

Vertigo

No. 803, February 2017



Dawn cloud spills over Sawtooth Ridge, channelled by Tiraha (1,668m), where this shot is taken and Ohuinga (1,686m) on the far side, Ruahines - photo by Peter Laurensen

Newsletter of the New Zealand Alpine Club - Wellington Section
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The four day horse shoe

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It's not been a summer to remember weather-wise. Clear spells have been short and hard to predict. I'd hoped to get down to the main divide again at some point over the summer break, but it just wasn't a happening thing for me on weather or climbing buddy fronts. So when I got an invitation to join Shaun Barnett and a friend of his, Joe Nawalaniec, to head onto the Ruahine's tops for four days I figured North Island is better than no island. Besides, Shaun is one of New Zealand's most renowned and successful back country photographers and writers – a man I aspire to. He also has a few decades of back country experience and an encyclopaedic knowledge of our high places. I might not be on the main divide but I would surely learn some things from him on the trail. And his mate Joe, while not so into photography, also has done more horizontal and vertical miles in the hills than my joints care to contemplate. During the four days I spent with them it seemed that, between them, there wasn't much left anywhere between 500m and 2,500m in New Zealand that they hadn't been.



Yarning with Richard and his dogs

Our trip into the Ruahines was Shaun's plan D, which we chose due to the weather looking most settled north of the Tararuas. Our route started at the Mangakukeke Road end, which is surrounded by private farmland. Beforehand I called ahead to secure our permission to pass across the farms to gain access to both Purity Hut, our way in (call Richard Gorringer 06 382 5856); and Kelly Knight Hut, our way out (call Colin Thompson 06 382 5577). Beyond these two huts we would spend most of our time above 1,500 metres on an expansive horseshoe-shaped route that took us over many of the highest points in the Ruahines, from the west to the east and back again. The whole trip, including a side trip over Mangaweka on the first evening, only amounted to about 37 horizontal kms. But it also involved nearly three vertical kms of ascent and descent. For me the beauty lay in being on the tops for all but a couple of hours on the first and last days, and being able to camp out under the stars for three consecutive nights.

On Day One we set off across Richard's farmland about 11am and soon met the man himself, plus an impressive team of dogs, up on the ridge leading to the forest park, at about 800m. Richard has a bit of a reputation for being pretty blunt about access permissions. He's suffered frustrations, like loss of stock due to trampers passing through over the years. This has hardened his approach. But the two times I've needed to pass over his farm he's been helpful and very happy to have a yarn, which we did this time, while wiping sweat from our brows. It was sunny and humid and the access ridge is steep.



Purity Hut

Once into the forest it's only another hour or so to Purity Hut, which affords panoramic views out to Mount Ruapehu. Our destination for the evening was Iron Peg, but we had plenty of time, so hung out in the sun on the hut's deck while Joe and I got to know one another a bit better. It was already apparent that I had a serious back country enthusiast as company – not just in New Zealand but in many other mountainous areas like Ladakh, where he leads trips up 6,000m plus peaks, among many other outdoor pursuits. And Joe can definitely not be accused of conservatism. We were set for many good discussions with this maverick devil's advocate over the next few days.



Sunset from near the broad flat summit of Mangaweka (1,731m) – highest point in the Ruahines

The route up to Iron peg at 1,703m is very straight forward, lulling us into a false sense of comfort. However, as we progressed higher, so the wind intensified. By several tarns near Iron peg, where we strung up our tent and fly, we battled with fast moving cloud swirling about us. After dinner Joe and I sauntered off along the Hikurangi Range to tag Mangaweka and the next high point along, while Shaun wrote in his journal. Through breaks in the cloud we enjoyed a blood red sunset.



Our campsite at dawn near Iron Peg

It was actually a lot colder than we'd expected overnight, but dawn on Day Two was a photographers dream. Shaun and I were like pigs in warm mud. A fantastic lenticular dome hovered overhead, catching the sun's dawn rays in its alien-like, concave underbelly. Soon though we were back in the murk as cloud again swamped us. This is how it remained as we undulated along the ridge dropping off Iron Peg in a south easterly direction. A little under 6kms away and about 550m of ups and downs lay Ohuinga (1,686m). By the time we reached Ohuinga the weather was clearing, revealing a north end-on, foreshortened view of Sawtooth Ridge. It didn't look far but 3km and another 300m or so of ups and downs meant we were glad to reach the top of Tiraha (1,668m) at the far end. The wind still howled so Shaun and I dropped off the west side of Tiraha in search of a sheltered bivvy spot on the eastern side of the saddle at 1600m. Joe, while never running out of energy, wasn't keen on another cold night, so he opted for a 300m drop down to Howletts Hut on the Daphne Ridge. There he could read his newspaper and then charge on up to re-join us after breakfast next morning.



The view from Ohuinga, along Sawtooth Ridge to Tiraha, then around to Te Hekenga. The Hawkes Bay is in the distance

As photographers, Shaun and I made the right choice. The night was not as cold and, in my bivvy bag, I marvelled at the night sky, clear and spray painted silver with galaxies of stars. Dawn on Day Three was another stunner and the weather had noticeably improved, boding well for the challenges of the day ahead. On top of Tiraha, we shot frame after frame of a huge catchment of cloud, channelled between Ohuinga and Tiraha so it spilled, in slow motion, over Sawtooth Ridge. Ruapehu hovered above the cloud in the distance as the whole magnificent spectacle took on the changing colours of sunrise.



Dawn view from Tiraha, with cloud spilling over Sawtooth Ridge. Ruapehu hovers on the skyline

Soon Joe was back with us and we set off south westerly at first, over Taumataemekura (1,682m). Joe became our supermodel, going back and forth while reflected, mirror-like in various tarns. Due to the high rainfall this summer season we came upon scores of tarns along the route, making the mud a bit warmer still for the camera pigs.

However, we did have something on our minds that kept us a tad on edge. Our crux was fast approaching – a cheval near the summit of Te Hekenga that Richard had warned us about. We'd seen Te Hekenga from various angles the day before and it had looked somewhat gnarly. Now, as we got close, it seemed to alternate between "yeah nah, no worries" and "hmmmm".



Right – Joe on Te Hekenga's cheval.
The Cheval Kid is born

At the base of the steep craggy section leading up to the cheval a trail branched off around the base of Te Hekenga on the southern side. The climbing option did look rather intimidating and Shaun decided that there was no good reason to ignore a perfectly good trail. Joe on the other hand was bursting at the seams to get onto the cheval, also insisting that we approach it in good style over the true ridge, rather than taking any soft sidling options.

So, up we went, both hands required. After a steep scramble of about 50m we reached a small platform, beyond which was our crux – a very narrow, exposed, eroded and broken section of no more than 15 metres. With our packs on and no rope, our resolve started to dissolve. But Joe took off his pack and tentatively ventured out, confirming that indeed it was dodgy ground. Once back beside me he suggested I go out for a ‘been there’ photo op. To my surprise, once out there I could see a feasible way across and said as much. And lo, the Cheval Kid was born. Joe perked up and soon crossed the cheval without his pack to see if the going was any better around the bluff on the far side. In a moment a huge smile reappeared confirming that “Thunderbirds are go, with packs.”



Crossing the cheval, between the two narrowest sections. Tiraha is on the right skyline and Sawtooth Ridge stretches left

Getting across unprotected was at the edge of my comfort zone. Afterwards, on the summit of Te Hekenga, where Shaun had come around and up to meet us, my vastly more knowledgeable partners agreed that the cheval was the gnarliest section they'd encountered on any non-volcanic terrain in the North Island. That made me feel better. Then, for the next half hour or so Shaun and I watched the Cheval Kid venture back and forth across his narrow, crumbly pathway of joy. The adventure junky claimed it was so we could get a few action shots – a line for the next Tuis ad.

With our crux behind us we still had some work to do before Day Three was done. Also, Joe had never been to Pourangaki Hut, which sat a thousand metres below us and directly accessible down a secondary ridge dropping north off the main ridge between Te Hekenga and the next high point along – Maungamahue (1,661m). So at this point we stopped for lunch before Joe headed down and Shaun and I continued westwards.

The day was clear and calm. And HOT. Beneath Maungamahue we came upon two crystal clear tarns which were too inviting to go past. So after a cooling dip, with replenished water bottles, we plodded up on to Maungamahue to enjoy an expansive view taking in virtually our entire route. From this south westerly aspect it looked big and impressive. And our intended campsite – a tarn at 1,440m, was under 3kms and 250m of descent away. Life was wearisome but good.



Shaun at the tarn beneath Maungamahue

“Oh no, that’s not good news”. Shaun had just discovered, as we crashed our way through waist-high tussock and spanjaards, that the levy was dry. Ironical it was that, after passing so many brimming tarns, the one we needed to be full was empty. Shaun’s theory was that the luxuriant tussock all around the tarn had drained it. He was actually able to extract half a litre of water by digging a hole beneath one of the tussocks, all of which sat bedded in quite soggy ground. Too arduous to stay and camp though, so only one thing for it, plod on down to Kelly Knight Hut a further 600 metres below us.

At about 1,200 metres, as we resignedly descended Shaun suddenly piped up “That’s weird, I can hear trickling”. Indeed he had and soon, just before sunset, we’d strung up our fly right across the trail beside a tiny babbling brook on the ridge. It was a lovely way to finish the day. We even had a picture postcard view out across the lowlands to Mount Ruapehu. Our water supply was sweet and so was life. The only thing missing was the Cheval Kid, who was down at Kelly Knight Hut indulging in social intercourse with two young hunters.



Our sunset view from camp, end of Day 3

Day Four again dawned fine. After a good sleep, a leisurely breakfast and pack up we set off, knowing that it was less than 9kms to the car and mostly downhill. At about 900m there was a sudden odd grunting noise coming from behind us in the bushes. A wild pig surely not! No, it was Joe, fossicking in the shadows in search of another cheval. We all descended to Kelly Knight Hut, swapping details of our split adventures. Joe collected his pack and we headed on out.

The last couple of hours were through native forest tracing the Pourangaki River and then across Colin Thompson's farm. We'd shared a fantastic journey and all felt chuffed at connecting with kindred spirits. Joe and I picked Shaun's author, editor and publisher brain, discussing potential book projects. But that's another story, or stories – hopefully ...



On the trail above Pourangaki River and Kelly Knight Hut

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