

Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For: Cupola Hut

by Peter Laurenson



THE VIEW WEST AT DAWN,
ABOVE CUPOLA HUT

F8, 1/100s, ISO125, 24mm, stitch of 3

For the sixth article in this series we're still in the South Island, this time up in Nelson Lakes, where a little effort will reward you with a comfortable night in a charming high country hut, giving easy access to alpine vistas and magnificent sunrises.

I'm referring to Cupola Hut. To get there requires finding your way to the northern shore of Lake Rotoiti, beside Saint Arnaud. From there you can take a water taxi to the south end of the lake, saving you three or so hours of walking, although if you have the time, some of the mirror reflections to be enjoyed when the conditions are right are worth the effort in themselves. From the south end, a beautiful trail mostly through beech forest, tracing the Travers River, gets you to John Tait Hut after five or so hours of walking. You can stay here to break up the journey, or carry on if feeling up to it. The harder work starts as you climb about 600 vertical metres to Cupola Hut, situated at 1,380 metres, taking two or three hours.

My first visit to Cupola Hut was a July trip and that time, the snow was so deep we had to dig our way into the hut. A shovel mounted above the hut door is there for good reason. So when I returned to the hut again in August this year, my memories were of a very cold spot. This time though, there was no snow to dig and a potbelly stove had been installed. I instantly felt high country charm wash over me.

Built in 1957 as a base for scientific researchers, Cupola offers eight bunks (which can fill quickly on weekends, holidays, and during fine spells) in a long oblong box with plenty of windows. Situated just below the tree line amongst beautiful beech forest, the view to the south face of Mount Hopeless, with its intimidatingly exposed couloir route to the summit, is spectacular. Just a minute's climbing above the hut and you're on an open, rolling



tussock shelf, with views of peaks above from north to south, when looking west; and more open vistas down Cupola Creek to the Saint Arnaud Range when looking east. This more distant open easterly aspect is perfect for sunrises. So for photographers, you've got the hut itself, the great views from it, and the even better vistas from above the hut, especially at dawn.

Don't forget that this route to Cupola Hut also takes you to the junctions with several other longer legs – up over Travers Saddle, up Hopeless Creek and over Sunset Saddle, or up the Cascade Track, to Lake Angelus, to name three. Whichever way you chose to tackle your journey, just as an overnighter or over several days, it's definitely worth sweating for.

For a route map and more details visit:

<https://www.occasionalclimber.co.nz/browse-images-2/new-zealand-south-island/nelson-lakes-browse/three-saddles-nelson-lakes/>



NELSON LAKES
A DAWN VIEW SOUTHEAST
FROM ABOVE CUPOLA HUT

F5, 1/30s, ISO125, 24mm



'THE VIEW EAST AT SUNRISE,
FROM ABOUT 1,750 METRES,
ABOVE CUPOLA HUT

F8, 1/100s, ISO125, 24mm