feeling. My summit attempt of Mt Aspiring (3033m) pumped contradiction through my body. I felt powerful, strong, a conqueror. But also humble, insignificant and frightened. The contrast was startling, I was alive with contradiction, it felt immense. And I loved it.



It had been bubbling away since 7am, when we left the tiny and sparsely decorated hut. We should have left at 5am, but the poor weather, which had battered and chilled us for the previous four days, only lifted late.

Finally, we were away, scrambling up a rock-face and I was on my way to the top, my heart thumping with excitement and exultation.

After half an hour the crampons were on and we were traversing up steep ice, with any slip potentially disastrous — screaming, falling, tumbling and then collapsing in a pile of broken bones disastrous.

I was scared. No normal human being — that is, no one who doesn’t climb mountains for a living — wouldn’t be, but I was in control. And constantly in awe of the scenery, with blue skies and wisps of clouds flying over the peak above us.

Another half hour and we were on rock, pitch climbing sections with 1000m falls beneath. You’re trusting rock anchors and a rope with your life, and telling yourself you won’t fall as long as you concentrate and control your every

movement. But your breathing is loud in your ears and there’s also an unavoidable whisper of doubt now and then. I kept having visions of old Road Runner cartoons, picturing myself as Wile E. Coyote, taking one of those long, comical falls that always end in a puff of dust. I was on edge, but also elated, and filled with a sense of freedom like nothing I’d experienced before.

To be roped onto the side of a major peak with the summit in full view is a mountaineering fantasy — the sort of thing a Kiwi kid first dreams about after reading Hillary and Everest stories at school. And it was real. Visceral and vital.

The negative, doubting side of my mind wasn’t completely quieted, however. It told me I was unfit, inexperienced and unlikely to make it. My mind, and my body, stuck in that perplexed state of contradiction.

TESTING GROUND

I was attempting to summit Mt Aspiring, near Wanaka in New Zealand, as part of Adventure Consultants’ seven-day mountaineering course



Johnno demon-
strating different
techniques for ice
anchors.



Day 1 and learning basic belaying calls.



Roped up and ready to cross the Bonar
glacier on the walk into Colin Todd hut.



All eyes on the summit!

and ascent.

It was a huge step-up in difficulty for me, as I’ve only ever walked up things — stairs, the odd hill — and never actually climbed a mountain. It felt like going from billy cart racing to the speed and danger of Formula One.

Trekking I’d done, of course. It formed the highlights of my backpacking years, including Nepal’s Annapurna Circuit and Gyoko/Everest base camp trek, the main South American walks, including Aconcagua camp 2, and summiting the 6075m Mt Chachani in Peru. So I’ve seen the big mountains up close and have never stopped dreaming about climbing them, but I’d never learned how to use ropes or crampons properly, or had any training. A busy working life, combined with living in Sydney and a young family, results in golf being my main hobby and release.

Mountain climbing seemed as unobtainable as a peak like Mt Aspiring looks from a distance. I was intrigued to find out if I had what it takes to climb a technical peak. Not just if I could do it, but also if I would get a rush from the experience, and whether that would lead to a desire to do it again.

So when I heard about Adventure Consultants’

ascent and course, I was hooked. It would tick off my two goals at the same time, summit a technical alpine peak and learn mountaineering skills.

Another major incentive was the opportunity to spend a week one on one with professional mountain guides and understand what makes them choose to work in such a dangerous environment.

LESSONS ON THE GO

The course is a real 101 of mountaineering. From the moment the helicopter spectacularly dropped us near the Bonar Glacier I was under continuous expert instruction. And we were straight into it. A half-hour walk to the glacier’s edge, a quick lesson on crampon use and roping in, and we were traversing a serious glacier, with serious crevasses, under the watchful gaze of Mt Aspiring.

Two hours later, I was absorbing and practising the skills necessary to minimise my risks on the summit attempt. First off was how to walk on ice and snow by keeping all eight crampon points engaged by bending the ankle sideways when walking across steep slopes — tougher and

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Scrambling up the North West ridge with the Bonar Glacier below, and Colin Todd Hut shrouded in the mist bottom.

more unnatural than it sounds. Then how to walk with an ice axe and how to use it to stop a fall – great fun sliding down the mountain, but a life-saving skill to master.

We then dropped our gear at the hut and went straight into rope training on the rocks, where I learnt the basics of belaying, placing anchors, and abseiling. I went to bed that night with the hope of waking at 4am for a summit attempt.

Alas, the wind picked up at midnight, and got stronger and stronger, and the forecasted poor weather set in earlier than expected. The next three days were spent waiting in hope of a positive weather forecast across the hut CB. Any break in the rain/sleet/mist and we ventured outside to practise skills, but the storm (what I called it, but apparently it was pretty standard) was fairly relentless.

A highlight was an ice climb up a steep 100m slope, using the front two crampon points and swinging ice axes in a steady rhythm. Utterly exhilarating, and exhausting. But much of the time was spent in the hut with photographer Blair

and the two mountain guides, Johnno and Tim.

Gaining Mountain Guide status is a big deal (see break out box). In NZ it involves years of dedication to gain the necessary hours of skiing and climbing practical experience, plus about \$40,000 in course fees. It’s nothing like getting a university degree to work in an office, it’s like taking a blood oath to a Mafia family, or in this case an oath to the mountains, which some would argue are just as dangerous.

Sure it’s a job, but it’s much more than that. You are away for weeks at a time, working 24 hours a day, with clients’ lives in your hands. However, the mountains are unpredictable, so you’re responsible for something that you’re not 100 per cent in control of. But what a workplace it is – high in the mountains – in the serenity and stillness, but with the ever-present tones of danger and death.

TRUE MOUNTAINEERS

The knowledge of our two guides was astounding. From the moment the chopper landed we

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were straight into dangerous territory with a glacier crossing, but I never once felt any unease. The guides were calm and relaxed and so were we. They seemed to have a sixth sense of mountain awareness and were constantly looking around, actually feeling the mountains’ danger.

However, guides in NZ and Australia, I learned, are not as revered by the climbing public as they are in Europe. The Antipodean male macho culture, coupled with the belief that men should be able to do anything, means we’re experts at everything, and that includes mountain climbing – only a wimp should need a guide and only weak climbers use them. Europeans are more specialised and are happy to pay for a guide to learn skills and ensure their safety in the mountains. In NZ, that’s seen as a cop-out.

But would we try other potentially dangerous pursuits, such as scuba diving or flying a plane, without professional training?

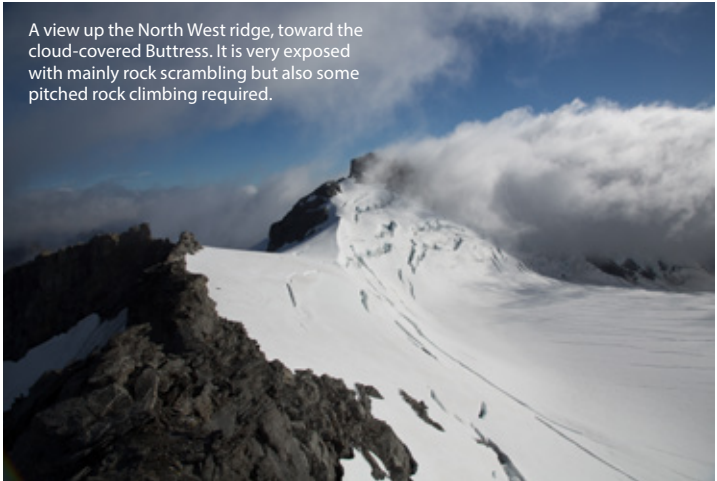
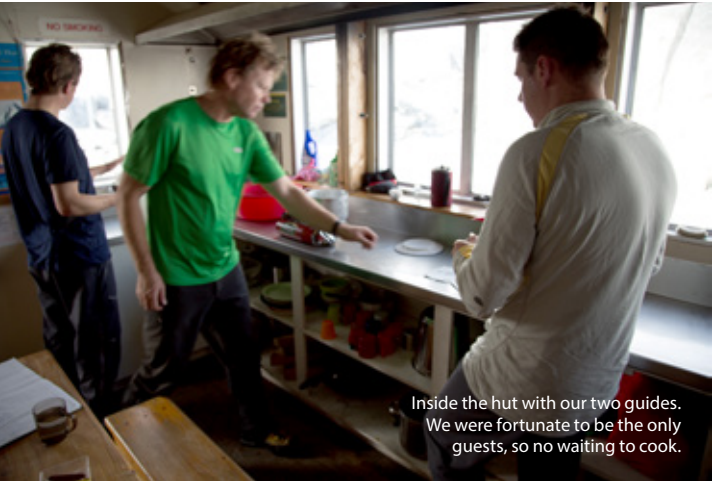
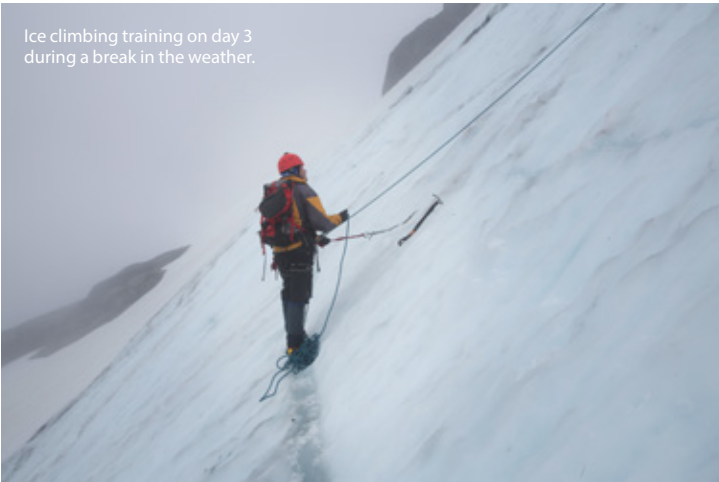
A guide is an expert of the mountains and the NZ Alps are extremely dangerous, with high death rates. Dr Erik Monasterio, of the University



MT ASPIRING NATIONAL PARK

MT ASPIRING NATIONAL PARK is one of New Zealand’s most popular national parks – and it is easy to see why.

With fantastic climbing (Mt Aspiring, and surrounding peaks), plus a number of excellent multi-day treks (the Routeburn Track and the Cascade Saddle traverse are two popular treks), Mt Aspiring NP is an adventurer’s wonderland. Mt Aspiring NP is located around 30 minutes from the South Island adventure town of Wanaka, and only 1.5 hours from Queenstown. Summer activities include trekking, trail running, mountain biking and climbing, while in the winter, there is some excellent backcountry skiing available, as well as ice climbing. For more info see the NZ Department of Conservation website: www.doc.govt.nz



of Otago, identified four contributing factors that make the Southern Alps high risk. The maritime weather patterns (which I was experiencing), the mountains are low altitude so visitors tend to underestimate them, the changeable snow pack conditions and the ease of access. To guide in these mountains is much more dangerous than other parts of the world.

Tim is a fully certified guide and has guided an expedition up the technical, and beautiful, Himalayan peak, Ama Dablam. He spends the NZ summer guiding the alps and the winter either guiding heli-skiing trips or guiding in Europe – quite a lifestyle. Johnno is an apprentice and has nearly completed the courses and experience hours to be a guide. Both are inspirational and both have made their lifestyles their work, a fine attribute. But there were plenty of stories when I asked about accidents and fatalities on Mt Aspiring. And when I enquired as to friends lost in the mountains, their tone revealed a sense of calm and resignation. An acceptance that one turn of bad luck could result in death, yet their training, skills and self-belief minimise the chance of bad luck occurring. But the chance is always

The 6pm weather report on day four hinted at weather clearing the next morning and we were all pumped...

there, they have to be constantly aware. It was a pleasure to be in their company for a week, not only to learn from them and be protected from falling through their short rope, but to gain a glimpse into the mindset of true mountaineers. A book I read in Colin Todd Hut – Where the Mountains Throw Their Dice: An insight into the Kiwi climbing psyche, by Paul Hersey (2008, New Holland) – had an excellent summation of climbers: “Climbers enjoy unfamiliar places and situations. Climbers are easily bored and seek thrills, excitement, and adventures. They can be quick tempered, excitable and impulsive. Erik [Monasterio] said that low harm avoidance suggests that climbers are confident when faced with danger and uncertainty, and tend to be relaxed and optimistic even in situations that would worry the general population”. The guides on this trip were a level above the “climbers” the book referred to. Tim and Johnno

both loved adventure, but the excitement and thrill-seeking were certainly not evident traits while with clients. However, they both portrayed a sense of adventure I’m sure they carried into their everyday life.

SUMMIT COUNTDOWN

The three days spent waiting for the weather to clear were spent learning the basic skills to climb and spend time in the mountains. We had lessons on clothing and survival, navigation, rope work, glacial travel and safety, how the weather really works, and how to read weather maps and verbal reports. The guides also inadvertently taught us the extremely understated vocabulary of mountaineers – where I would call something extremely dangerous, to them it was just “a bit grim”. They seemed to be in control of all situations. I likened them more to a Jedi Master or ninja sensei than a mere guide – perhaps an





Johnno leading the way up another climbing section towards the next anchor point.

overstatement, but there is no way I would have wanted to learn these skills, in this environment, off someone unqualified.

Finally, the 6pm weather report on day four hinted at weather clearing the next morning and we were all pumped at the prospect of a summit attempt. The morning was exquisite and the climbing terrific. My internal state of contradiction was burning, and I suffered self-doubt over my fitness to climb 1200 vertical metres in one push. But I could see the summit and the route to stand atop it. I just had to navigate one more major section of rock and the crampons would be on to tackle the 500m climb to the summit. I knew that it would be super tough on the body, but also knew I had the ability to get into the meditative zone and persevere through the inevitable pain.

We stopped for a water break and Tim went ahead to scout the rock section for a route. As soon as he came into view I knew it was bad news. I was immediately crushed. I wanted the summit, badly.

The explanation, of course, made perfect sense.

The rock was covered in verglas — a thin layer of ice. The poor weather had allowed it to form and the sun hadn't touched the rock to melt it. It would take a few days to melt, there was no route around it, and with our experience it would be risky to go over it. It would have been downright dangerous to navigate on the descent when exhausted in the dark.

I accepted the decision resolutely and we climbed down to the hut to news that another major front was heading our way. The contradiction of the mountains at work again — the heart-breaking verglas that made us turn back made us avoid a dangerous storm that would have enveloped us while descending in the darkness.

So I missed my summit, but I spent an awesome week learning what it was like to be a mountaineer. I learnt that I am a pretender, but also that I want to experience more. I learnt that the mountains make me feel alive, the solitude and danger give me an energy like no other. So I made a commitment on the walk out to return to the mountains whenever possible. The golf clubs can gather dust.



WATCH a video from this adventure! Simply download the free **viewa** app, and hold your phone or tablet over this page.

THE ESSENTIALS

Getting there: Qantas and Air New Zealand fly to New Zealand. Direct flights are available from Sydney or Melbourne to Queenstown and Christchurch in the South Island. See www.qantas.com.au or www.airnewzealand.com.au for more info.

Activity: Adventure Consultants offer a wide range of climbing instruction and adventures in NZ's Southern Alps and around the world (including the Seven Summits). This Aspiring Course and Guided Ascent is a 7-day course. Cost is \$NZ5350 per person. www.adventureconsultants.co.nz for info on all AC courses and climbs.