



In to the void

Words and pictures Peter Laurenson

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. I'd seen photos of it – even a guy lugging his dog up it in his back pack. On my first visit five years ago I had a two day space over Easter, so thought it was time I went and had a look myself. I slogged through two long days in cloud and, at the time, the photographer in me knew I'd have to come back in better weather. And with a bit more time. The circuit from Otaki Folks, 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 Folks is physical – 55 horizontal kms and, more tellingly, 4,000 vertical metres of ascent and descent.

It was nearing the end of the first week of the April school holidays and not much was happening. "Okay guys, it's looking good for a two day weather window this coming Sunday/Monday. Time to put your screens down and gather some gear together." Some grunts from Ed, seventeen and Will fifteen, confirmed that they understood.

A few days later, in lovely clear weather as we made our way along the main range towards the Tararua Peaks, Will asks "So just how big is this ladder Dad?" Yes, its reputation was having its usual effect on the boys. 'Keen with a touch of apprehension' summed up their demeanour as we reached the top of the trail, just beneath Tuiti's summit. Ahead was a steep, two hands required, partially cable protected drop to a small notch. Beyond that was 'the void'.

It was in the 1930s that intrepid trampers first pushed a route through the Tararua Peaks. Using climbing ropes for protection, it took several attempts to crack it. Later a wire cable was installed, 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. The current aluminium ladder was installed by DOC 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 of this rugged route.



By the time I and my arthritic knees reached the top of the ladder in the exposed and craggy little notch between Tuiti and Tunui, the 1,325m twins known as the Tararua Peaks, Ed and Will were already lounging nonchalantly at the bottom. Damn it, I wanted to get some shots with someone on the solidly constructed structure. "Ed, climb up a bit so I can shoot you." To do that I had to gingerly dismount the ladder onto steep tussock on the ladder's true right (if you define the sides of ladders in terms of looking down them), then hook an arm around the top rung before going to that somewhat more precarious through-the-lens space.



A bit later we were getting a selfie at the DOC sign on top of Maungahuka (1,330m). The clear weather was giving way to swirling cloud as we dropped down to Maungahuka Hut at dusk. I lingered for more photos, enjoying some beautiful cloud-at-sunset light. And life got even better upon entering the hut. Four room temperature, i.e. chilled, bottles of Kiwi Lager sat gleaming appetizingly at me from the bench. Nec minute there were only three left and I felt considerably refreshed. The hut book revealed that two hunters had left them behind for all comers – legendary behaviour.

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 most spectacular spots in the Tararuas. 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.

This trip along the main range, with a stop at Maungahuka Hut is a must do for any hill and mountain lovers. For a route map and more images - www.occasionalclimber.co.nz

