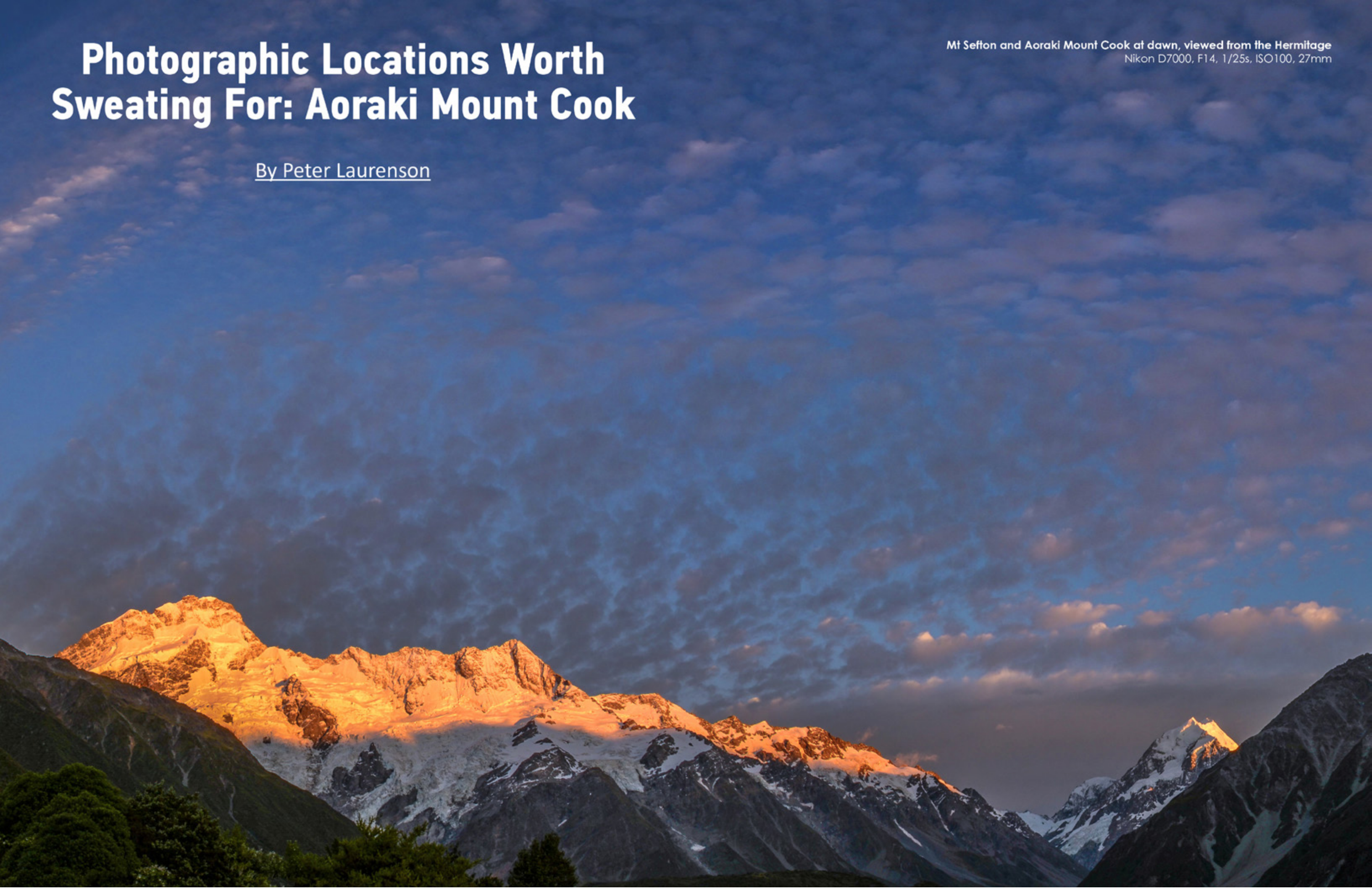


Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For: Aoraki Mount Cook

By Peter Laurensen

Mt Sefton and Aoraki Mount Cook at dawn, viewed from the Hermitage
Nikon D7000, F14, 1/25s, ISO100, 27mm





To get the year off to a good start, the first article in this series for 2021 takes a look at what is perhaps the ultimate New Zealand 'worth sweating for' photographic location. In fact, before you even have to raise a sweat, and even if you're just one of hordes of tourists as was the case pre-Covid 19, you can still capture some magnificent alpine landscape images.

I refer to Mount Cook Village in the heart of Aoraki Mount Cook National Park. From this alpine base, if the weather permits, you can simply fall out of bed to enjoy a beautiful sunrise lighting up the magnificent alpine wall spanning between Aoraki Mount Cook and Mount Sefton. It's one of the reasons why this place became over-run with international tourists until the virus called an abrupt halt to proceedings.

Another reason is that from this base, you can access multiple day walks offering dramatic landscape photography. The amount of sweat required varies quite a bit depending on your choice and, the good news is that, with the exception of Mueller Hut, the degree of solitude enjoyed increases in proportion to the amount of sweat parted with.

Following are nine options, briefly described in rough order from least to most sweat-inducing. This map

shows the location of each option within the national park.

1. TASMAN GLACIER LAKE

Measuring 23.5 kilometres, Tasman Glacier is the longest in New Zealand. Until the early 1990s the glacier had retained a stable 28 kilometre length, but since then it has become a graphic demonstration of the impact of global warming, with its terminal lake growing dramatically in size as the glacial ice melts and retreats.

To reach the terminal lake, take Tasman Valley Road all the way to the carpark. A gravel footpath then takes you the top of the west-side moraine, taking 20 or so minutes easy walking, so it's likely you'll have plenty of company up there, but it's an impressive view of the ever expanding terminal lake, often with icebergs floating in front of a wide mountain vista.

Another photographic option is the Blue Lakes, two small tarns to the west of the moraine. They offer many more colours than just blue in the right light.

2. KEA POINT

Another moraine view point, situated above Mueller Glacier. This viewpoint is quite different from Tasman



Top: One of several small tarns beside the western moraine of Tasman Glacier. Nikon P7800, F7, 1/500s, ISO100, 28mm
 Bottom: Aoraki Mt Cook viewed from Kea Point at dusk. Nikon D70S, F22, 1/200s, ISO200, 66mm

Glacier though - the northern moraine of Mueller Glacier provides an impressive foreground, a gigantic sheer wall of unstable rubble.

Only about 20 minutes easy walk beyond Whitehorse Hill Campsite, Kea Point offers bench seats well suited to sipping a wine while you enjoy the sun setting on Aoraki Mount Cook. And this is a view to savour, being set further back than the Hooker Glacier view, it really accentuates Aoraki Mount Cook's impressive scale.

3. HOOKER GLACIER LAKE

Hooker Glacier is significantly smaller than Tasman Glacier being 11 kilometres long and only a quarter as thick. Even so, this is still Aoraki Mount Cook country, so everything still feels huge. Another distinction between the two glaciers is that it's much easier to get down to lake level at Hooker Glacier Lake, so you get a different perspective, while also having an unimpeded view of Aoraki Mount Cook.

On a well graded trail, supported by swing bridges and boardwalks, the Hooker Valley trail is a very popular walk. It takes about 90 minutes to wander up

the 5 kilometres to the terminal lake, ascending less than 100 metres.

The Hooker Valley trail also offers nice views of the upper portion of Hooker River, a very popular spot to capture long exposure river scenes with big mountain backdrops.

4. RED TARNs

While the first three vantage points are likely to be busy, the Red Tarns are less so because they requires a 300 metre climb up a well stepped but relentless staircase. The base of the staircase is reached via a bridge crossing the Black Birch Stream at the south end of Mount Cook Village.

The reward for the steep climb is a distinctive, photogenic foreground – the Red Tarns – and a beautiful backdrop encompassing the Sefton to Aoraki wall, from a new perspective. The red plants in the tarns are a form of pond weed, offering a photographic challenge to see how well you can capture their distinctive colour and underwater shapes and texture.



Aoraki Mount Cook, viewed from the terminal lake of Hooker Glacier.
Nikon D7000, F14, 1/160s, ISO100, 27mm



The Red Tarns beneath Mt Sebastopol, Mt Sefton (left) and Aoraki Mt Cook (right) behind.
Nikon D7000, F14, 1/80s, ISO100, 27mm



On top of Mount Sebastopol, looking north over Wakefield Ridge to Mt Cook (left of centre) and Mount Sefton (far left).
Nikon P7800, F8, 1/320s, ISO100, 28mm, stitch of 3

5. MOUNT SEBASTOPOL

By following the trail above the Red Tarns, you can climb on to the top of Mount Sebastopol (1,468m), another 450 metres higher. This is more demanding terrain and near the top it's a somewhat exposed rock scramble, so appropriate footwear is needed and it's not a place to be in windy weather.

In clear conditions you are rewarded for the extra effort to reach the top – a panoramic perspective on much of the eastern part of Aoraki Mount Cook National Park. The view south is over Lake Pukaki, the view north-east up the Tasman Valley, the view north to Aoraki Mount Cook and the main divide and the view west up the craggy Sebastopol Ridge, which leads on to the Annette Plateau.

Kea quite often visit the upper reaches of Mount Sebastopol, so if you're lucky that's another photographic opportunity on offer.

6. SEALY TARN

Climbing 500 metres above Whitehorse Hill Campsite is a stone staircase leading quite directly to a natural bench where Sealy Tarn is nestled, affording impressive views north to Aoraki Mount Cook and south-east over Mount Cook Village and down lower Hooker Valley.

The tarn itself is beautiful, offering options for water reflection and flora photography. The famous Mount Cook Lily grows beside the tarn, flowering late spring to early summer.

Though a solid climb, this trail can still be very busy because it leads above the tarn to Mueller Hut, another 400 metres higher. If your time is limited though, this is a nice option, even for sunrise or sunset with a head torch, if you're keen.



Footstool and Aoraki Mt Cook, viewed from Sealy Tarn
Nikon D7000, F16, 1/160s, ISO100, 27mm

7. MUELLER HUT/MOUNT OLLIVIER

Mueller Hut is the busiest hut in the park, if you want to stay here you'll need to book a space in advance at the DOC centre in Mount Cook Village. Its popularity is self evident when you get there, situated just across the Mueller Glacier from the formidable icefalls on the south-east side of Mount Sefton, which towers another 1.3 vertical kilometres above. The sunrise and sunset views from near the hut can be breath-taking.

An easy 200 metre scramble above the hut gets you to the top of Mount Ollivier (1,933m), from which the views are even more expansive and panoramic in all directions. This is the highest point you can readily reach on a day-walk from Mount Cook Village. It's possible to climb to Mount Ollivier and return to the village in a day, but that means missing sunset and sunrise.

8. WAKEFIELD RIDGE

If you're feeling a little more adventurous, an unmarked trail leads directly up Wakefield Ridge from Hooker Corner. It's a steep 700 metre climb, initially up through scrub and then, as the gradient relents, on tussock slopes. After about two hours, you reach a point on the ridge at 1,400 metres beyond which the going becomes more challenging. In calm summer conditions it's possible to carry on up the rocky ridge to 1,800 metres, but if snow is about crampons could be needed.

At the 1,400 metre point the ridge is broad, offering a lovely expansive alpine feel – a perfect spot for a picnic, while you enjoy great views west, over Mount Cook Village to the Sealy Range, north-east up the Tasman Valley, and south out over Lake Pukaki.

9. SEFTON BIVOUCAC

The most challenging day walk is the one that goes up more than 800 metres to Sefton Bivouac (1,640m). The route is accessed by leaving the Hooker Valley trail and heading west, over to the base of Stocking Stream. Where the trail begins is not easy to find. It's steep and even exposed in some places, but if you want to get up close and personal with the big mountains of the Southern Alps, this is one of the best day-walk options to do so.

Originally built by the famous mountain guide Peter Graham about 1917, Sefton Bivouac is the oldest hut in Aoraki Mount Cook National Park. Directly above the historic three-to-four person hut towers Footstool (2,764m), with the ice of the Tewaewae Glacier providing an intimidating foreground. You can also look directly across to Mueller Hut at a similar height.

For more details and a route map visit

<https://www.occasionalclimber.co.nz/browse-images-2/new-zealand-south-island/mount-cook-browse/>



At about 1600m on Wakefield Ridge, looking northeast to the terminal lake of the Tasman Glacier.
Nikon P7800, F7.1, 1/320s, ISO100, 28mm



Ski tourers climbing above Sefton Biv, Footstool directly above them.
Nikon P7800, F8, 1/500s, ISO100, 28mm



Mt Hicks and Aoraki Mt Cook, viewed from near Mueller Hut at sunset,
Nikon D7000, F5.6, 1/160s, ISO100, 105mm