



A view from the crater rim at 2,750m, looking north across the Summit Plateau. Tahurangi, the main summit of Ruapehu, is right

# Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For: Mount Ruapehu Summit Plateau

by Peter Laurenson

In my first article of this series (issue 28) I described a dawn/dusk photo session achieved by climbing to Syme Hut on Fantham's Peak, Mount Taranaki. Being New Plymouth born, that mountain holds a special significance for me, but we live in an amazing land and there are plenty of other fabulous spots that are seemingly designed for photographers – if you're prepared to put in the effort.

At 2,797m Tahurangi is Ruapehu's highest point as well as the highest point in the North Island. As the closest ski area to our biggest urban population centre, lots of people visit Mount Ruapehu every year – for skiing, about 450,000 people a year, that's without the trampers and general sightseers. What the vast

majority of visitors don't see though is the Summit Plateau, the surprisingly expansive, relatively flat area contained within this volcano's crater rim.

To reach the Summit Plateau there are several quite straight forward options. Year round your feet can take you there from the Turoa and Whakapapa ski area carparks. Whakapapa also operates a tourist chair lift that gets you above 2,000m before you even have to start climbing. From the eastern side of the mountain, when the road is in condition, you can drive to 1,700m at Tukino village and walk from there. In winter those same options exist, but Turoa also offers a sightseers' lift pass that takes you to 2,300m, from

there the most direct route to the crater rim, just north of the main summit, is by climbing up a snow face.

In winter skiers, sightseers, and climbers can all quite easily plug or skin their way up to the Summit Plateau on a day trip, if they come prepared with the right gear to handle the cold and ice underfoot. As on any alpine terrain, they must be aware of the weather conditions and avalanche risk too – remember that poor weather on the Summit Plateau is a killer – at such times, stay away!

Usually the chair lifts open from around 9am-4pm but for photographers that's no good for magic hour shooting. Sure, you can enjoy and capture the beauty of the rising or setting sun colouring the slopes of the mountain from a distance, but being inside the crater, high on the Summit Plateau, takes things to another level altogether – literally, aesthetically and experientially.

Camping up on the Summit Plateau is easier said than done. Firstly, you need calm and clear weather – if it's cloudy your photography will likely be underwhelming and, if it's windy, trying to keep your

tent anchored to the surface is a near impossible challenge. There's another factor to be aware of if you've never camped on snow before. Snow is not like ground – it's freezing cold, often soft, and it melts. Without insulation your bum will soon go numb sitting on it and your clothes and sleeping bag won't be enough to keep you warm all night long. Therefore a good ground mat is essential. Anchoring your tent to the surface is not straight forward either as there are no rocks available in winter and, depending on the condition of the snow, it can be difficult to peg your tent down – much longer items such as ski poles and ice axes come in handy. Also remember that water to drink and for cooking must be melted, and there are no toilets.

For these reasons I don't think the selfie horde will ever experience Plateau Camp. If you're a keen landscape photographer though, overcoming these challenges will reward you many times over when the dawn and dusk symphonies of sunlight and snow unfold and chances are, you'll be the only one in the audience.

A dawn view east from 2,650m  
on Summit Plateau, Ruapehu.  
A stitch of 3 landscape shots

F5.6, 1/60s, ISO200, 27mm



At dawn looking east across  
Pyramid Peak, Summit Plateau

F11, 1/160s, ISO 200, 72mm

