

Vertigo

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Approaching the second ice pitch at about 2,670m on the SE Ridge of Te HeuHeu. More [here](#)

Trip Reports

Another great day in the mountains

Climbing Te HeuHeu's SE Ridge
Words and pictures Peter Laurenson

Just as I thought what lay above wasn't the prettiest icescape I'd seen, Simon paraphrased for me. "This ice is shit." He was busily hacking away at brittle rime ice on steep volcanic rock. Ice fragments flew everywhere. There did appear to be a kind of shelf system zigzagging up from our point at 2,670m towards the summit of Te HeuHeu, some sixty metres higher. But yes, it wasn't pretty.

Kathy looked sheepishly at me and said "I don't want to stop you climbing it, but I'm going to bow out of that." She'd battled up two earlier steep, exposed icy sections lower on Te HeuHeu's southeast ridge, pushing her cramponing and axe work beyond her prior experience. I can't think of many grandmas that could get as far as she had already that morning, so had no problem with her not wishing to follow Simon.

There were five in our party as we set off from the TASC lodge under full moonlight at 7am. Simon Williamson, partner Caro, son Felix, Kathy Ombler and I. The sky was beautifully clear, but the breeze was nippy, progressing to bitey as we ascended. Our intended route was the southeast ridge, which presents a very aesthetically appealing profile from the lodge door. The snow squeaked under our crampons – lovely.



The first section up through Tukino Ski field was very straightforward – good terrain to generate some body heat for warmth. As we reached a ridge at about 2,000m on the north side, a molten orb breached the eastern skyline, treating us to some alpenglow on steroids.

Otherworldly scalloped snow caught the low angled rays, creating a luxuriant scene at our feet that just stretched away to the horizon around us. Our route lay ahead, bathed in mauve.

Left - at the base of the ice cliff at 2,670m

One of the beauties of club trips is that more experienced climbers help less experienced ones push their boundaries. In this case I'd invited Kathy to join our party at the Wellington Section Tukino ice climbing meet. It was a chance for her to get into a winter ice headspace before she joined an Adventure Consultant's ice climbing course down south. So naturally, when conditions became more demanding at about the 2,400 metre mark, I took on an informal guiding role. And that upped the challenge for me too, requiring me to take direct responsibility for the safety of another. My rope work is a fair way south of slick, but I managed to effectively protect her on a short steep exposed pitch, followed by a section of short roping, until we reached a second steeper pitch that Simon had already led up and protected.

From the ski field we traversed across to the lower southeast ridge and began gaining height in earnest. Conditions were really good, but our first little challenge presented at 2,400m, where the icy wind had scoured away the snow, leaving a hard steep section of ice with a yawning drop below. Simon, Caro and Felix forged ahead while Kathy and I enjoyed our first pitch of the morning. That followed shortly after by our second, which was on the line of ice cliff that stretches horizontally right, appearing to be about three quarters of the way up the route, when viewed from TASC Lodge.

Simon belayed Felix up first and then decided he'd had enough of standing in the persistent, icy wind. "Dad says all three get on the rope" yelled messenger Felix through the spindrift. Hmm, well, okay then. Soon Caro, then Kathy and I, bringing up the rear, climbed up the steep chute of rime ice. The very start of the chute was the crux, where having a top rope paid dividends.



Looking to Te HeuHeu (2,732m) from the exposed summit of Tukino (2,720m)

By late morning we gathered at the base of the final ice cliff and agreed that Kathy and I would bypass the cliff, traversing right, underneath until it relented and became the west ridge.

The others would do battle with the rime ice. Kathy and I reached the top soon after, enjoying an unimpeded panorama. There's so much more to Ruapehu's terrain than "volcano" suggests.

We enjoyed this until the wind drove us down to the saddle between Te HeuHeu and Tukino. As we did so, two figures appeared from where we'd come up earlier, scampered up the final stretch to Te Heu-Heu's summit, then disappeared.

Kathy and I waited in the calm of the saddle, expecting to see three other figures emerge on top any moment. As time dragged those other two climbers didn't reappear either. I anguished about whether we should push on without them or not. We hadn't actually discussed what our now split party would do beyond the summit.

While we waited I suggested we climb up onto the top of Tukino, just twelve metres lower than neighbouring Te HeuHeu. This was my third time up Te HeuHeu and, until then, I'd never bothered to visit Tukino's summit. I'm glad we did, because it's a spectacular spot – a narrow outcrop of rime ice with sheer drops on three sides.

Climbing the western side of the summit ridge of Te HeuHeu, here at about 2,700m. Ruapehu's summit plateau unfolds behind



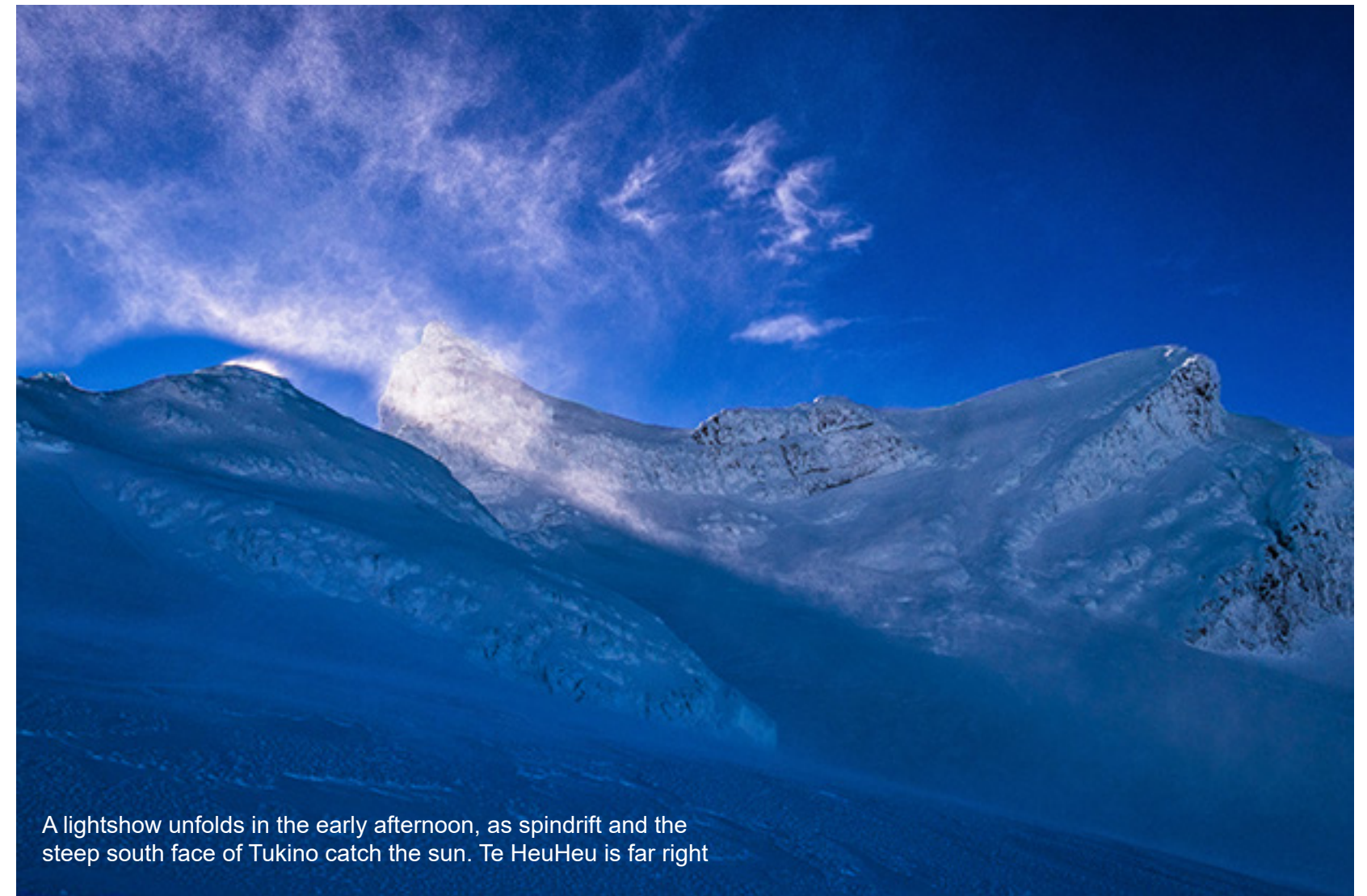
At about 2,600m
on the SE Ridge

The others still hadn't appeared on top of Te HeuHeu, but we reasoned that they were three and well experienced. They must be fine, so began our descent down the west ridge to Ruapehu's Summit Plateau. As we trudged towards the top of Mangatoetoenui Glacier three waving figures appeared above the ice cliffs. It was good to know for certain they were also on their way down.

As we plugged down the glacier the effect of the bright winter sun was evident. The firm conditions of the morning had gone. Now we had to be mindful of avalanche risk as we passed the convex snow bulge on the upper glacier. About 4pm we again reached the ski field, closing our day's loop.

Back in the warmth of TASC Lodge, sipping red wine that evening, we learnt that, due to the "shitiness of the ice", Simon had run out of ice screws short of Te HeuHeu's summit, so had to rap off, go around the traverse we'd used and then put in a top rope for Felix, so he could climb the rime. It had been Simon and Caro who were the "other two climbers" we'd seen. Ahhh-ha, mystery solved.

TASC Lodge is a treasure. You can step straight into your crampons or skis at the lodge door, wasting zero time on a tedious approach below the good stuff. The lodge is the ideal place to savour your day's exploits higher up too. Considering its 1,700 metre elevation, the extent of comfort afforded by its facilities is impressive. And then there's the lodge owner and resident alpine legend, Don French. As I sat with Don in the warm glow of the fire, sipping yet more red wine, he recounted epic climb after epic climb. Yes indeed, another great day in the mountains.



A lightshow unfolds in the early afternoon, as spindrift and the steep south face of Tukino catch the sun. Te HeuHeu is far right



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