

Photographic Locations Worth Sweating For: Mount Owen, Kahurangi National Park

by Peter Laurenson

Mount Bell from Mount Owen at sunset.
Nikon P7800, stitch of 3 @ F8, 1/60s, ISO100, 28mm





Kahurangi National Park with Granity Pass Hut centre left.

Nikon P7800, stitch of 2 @ F8, 1/250s, ISO100, 28mm

The peaks of the Kahurangi National Park certainly aren't the biggest in New Zealand's South Island but the distinctive karst rock that they're largely composed of makes for a dramatic, often sheer, photogenic landscape reminiscent of the Darrans in Fiordland. Unlike the very hard rock typical in the Darrans, a karst landscape is one comprised of easily dissolved, carbonate-rich rock such as limestone, gypsum, or dolomite. Combine this with plenty of rainfall and over eons the elements have dissolved some of the rock faces into almost glacial shapes with deep fissures that resemble crevasses.

The highest point in the Kahurangi National Park is Mount Owen (1,875 metres) and it is surely one of the best examples of the karst formations in the park. Although it's the highest peak, it doesn't require technical skills to climb it but that doesn't mean you can avoid some serious effort.

Getting there requires an approach from the main road from Motueka, turning on to Tadmor Valley Road at Tapawera. Follow this for about 12km to Matariki. Here, cross a bridge onto Wangapeka River Road. Follow this for about 18km to Courthouse Flat car park (330 metres). No sweat yet, but that starts when you cross Granity Creek via a small footbridge and head left up the ridge track. This climbs steadily to 1,250 metres beneath Billies Knob, before dropping steeply about 200 metres through forest to Blue Creek. Some boulder hopping ends at Granity Pass Hut (12

bunks, 1,220 metres), which is surrounded by towering limestone cliffs – a spectacular spot to overnight.

From the hut, a defined ridge curves southwest up to a saddle at 1,550 metres, where Mount Owen appears across gradually rising tussock and tarns. Even if you elect not to carry on to Mount Owen, the landscape here is already worth sweating for, especially at sunset. Mount Bell, another karst peak directly to the northeast, is reflected beautifully in several small tarns.

The most challenging bit of the climb begins on the limestone flanks of Mount Owen, as you find a way through the fissures and bulges. A great time to be up there is late afternoon, so you can enjoy the sunset before returning to the hut. But do not underestimate the respect that this landscape demands. The karst landscape is drilled by rainfall and runoff, forming deep holes and caves. Sometimes the entrances to these can be hidden by surface vegetation. In poor conditions, or after nightfall, it is easy to miss such an opening, so make sure you bring a good head torch if you plan to remain on top for sunset.

A worthwhile side trip on the walk out the next day is to Billies Knob (1,648 metres). An hour or so of sustained climbing up tussock and karst rewards you with a great view back to Mount Owen, as well as many other peaks in the area.



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Top: Mount Bell
Nikon P7800, stitch of 3 @ F7.1, 1/200s, ISO100, 28mm

Bottom: Mount Owen summit view.
Nikon P7800 @ F8, 1/160s, ISO100, 66mm