

Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For:

Ladder In The Wilderness

by Peter Laurenson



For the fourth article in this series we're still in the Tararua Ranges. There are plenty of striking places in the Tararuas, but the ladder at the steepest section of the Tararua Peaks, just west of Maungahuka Hut, stands out to me. As photographers we're always on the lookout for a striking angle. Well, the ladder offers that, but you need to be willing to put in at least two hard days, or more commonly three solid days of tramping to get in and out, via one of several approaches.

The most common approach is the circuit from the Otaki Forks carpark, up past Field Hut to Bridge Peak, then along the main range past Maungahuka Hut, Anderson Memorial Hut and over Junction Knob, then plunging down to Otaki River and Waitewaewae Hut, before returning to Otaki Forks. I've done this travelling light in claggy Easter conditions in two very demanding days; and another trip with two of my teenage sons in fine conditions over three days. I recommend the latter, not only to avoid exhaustion, but also to allow time to photograph some spectacular landscapes.

The trail from Otaki Forks (80m) all the way up, pretty much, to Bridge Peak (1,421m) is in very good condition these days, allowing quick progress. From Bridge Peak the poled route heads eastwards down towards Boyd Wilson Knob, at 1,138m, the first of four named high points that steadily climb again to the Tararua Peaks at 1,325m. This is engaging terrain, often requiring hands as well as feet and in fine conditions it's really enjoyable. To the west you can clearly see Kapiti Island and Wairarapa to the east. You'll know when you're nearing the ladder by the heady ambience and a steep, two hands required, partially cable protected drop to a small notch. Beyond that is 'the void'.

It was in the 1930s that intrepid trampers first pushed a route through the Tararua Peaks. Using climbing ropes for protection, they took several attempts to crack it. Later, the Tararua Tramping Club installed a wire cable, which I imagine would have been a fairly focusing ascent or descent tool, especially in wet conditions. The cable was later upgraded by the Forest Service to a chain ladder. Pictures reveal a wobbly affair that, at least, would be preferable to a single cable. DOC fixed the current aluminium ladder in place in the early 2000s. About 25m high, with over 70 rungs, it's an impressive

and very effective way to get up or down the crux section. For photographers, it challenges your imagination and courage to get the very best angles.

At the bottom of the ladder, a dramatic, chain-protected section skirts underneath the summit of Tunui, before rejoining the main ridge. Back on the ridge, the route leads over Maungahuka (1,330m), then drops to Maungahuka Hut.

The twelve-bunk Maungahuka Hut, nestled into the tussock hillside beside a pretty tarn at 1,280m, deserves its reputation for being situated in one of the Tararua's most spectacular spots. This became even more apparent, when I looked back from the ridge north of Anderson Memorial Hut the next afternoon, to see the main range unfold in clearing cloud. Right in the middle, at what appeared to be near the highest point, sat a tiny red dot commanding unimpeded views. And those views are wonderful at both dawn and dusk, so Maungahuka Hut is definitely worth an overnight stay.

From Maugahuka Hut, the poled route continues along the main ridge in the direction of four more named high points, the first being Simpson down at 1,138m. There is some more quite exposed, steep terrain between Simpson and Aokaparangi (1,354m). Beyond Aokaparangi is Kahiwiroa (1,320m) and, a little further north, the route drops back into the bush.

Immediately after breaching the bush line, you're confronted with an unexpected and dramatic contrast – some of the finest Goblin forest I've ever seen – another excellent photo stop.

The terrain beyond Anderson Memorial Hut, up over Junction Knob (1,375m) and down off the main ridge via Shoulder Knob (1,320m), is considerably easier, though there is still a relentless 1,000 metre drop through forest, over slippery roots and mud, to the Otaki River and Waitewaewae Hut. From there it's just another four or five hours bush walking to lug your pack and hopefully a pixel-packed memory card back to the Otaki Forks carpark.

If you're keen to reach this 'worth the effort location' you can find more details and a route map at:

www.occasionalclimber.co.nz/browse-images-2/new-zealand-north-island/tararuas-browse/15159-2/



INTO THE VOID

F8, 1/250s, ISO125, 24mm



BEST VIEW IN THE TARARUAS

F8, 1/100s, ISO125, 24mm



MAUNGAHUKA TARN

F8, 1/320s, ISO125, 24mm