

Vertigo

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Dawn at about 1,700m, climbing an eastern snow face towards the northeast ridge of Mount Travers - Peter Laurenson

A snowball called Anxiety

An attempt on Mt Travers, Labour Weekend
Words and pictures Peter Laurenson

Well that didn't work – this rock is no better than the sugary, treacherous snow I was craving respite from. My climbing companions Caro and Simon and I had been tentatively plugging upwards, out of the dawn, towards Mount Travers' northeast ridge. There had been no freeze overnight and, nagging at the backs of our minds, was a deteriorating weather forecast.

The snow was a problem. While the steps we kicked as we pot-holed upwards were deep, they sometimes gave way without warning. Our route took us up steep, exposed snow slopes, interspersed with stretches of shattered rock. Our ropes remained in the pack because there were no possibilities to put in solid protection. Our axes were really only good to aid balance – successful self arrest was very unlikely.

Our journey began on the Interislander two evenings before. Then our party was six – an Alpine Club trip led by Simon, our energetic Wellington Section President and organised by his industrious partner Caro. Nina, Ian and I are also Section members. I also had my youngest son Will along.

Approaching the most exposed section of snow and rock beneath the northeast ridge

Crossing Cook Strait we were still in a lovely weather window, due to close about midday on our intended summit day. The usual story authored by Mr Sod. A late night and fairly early start at St Arnaud saw us gliding across the mirror surface of Lake Rotoiti in Hamish's water taxi just after 8am. With pretty hefty packs, even with the water taxi assistance, we still had a good 22kms to go to reach Upper Travers Hut, 700 vertical metres higher up.



I was a little nervous. I'd had keyhole surgery on my left knee exactly five weeks earlier, so I wasn't sure how well it would tolerate sustained weight and effort. As I write, three weeks on from our return, I now know that the timing of our trip wasn't exactly ideal for my recovery, but Voltaren kept pain and inflammation at bay very effectively during our four day journey.

We sweated our way up beside the Travers River under a cobalt sky. It was hot, so the cover of gladey beech forest for much of the way was a blessing. We got our first good look at the top four hundred or so metres of Mount Travers before John Tait Hut, at a bend in the river where a slip had taken out a section of the trail. It looked muscular – a classic looking summit.

After a pause for lunch at John Tait Hut, roughly the halfway point, we soldiered on. By the time everyone had arrived at Upper Travers Hut it was nearly time for dinner. Situated amongst trees just below the treeline and commanding an expansive view back down valley, with the eastern flanks of Travers soaring above, the generously proportioned hut is a beautiful place to stay.



An early glimpse of the top 400 or so metres of Mt Travers' southern aspect

After sorting out our gear it was an early dive into our sleeping bags to catch a few of the zeds lost the previous evening and to be ready for a 3am wakeup. At the sound of the alarm I peeked out to see, aside from the multitudes of twinkling stars, a completely clear sky. This was Will's first alpine start. He discovered how unappealing breakfast can be so early in the morning but, to offset that, he also enjoyed the otherworldly sensation of ascending terrain in the hovering pool of his head torch.

At about 1,500 metres we reached the snowline and soon donned our crampons. This is where our first problems emerged. Will's crampons wouldn't stay in place. I'd fitted them properly the night before, but I hadn't done as well in fitting his feet to my spare trekking boots. There was just too much give and they kept popping off.

As I cursed myself for my stupidity, Nina announced that she was not feeling well – possibly a dose of norovirus that had been doing the rounds recently. She was considering turning around and, when Ian heard all this, he also decided that perhaps our intended route might be a bit beyond his burning thighs on this particular dawn.

So, as the first inkling of a new day began to backlight the St Arnaud Range across the valley, three headed back down to the hut and three continued up. I am eternally grateful to Nina and Ian for going down with Will. For a moment there I thought my climb was over before it had really started. And as we progressed higher, my gratitude only magnified as I realised that, on this day, the route would have been unacceptably dangerous for Will.

As the others' head torch beams grew smaller and smaller below us, Simon, Caro and I headed north and up to a broad shoulder at 1,880m. On the shoulder we enjoyed an expansive dawn view across to the St Arnaud Range and down the Travers Valley.

The view north from the north east ridge, with Mt Cupola (2,260m, far left), Mt Hopeless (2,278m, left), the Travers Valley in fog and the St Arnaud Range, right



Climbing Weetbix at about 2,000m

From the shoulder we lost about fifty metres as we sidled around to the next snow field, giving us access to the northeast ridge, just beneath a 2,127m highpoint. As we climbed, the gradient increased and the sun's first rays began to make their softening and loosening effects felt.

At 1,900m we paused beneath a rock buttress on the lip of a tiny schrund to rearrange gear and discuss our next move. Simon lead up through steep snow around patches of rock while I waited a bit to get some photos. By the time I caught them up we were all starting to feel the early emotional impacts of sustained and increasing exposure. I led on through and decided to test my theory about the rock looking friendlier than the snow at that point.

I soon realised that, while the rock made a convincing impersonation of Weetbix, like the snow, it was definitely not to be relied upon for safe handholds or footings. "How far to the ridge" was Caro's hopeful call below me. "Can't be far now, but I still can't see the top yet". Another stint on snow and then Weetbix later and I still couldn't see the ridge directly above me. I could, however, see it to my right, just a careful traverse away, so that's where I headed.

As I reached the end of the traverse and gained the ridge at 2,070m, I noticed how fog had filled the Travers Valley and the sky above had filled with brooding, spectacularly beautiful clouds. It was very nice to relax for a bit on safe ground as I watched Simon, then Caro make their way across the traverse. When they both joined me we commiserated about how the sustained, un-protectable exposure had incidiously broken our resolve. It was as though our anxiety had slowly snowballed to the point where our thoughts were no longer about the summit. As we took in the deteriorating weather, which appeared to be bearing out the unfavourable forecast, we made the call that it was time to find a way down that didn't involve down climbing what we'd just come up.

Once that decision was made we discussed a couple of descent options while munching on some calories. While Caro was in favour of a retreat down Summit Creek, in pursuit of less knee effort, I argued for a much shorter route off the eastern side of the ridge. "I reckon that long tongue of flat snow coming off the ridge down there at about 1,950m looks like a friendly ramp. Shall we head for that guys?"

The section of ridge between us and the "friendly ramp" was mostly broken rock on a moderate gradient, so we felt the tension fall away as we enjoyed the views as we descended. At the ramp though Caro was unimpressed, as indeed was I. The ramp was no longer at all friendly, so Simon suggested another exit point further down the ridge. His option turned out to be partly friendly but, after running the ropes out to their full extent on a somewhat awkward abseil, Simon discovered that the next pitch was less friendly and also un-protectable. So back up he came and further down the ridge we went.

Soon we pitched, more for practise than necessity, a rope length down a snow chute on to a broad snow field one further over from the one we'd ascended that morning. It was then just a plod back around the 1,600m contour until Upper Traverse Hut came into view. Back in the Hut about 3.30pm Travers' summit was shrouded in swirling cloud and the first rain drops began to fall. It's always disappointing not to reach the top, but at least this made us feel like we'd made the right call to bail when we did.

Will was waiting for us, explaining that after having taken a jaunt up to Travers Saddle with Nina and Ian, they had decided to head down valley and would rejoin us in two days. While it would have been nice to have their company, that evening we savoured the luxury of having the entire hut to ourselves, despite it being Labour weekend.

Next morning dawned crisp and clear – better than the morning of our climb, despite the weather forecast suggesting otherwise.

The south ridge and summit of Mt Travers, viewed from above Travers Saddle. Mt Cupola is just left partly in cloud

Simon, Caro and I headed for Travers Saddle and soon discovered that there had also been a freeze overnight. With the clarity of hindsight we realised that this should have been our summit day. "Buggar! Ah well" we thought, "might as well make the most of the situation and go check out the grade three route up from the Saddle, along the South Ridge".

We only had walking axes and no rope, so Simon and I just went as far as the conditions would permit, while Caro enjoyed a bit of down time soaking up her surroundings below the Saddle. After a steep front point onto a broad shoulder at 2,000m we called it a day. From our high point we could see the way to the notch guarding access to the summit snow fields and felt that, on a good day, this could be a very rewarding and doable route. Maybe next time!

As we descended again to the Saddle we were surprised to see how quickly the snow had deteriorated again as the day wore on. But it was great to take in the beautiful views on and around the Saddle. As Simon said "any day in the mountains is a good day."

After lunch we bid farewell to Upper Travers Hut and headed down to John Tait Hut. En route we checked out Travers Falls, which was a nice surprise. Just a little down off the trail in a lovely, extensive goblin grotto of ferns and moss, it was definitely worth a visit. At John Tait Hut Labour weekend caught up with us in the form of a noisy, crowded Hut. But this only accentuated our fond memories of Upper Travers Hut.

Our final day involved a flat trudge through pretty beech forest back to our water taxi pickup point near Lake Head Hut. At the other end we reunited with Nina and Ian to swap accounts of our separate experiences. Supping on a chardy back on the Ferry I mulled over my growing list of unfinished business and pondered how best to prevent that snowball called Anxiety from gathering momentum next time.

For more images and route map
www.occasionalclimber.co.nz