

Vertigo

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Enjoying sunrise beneath Kaitiaki Peak, on the east side of Ball Pass - more [here](#)

Overnighting with a Kaitiaki

Words and pictures Peter Laurenson

Since Guy Mannering and A. P. Harper first crossed it in January 1890, Ball Pass has become one of those better known spots than most in our Southern Alps. So when my climbing buddies Simon and Caro suggested we do it due to the weather forecast being more favourable there than most other places at the time I thought, “yeah, I’ve wanted to check out Ball Pass for years”.

Many years before I’d crossed Copeland Pass which, at the time, seemed reasonably straight forward, so I wasn’t expecting the Ball Pass route to be too challenging, especially in summer. But right from the get go this route continued to surprise us.

We set off from the Whitehorse carpark (Hooker Valley) in calm fine weather and soon realised that our choice to go west to east was a good one. Doing it this way had us nice and cool until mid day in the shadow of the Mount Cook Range directly above. We would also later discover that the steepest sections of the route are on the western side – easier to ascend than descend.

At the first swing bridge on the tourist trail leading to Hooker Lake we declined the bridge, staying on the steep craggy ground on the true left of the river. Our understanding was that this is where you had to go to access the moraine on the east side of Hooker Lake. Our first surprise, after having battled up a little-used smear of a trail for an hour or so, was an Asian tourist looking down on us from a small ridge above us. “You going Ball Pass?” he asked. “How the hell did he get there?” we thought. Then we spotted a sign indicating Ball Pass right, Hooker Lake straight ahead. The trail had been expanded and we hadn’t caught up with that fact. Ah well, I got some lovely shots along the old route that I wouldn’t have if we’d known.

From there we began a quite gradual ascent of the moraine, affording ever more expansive views across Hooker Lake and up the glacier to Aoraki Mount Cook. The main challenge on this section of the route are several deeply cut side streams which demand some steep ups and downs to get around, but after about three hours we reached the grassy flats of east Hooker Valley camping area, perched above the terminal moraine. Here was our second surprise – despite the wide notoriety of Ball Pass, route finding is no piece of cake. We wandered around scratching our heads for half an hour or so before spotting a solitary cairn, hidden in a sea of rock. The main problem was that, leading up out of the camping area, there are at least two viable looking chutes. Eventually we realised that it’s the most northern one we needed to ascend.

Up we went - initially steep scree, then 300 or so vertical metres of steep snow. By now the sun had caught up with us and, as we cramponed up, sweat poured off. The chute narrowed to a choke stone that I imagined could be a challenge in winter conditions, especially if descending.

A little above that, at about 1,600m, a large rocky plain called the Playing Field came into view, with Mount Mabel looming over head. Here, again, route finding demanded care. The key is to remember to keep left/ north. A zigzag Z trail leads up about 100m to Mabel’s northwest ridge crest which, once we rounded, gave us our first view of Ball Pass. And it didn’t disappoint, looking very much a mountain pass.

To gain the Pass required a sometimes exposed rocky traverse around beneath Mount Rosa to a snow field, which we joined at about 1,800m. This went up in a north easterly direction to the Pass, though the last 30 or so metres were on steep slippery gravel.

Below - approaching the east Hooker Valley camping flats (right), with the steep snow chute leading to the Playing Field above



On the Pass at 2,121m, we knew we were in big mountain country. Back down our ascent route lay a panorama taking in the Sealy Range beyond Hooker Lake in the south, then the Main Divide, until Aoraki Mount Cook took over in the north. For the first time, on the Pass, Aoraki's magnificent Caroline Face came into view as well and, beyond that to the east, unfolded the Tasman Glacier, the Minarets, Elie De Beaumont, the Malte Brun Range, to name but a few of the more notable points. O for oooooorsome!

By the time we reached our campsite, across a snow field skirting Ball Glacier, about 70 metres below the Pass, it had been about an eight hour day. As far as memorable campsites go, this one was right up there. Two nice flat areas have been carved out and protected by low stone walls, in a sheltered spot commanding unbeatable sunrise/sunset views. Though it took us a while to spot them, there were two tiny tarns – more rock pools actually, right under our noses, nestled in a small outcrop beside the campsite. We settled in to enjoy all this, hoping that the less than appealing weather forecast would not bear out. It didn't and my camera got a thrashing.

Our next surprise was the craggy high point looming to the south, directly above camp. The day dawned calm and clear and we felt no particular compunction to break camp. The crag looked suitably climbable, to the extent that it would've been rude not to. So we did, enjoying an easy scramble up on to what Mr Google then told us is named Kaitiaki Peak. At 2,222m it's the highest point on the Mount Cook Range to the south of Ball Pass, affording views on another magnitude of fabulousness than back down on the Pass. Life was good.

Kaitiaki translates as trustee, or guardian, which perhaps makes Kaitiaki peak the guardian of Ball Pass. As we set off in the direction of Caroline Hut about 10am I was thankful to this Kaitiaki for any role played in laying on such lovely conditions for us. But on the eastern side of the range there was no respite from the glaring sun. Stupidly I had not sufficiently slip-slop-slapped the day before and had to wear my fleecy to cover up my sunburned arms. Sweating took on a new meaning for me as we worked our way onto and along Ball Ridge.

Here was my next surprise. Simon and Caro had talked this down as a fairly easy section of the route. Though not as steep as parts of the western side, much of Ball Ridge is exposed and crumbling. Lots of little undulations and sub ridges to lead us astray, especially as it was hard to stay focused when the views unfolding around me were so beautiful. Aoraki's Caroline Face dominated the scene, but the views up Tasman Glacier were also compelling.

It took two or so hours to drop down to Caroline Hut at 1,800m, where we gratefully restocked our water supplies. From there was some more scrambling to regain the main ridge. At about 1,500m we paused for food. Simon and Caro were suffering from foot strife, having worn their semi rigid climbing boots. My problem was heat, so I went ahead while they aired their feet.

My understanding was that all I had to do was keep on the ridge. It did seem a bit odd though how poor the condition of the trail was getting. I could still see a trail, but disturbing cracks were beginning to appear in the dry, rocky earth. The further I descended, the more these cracks looked like small crevasses, until I reached a sudden end point where daylight shone through gaping holes. The rapid contraction of Ball Glacier had left huge exposed rock slopes behind, no longer supported by glacial ice. The land was literally falling apart. Yikes, time to backtrack.

I sweated my way back up the ridge and met Simon and Caro. We decided to drop straight off the ridge, down steep scrub and hope we weren't bluffed. It was a good call. If we'd gone any sooner we would have been bluffed, but at that point we snuck down on to the flatter boulder and scrub field below. We'd all missed the new track, which drops off on the east side of the ridge at about 1,400m.

About four hours after leaving camp we trudged in to Ball Hut (1,020m), longing to quench our thirsts. "Looks like the tank's empty" reported Simon. "What the..." Well, it had been an incredibly hot summer. Upon further investigation he dredged some out after removing the top lid on the tank. "Thank you Simon!"

Beyond the hut was another eight or so kms of gradual descent down the old Ball Hut Road. In places the road has given way to the effects of glacier contraction, requiring short scrambles through scree and boulder fields. Luckily for us our friend Pip was willing to collect us, wherever we met, along the 4WD track above Blue Lake carpark. As soon as Simon got a signal he put in a call and, with still a couple of kms to go to the carpark, her Subaru Forester appeared around a corner. That was nice. Even nicer were the bottles of beer she produced from the boot as we loaded up our gear. I hadn't realised until then that Pip is an angel.

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

Below - a panorama from the summit of Kaitiaki Peak. From left, the lower Mount Cook Range with Mount Rosa (2,161m) closest. Then the Hooker Lake, Mount Sefton left of centre, with the Main Divide stretching right to Aoraki Mount Cook. The Caroline Face is top right





Left above - Caro ascending the lower section of Kaitiaki Peak above the campsite



Centre - regaining Ball Ridge beyond Caroline Hut



Right - on the lower section of Ball Ridge, with Tasman Glacier beyond

Below - setting off from the campsite beneath Ball Pass. Tasman Lake is right, with the craggy profile of Ball Ridge stretching left to the Malte Brun Range

