

Here comes the sun, viewed from the southern edge of Fanthams Peak, with Mount Taranaki and Syme Hut left

# Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For

by Peter Laurenson

I first became aware of the impact we travellers and tourists have on both natural and urban environments when I set off to see the world in 1988. Since then, as each year has passed, that impact has become more and more apparent. It's not good. Yes, I know the jobs and wealth created are appreciated by locals and businesses, but it's a finite planet we live on. Mantras like 'growth is essential', 'it's only business' and 'a healthy economy looks after everything else' have always sat uneasily with me. But today, as we gaze (still too often blindly, so it seems) down the gapping double barrels of climate change, the dark side of those claims is undeniable.

Even if our planet wasn't warming at an alarming rate, too many people in one spot at one time still have

a disturbing impact – environmentally, logistically, emotionally, spiritually, and aesthetically. So it's with caution that I agreed to write about some wonderful photographic locations I've been privileged to enjoy. By showing you them, will I destine these places to also one day become over-run like the Tongariro Crossing, Roys Peak or the 'Lone Willow' at Wanaka? Perhaps not – if I chose places that demand a little pain in order to enjoy the gain. Places that take more effort to reach than the immediate-gratification-selfie-seeking hordes are prepared to make. Well, that's the plan at least.

To begin then. A favourite for me is a winter sunrise at Syme Hut. Perched on the northern edge of Fanthams Peak, the secondary cone on the southern side of

Mount Taranaki, Syme Hut is a basic 10 bunk DOC hut. At 1,950m and well above the tree line, there's no fuel for a stove up there, but a tap and sink in the sheltered entrance alcove give access to rain water when the pipes aren't frozen.

Access to the hut is from Manaia Road, which ends at a car park and DOC visitor centre, near Dawson Falls. From there it's a relentless climb from 900m, on a well defined track up through native forest. As you clear the tree line at 1,400m it steepens and a series of steps make the going a little easier to begin with, before you reach the bare eastern flanks of Fanthams Peak. To reach the hut only requires about 3 hours of climbing, so access is relatively easy by New Zealand backcountry standards.

But here's the catch – the ultimate time to photograph this location is in full winter conditions. While Syme Hut and Fanthams Peak are an impressive location at any time of year, it's when snow and fantastic rime ice encase everything that the magic really happens. Even from the hut door, you can watch the eastern horizon redden. As the dawn sun's light intensifies through mauve, blood red, orange and yellow, distant Mounts Ruapehu, Ngauruhoe and Tongariro are silhouetted on the eastern skyline. Meanwhile, all around you the snow and ice become a fine art canvass, reflecting all the drama of the changing light.





*Mount Taranaki and Syme Hut, early morning from Fanthams Peak*

The upper 600m of Mount Taranaki, bathed in glorious dawn hues, loom larger than life directly above to the north and, sometimes, if you walk across to the southern edge of Fanthams Peak, you can even see the mountain's shadow cast out across the lowlands to the southwest.

Syme Hut (and its separate loo) become partially buried in snow and sometimes completely encased in magnificent rime ice in mid winter. The hut's single door is split horizontally in the middle so that entry and exit are possible just through the upper half when required. I was able to crampon up rime encased weather stabiliser cables on to the hut's roof on one winter visit. The evening before, when we arrived we had to hack our way through a coating of ice to even see the upper half of the hut door. When the hut is encased like this, inside it's

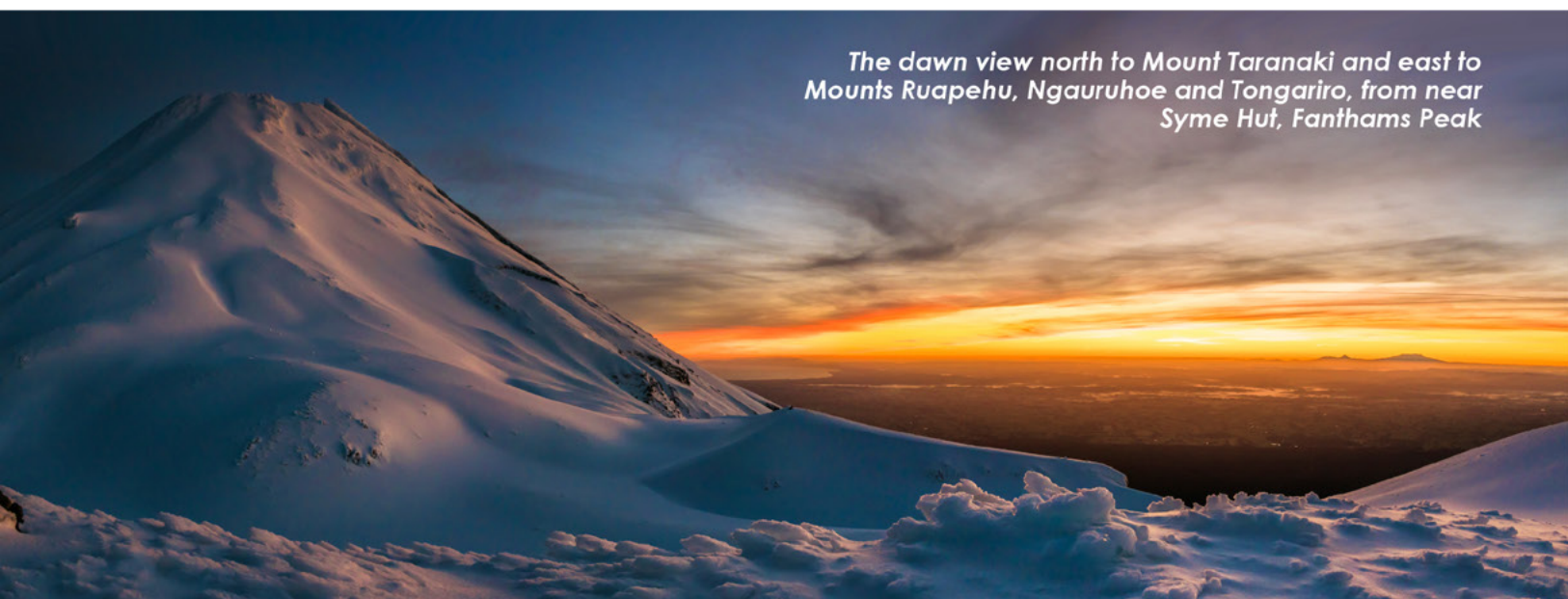
a cool 2 °C and the soft turquoise light is a bit like what you might see from inside a glacial crevasse.

It's an amazing place, perhaps the single best place to photograph Mount Taranaki in my opinion. But don't even think about going there unless you're comfortable on exposed frozen terrain kitted out with crampons and ice axe. While the terrain is not technically difficult – free climbing has always been how I've climbed up to Syme Hut and then on to the main summit – a fall could be deadly. This place is not friendly in bad weather either, so you need a fine weather window, both for your safety and also so you can enjoy the full photographic potential.

For these reasons, I don't think the selfie horde will ever reach Syme Hut, but if you're a keen landscape photographer, I suggest you add this place to your bucket list.



*Mounts Ruapehu, Ngauruhoe and Tongariro at dawn, from near Syme Hut, Fanthams Peak*



*The dawn view north to Mount Taranaki and east to Mounts Ruapehu, Ngauruhoe and Tongariro, from near Syme Hut, Fanthams Peak*