

Vertigo

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Abseiling from a high point on the flanks of Mount Brown. More [here](#)

Trip Reports

Icy encounters above Bush Stream

Camping up Bush Stream in Aoraki Mount Cook National Park

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Camping in the mountains in mid winter is cold. I have a down Macpac bag that's meant to be cosy at minus seven. It wasn't. Mind you, I only had a half length therma rest and the ground cold seeped up through the tent floor and my bag into my lower legs and feet all night, even with two pairs of thick socks on. And in winter the nights are long.

It wasn't all suffering on a recent trip in to the upper reaches of Bush Stream in the Aoraki Mount Cook National Park though. For one, we choppered in to our campsite rather than slog 5kms up the rocky bed of Bush Stream from the road end near Glen Tanner. That meant we had luxuries like precooked dinners and red wine. When shared across our party of five, a trip in and out was only \$220 per head – money well spent I say.

Unlike many these days, my pathway into climbing was hiking rather than rock climbing. I'm still more inclined to tackle a route that includes a summit if the going's good, rather than focus primarily on technical climbing. But on this trip most of my companions owned many more cams, quick draws and ice screws than I. Our focus was the pursuit of vertical ice and I hoped to learn plenty from them.

The weather had been all over the place in the week leading up to our departure. The forecast was sufficiently bad just a day out to postpone. But then Piotr Nowak, our Christchurch based trip leader, called me on Thursday morning after the forecast did a miraculous U turn over night, explaining we were on again. Could I sort a flight?

Our chopper touched down beside Bush Stream at 1,150 metres, about 1pm next day. We immediately set up camp and geared up. Looking north, up the flanks of Mount Brown, we could see some near vertical white lines extending upwards from the steep sloping scree - worth a look.

Paul Knott and James Hobson, Canterbury Section NZAC members and very capable technical climbers made up one rope. Piotr, also a good technical climber, kindly opted to lead the rookies - myself and his partner Kim, who had never been in crampons. After establishing a belay stance at the base of the steep ice we enjoyed climbing a 60 metre pitch. Paul and Piot led on two ropes and we all abseiled off a V thread anchor, my first time doing that. For Kim the whole thing was new and her ear to ear grin suggested this pitch would be the first of many for her.





Above - The view east, down Bush Stream, from the shelf we used to access the ice. Our campsite is near where the stream leading out of the couloir meets Bush Stream. The couloir we climbed the day before is just visible at top centre, across the valley

Right - James leading a vertical 20 metre pitch - taking it calmly

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



By then it was nearly dusk, so we retreated to our campsite. It had been a great way to get started and, while up higher at about 1,500 metres, we'd spotted several other potential ice routes to the south, across the valley.

Next morning, after the sun had risen, we crawled out of our bags, stretched chilled bones and got ready to head up the south side of the valley. As we climbed, a couloir revealed itself from behind a rock buttress. It offered very enjoyable cramponing up through a system of exposed shelves. Paul and James had their sights set on a frozen waterfall, with further possibilities looming up above that too.

This time, given the extra exposure and fully vertical nature of the frozen waterfall, Kim and Piotr retreated while I tagged along with Paul and James. With youthful vigour James led up the hard, vertical ice. His experience told him not to rush it, otherwise his upper body would get over pumped and lactic acid laden muscles would translate in to fear. With frequent pauses to let the blood flow back into one arm then the next, he patiently made his way up the pitch, placing ice screw protection as he went.



Then it was my turn. Even with the total safety of a top rope I still wasn't sure if I'd be able to follow James. It was hard. My gear wasn't as specialised for ice and nor was my technique – or lack of. By the time I'd smashed and grunted my way up 20 metres of vertical ice to the lip, where the gradient relented, my hands were numb and my muscles pumped to the extent that landing accurate axe placements had become a bit of a lottery. It was a relief to peer over the lip and see the rope leading up to a snow shelf not much further above, where James had set up a belay.

Up beside James, while the blood painfully gushed back into my numbed hands, Paul also followed up. I felt a little better about my own performance when I heard Paul grunting in pain after also clearing the lip. Because I wasn't able to clean the route of the ice screws on my way up he had had to, therefore spending longer on the face than me. His hands were also numbed and now giving him grief as the blood returned.

Although a short pitch, James and Paul judged it to be grade 4 ice terrain due to the verticality and hardness of the ice – a superb learning experience for me and enough to tell me that I won't be leading any grade 4 ice pitches anytime soon. There was more climbing to be had directly above us, but both Paul and I were satisfied to back off. I got a fine lesson in V thread placement, then we rapped back down our pitch.

As we descended the shelves back into the couloir we caught up with Piotr and Kim, who were practicing snowcraft skills where it counted. It was excellent terrain to apply a range of climbing techniques. We all trudged into camp late afternoon at wine o'clock.

On Sunday, our last day, Paul and James went north again in pursuit of more vertical ice while Piotr, Kim and I headed up valley into the Cirque at its head. The terrain was friendly, but the dry, unconsolidated powder snow didn't make for easy going. As we ascended towards a saddle at 2,150m we saw various other ice climbing options on both sides of the valley. A family of four Chamois grazed on lean pickings ahead but, when they saw us, trotted off up into the bluffs on the southern side. On the saddle we enjoyed an expansive panorama, taking in Mt Brown to our left, the cirque wall leading south to Mauka Atua, Dobson River valley, to our right and the Naumann Range, far right. A brief lunch stop was all we had time for – our chopper was due back at 4pm – nice.

