

Beyond the cliff top shelter

A spring climb of Ringatoto and the east ridge of Tahurangi

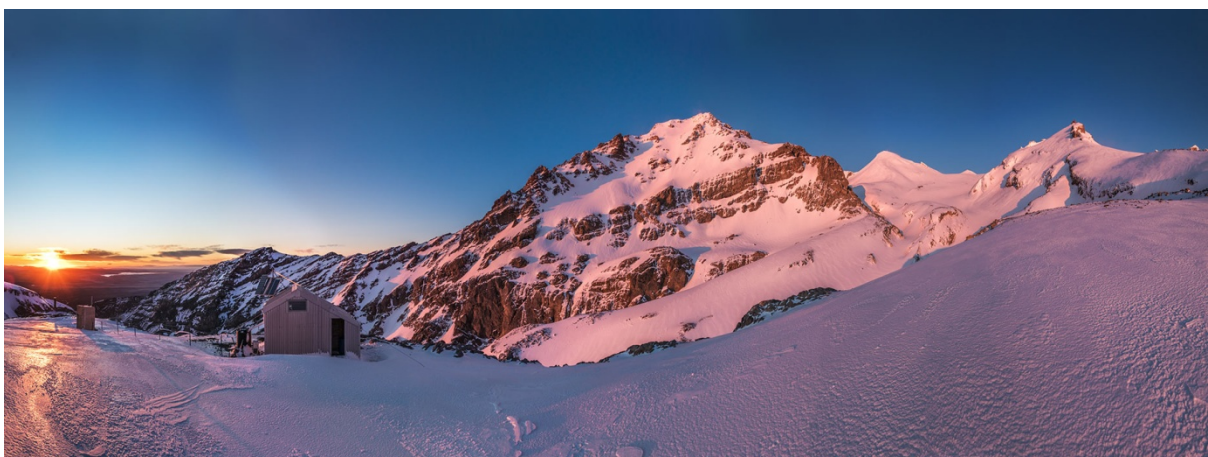
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Whangaehu Hut, viewed from the river bed

Perched on the edge of a sheer cliff at 2,080 metres, Whangaehu Hut is the highest in New Zealand's North Island. Refurbished by NZAC in 2017, it's a sturdy four double-bunk retreat from what can be very hostile conditions outside. At the bottom of the cliff Whangaehu River relentlessly continues to cut its way down through volcanic rock. This is also the path of least resistance that Crater Lake overflows and lahars take. The most infamous instance was the Tangiwai Disaster in December 1953, when late evening a lahar took out the rail bridge spanning Whangaehu River just as the Wellington to Auckland night Express was crossing it, killing 151 of the 285 passengers on board.

Depending on weather conditions and time of year, the Whangaehu gorge can indeed appear sinister – a chasm filled with swirling cloud and mist, tortured lava formations, loose rock fields, looming cliffs, gushing water. Even in winter, when the gorge is filled with snow and the Mordor-like terrain has been softened, it's still a yawning hole that demands respect.



Dawn, with the north east face of Ringatoto centre

Having secure shelter, a water tank and toilet located directly above all this makes for a memorable sleep over. The hut's eastern outlook extends out over the Desert Road to the Kaimanawa Ranges, allowing the rising sun to slowly climb above the horizon, painting all the mountain walls surrounding the other three sides of the hut in alpenglow. So dawn can be a particularly magic time to be there.

The Whippet (Simon Williamson, known for his relentless high-speed traversing of hill terrain) and I looked forward to the splendours of Whangaehu Hut once again as we made our way up from Tukino Village on a Thursday afternoon. A two day weather window lay ahead and we hoped to enjoy an uncongested hut at least that evening, before the weekend warriors surged up behind us.



On the poled route to Whangaehu Hut from Tukino

'Ah, the points are biting in nicely' I half said to myself and half remarked to Simon as we climbed towards the marker poles on the ridge above the hut. 'Yeah, nice to have crampons on again eh' Simon replied. The disruptions of a very unsettled winter weather pattern and the unpredictability of Covid restrictions had prevented us from donning crampons all winter until now.



Frozen conditions on the ridge above Whangaehu Hut

On the ridge top we looked down to the hut and across the gorge to our planned objective – the north east face of Ringatoto. From this straight-on perspective it looked steep and the rock cliffs spanning most of the base of the face were starting to attract my eye. ‘Hmmm, quite hard under foot on this side. Those death cliffs at the base of the face are starting to look more menacing’ I pondered. After some discussion we agreed that if the surface on the face was as hard as what we were now standing on, then there was no need for us to put up with that kind of exposure next morning. The topo map indicated a cliff-free option just out of sight further up the gorge. ‘Let’s go right rather than left at the bottom of the gorge then, and see what we find’ suggested Simon.



Morning pit view, Whangaehu Hut

With that decision made we settled in for a pleasant evening in an otherwise empty hut. Sunset was nice and dawn brought a full quota of mauve alpenglow, followed by a slightly breezy but bluebird morning.

As we traversed a steep section just west of the hut, clearing the sheer cliff and giving access to the river valley, the hard frozen surface removed any remaining questions we had about steering clear of the cliff-threatened north east face. Crunching up the gorge was a joy. ‘First time in here for me’ I remarked. ‘Yeah, interesting to see the terrain from down here. Somewhere up there the accident happened’ Simon reflected. To our climber’s right, beneath the ridge leading up to Cathedral Rocks, a fatal accident had occurred just over a year before on an NZAC climbing trip. At the time Simon was Wellington Section President and had been closely involved in the aftermath of the accident. ‘In bad weather, like the party encountered, I can see how someone might fall on those slopes.’



The Whippet posing beside the waterfall below the start of our route up Ringatoto

As we carried on, the slope steepened as we skirted a gushing waterfall. The Whippet did some crampon point posing as I took pictures, revelling in the graphically sculpted frozen snow. Soon after, our intended route came in to view. It appeared that we might have several couloir options, but later we'd see that these just led prematurely up on to the rocky north ridge. Instead we chose a clear path up steep snow slopes beginning at about 2,100 metres. I led off and soon realised that, while the terrain was straight forward, the surface was indeed hard and the further up we climbed, the greater the exposure risk. 'I'll put in an anchor and we can get in some pitching practise Simon.'



Simon on the first pitch

Five pitches later and we'd reached nearly 2,350 metres, where the snow had softened to the extent that it made any further pitching redundant. To my surprise the Whippet wasn't surging up the slope in his usual style. I plugged steps, planning to wait for him once I reached the north ridge near the summit.



Crotch cam, Whippet approaching, at about 2,400m

'Hmm, where the hell's he gone?' I wondered, a tad concerned. Instead of following up my lovely potholes Simon had elected to go left around a rocky buttress and now, from where I stood waiting above, the far side of the buttress looked very steep and exposed. After a few more nervous minutes the Whippet's helmet broke the ridgeline and he plodded slowly up to me. 'A bit steep on that side. If there was to be a place to get out the rope I reckon that was it.' 'Serves you right for rejecting my steps' I replied.



On top of Ringatoto, with the east ridge of Taurangi left of centre

Soon we were at 2,591 metres on top of Ringatoto. The stiff breeze drove us behind a hunched-over outcrop of rime ice where we had some lunch. Out of the wind we enjoyed a grand vista. 'I'm feeling a bit dodgy for some reason, no power in my legs' Simon explained. We hoped that some food would perk him up, which it seemed to as we prepared to set off again, now bound for the base of the east ridge of Taurangi. This was another piece of Mount Ruapehu we hadn't been on, so I was excited, but also a tad nervous about one section of rime cliffs that we weren't yet sure were friendly.



Reaching the east ridge of Tahurangi

Up on the ridge the entire summit plateau abruptly came in to view beyond the sharply defined ridge edge. It was great to see this iconic piece of Aotearoa from a new vantage point. My camera shutter finger had a small fit, continuing to click away as we proceeded upwards. We'd remained open to dropping off the ridge, down the north facing slope, but it was very steep and the surface was still hard. I also now wanted to complete more of the east ridge route to Tahurangi.



Approaching the big ice cliffs beneath Tahurangi's summit, where we skirted left beneath them

We cleared the rime cliff section without problems, but further up larger ice cliffs turned us across to the snow slopes beneath them. Simon was doing it hard, but the inner Whippet kept him doggedly following along as we traversed to a point 20 or so metres below the main summit on Skyline Ridge. Not long after we were back on top of Ruapehu and, of the six times I've reached Tahurangi over the years, this was in the best conditions yet. Fluted snow made a beautiful foreground for the best view in the North Island.



Tahurangi summit view

‘Well mate, at least it’s all downhill from here’ I reassured Simon. We’d been on the move for seven or so hours now and still had quite some ground to cover to drop down on to the plateau, skirt Crater Lake and then descend Whangaehu glacier.

I led off, back a little down Skyline Ridge to clear the rime ice directly beneath Tahurangi. I’ve done this a few times before and expected a nice leisurely snow plod once off the ridge. Wrong! The hard frozen snow returned with a vengeance. All we could do was face in and front point horizontally for what seemed the longest 200 metres I can recall. Dripping with sweat and calves burning, I gratefully reached the saddle and looked back to see how the compromised Whippet was faring. Ouch, not the kind of terrain anyone running on empty wants, but he eventually joined me unscathed on the saddle.



Sculpted snow on the saddle beneath Tahurangi (top right)

The other concern we had was avalanche danger. The north-facing slope we had to descend looked like a huge wall of vanilla ice-cream – nothing like we’d just traversed. For this my knees were eternally grateful, but avalanche conditions looked present. At this stage of the afternoon and with Simon’s energy levels seriously depleted, we decided to go for it, me first then Simon down a different line. ‘Ah well, this justifies carrying our transceivers, shovels and probes at least’ I consoled myself as I dropped over the lip.



Simon emerging from his bum slide debris on the summit plateau

Aside from the avalanche worry, the descent was bliss on the legs. About a third of the way down I resorted to a bum slide, which actually did set off a small avalanche, but controllable within the amount of uniform terrain involved. Simon soon followed, riding his own small but enlarging pile of bum slide debris.

By now the angle of the light had dropped and photographic conditions got even better as we made our way around Crater Lake to the head of Whangaeahu glacier, from where we had a good view of the route we'd climbed that morning. 'Wow, it looks like a real climb from here' Simon enthused.



Our route up Ringatoto that morning

It was an easy plod down the glacier, where the sun on the lower angled slope had softened things up nicely. Remnants of the Whippet returned as Simon strode ahead. I was happy to go slowly and soak up the tranquil ambience, recording it in pixels. As we neared Whangaehu hut this specific angle revealing the tiny box perched above the sheer cliff was particularly memorable.

Back at the hut we were quite amazed to find not a single weekend warrior. The hut was ours for a second night. Next morning dawned crystal clear and still. We felt a bit guilty packing up in readiness to head back to Tukino when such a fine day presented itself. But we knew it was going to be a scorcher and we felt well satisfied with the ten or more hours we'd enjoyed on the move the day before – perhaps the mellowing effect of advancing age?



Up on the ridge above Whangaehu Hut on our way out

Half way up the slope above the hut I suddenly tensed. 'We're on no slip terrain Simon' I remarked. We'd been in that state of relaxation you can get once you know the hard stuff is behind you – just a couple of hours leisurely trudging to go. But where we now stood, our crampons were barely biting in. Directly beneath us, just far enough away to really gather some downward speed, was a cliff and I certainly wouldn't place any faith in a self arrest. 'I reckon. No place for complacency for sure.'

More captioned images and route map at

<https://www.occasionalclimber.co.nz/browse-images-2/new-zealand-north-island/ruapehu-browse/ringatoto-tahurangi/>