

# THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

*Climbing at the head of Tasman Glacier*

*words and images by PETER LAURENSEN*

In January 2003 I climbed Tititea/Mount Aspiring. In December 2012, nearly ten years later, I climbed Aoraki / Mount Cook. Then another decade slid by and still I hadn't reached the top of a third of New Zealand's three thousanders. As those years passed and as I aged, I've come to appreciate much more that the journey is more important than the goal. Adopting this attitude as a mountaineer tends to increase the level of satisfaction felt on a given trip—and also the chances of surviving it. Yet, there still seemed to me to be a nice symmetry in three three thousanders, especially for me if the third could be Elie De Beaumont. That would allow me to encompass the southern-most, highest and northern-most of our three thousand metre peaks.

Something else I've noticed as I age is a diminishing tolerance for risk. In some ways, this seems odd to me. As a youngster you have so much still to live for, so risk aversion should be higher. On the other hand, as a youngster you also have so much yet to prove—taking risks can get you along that road quicker. Conversely, as an oldie, you have by now accumulated many of life's treasures—a life partner, children, challenges, failures and triumphs, plus the wisdom that comes with all that, memories—and in that sense have more to lose. That might explain it then!

Whatever the explanation, my motivation to attempt a third three thousander had nothing to do with scaring

myself shitless. So, while the Anna Glacier route, if in good condition, was within our technical climbing capabilities, my climbing partner Shaun Barnett and I agreed that we could significantly increase our levels of 'type one fun' by enlisting the support of a guide. And acknowledging 'the journey is more important than the goal' ethos, we knew that an experienced guide could also enable us to enjoy more of the iconic terrain at the head of our country's longest glacier than if were alone—especially if climbing conditions proved to be less than perfect.

So, we enlisted the skills of a very experienced guide who was able to provide us a degree of flexibility around weather windows. I don't reveal who our guide is in this article only to avoid compromising NZAC's objective position regarding guides. But that won't stop me giving her the credit she deserves (you know who you are!). Our plan was to grab the first available weather window during the period 1-12 November.

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*Tasman Saddle Hut, with  
Hochstetter Dome (left) and  
Mt Aylmer (right).*



As the weeks slowly passed while we waited for November to arrive, we pondered not only the uncertainty of New Zealand weather patterns, but also the COVID curveball. Near the end of October, a couple of cases of the virus turned up in Christchurch. No way, would our Canterbury-based guide get locked down? Even worse, might the calls to close off the South Island actually come to pass? As it turned out, not only did these worries come to nothing, but the most settled spell of weather for many months materialised during the first week of November. La Nina had arrived and it was game on!

Neither Shaun nor I had been to the head of Tasman Glacier, so we were fizzing just to land on that hallowed snow above Tasman Saddle Hut under a cobalt sky on 2 November—the ultimate gift for my 59th birthday. But yes, this was definitely tinged with some flight shame. Chopper CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are not good and we were very much aware of the privilege we enjoyed. I consoled myself with the two months I'd lived by a plant-based diet to that point—when it comes to our personal response to global warming, we must do what we can, but not make it a rigid straitjacket either, otherwise sustaining positive action becomes more difficult. I knew that my aging knees would not permit me to hike all the way up Tasman Glacier, with all the added weight that would entail, and still have any energy left in my tank for climbing. This chopper indulgence at least served to strengthen my resolve to stick to plant-based food.

From the moment the chopper departed, we went in to 100 per cent guide mode. This worked to a hierarchy whereby our safety came first, then our ambitions, then our comfort. Our guide's attentiveness was never obtrusive, but tireless. During the next five days I marvelled at her ability to constantly think, then act, drawing on seemingly boundless reserves of energy. And all this was done in an understated, warm and friendly manner. To begin with, being one of the two photographer brats on a short leash felt a little restrictive, but we soon got with the programme and fell in to a comfortable rhythm. This was aided by our guide's frequent instructive explanations.

Just to reach the door of Tasman Saddle Hut (2320m) required short roping. At the time our guide explained that this was a good point to become familiar with this mode of guide/client protection. Much later she also revealed that an experienced climber had fallen to his death on this short stretch of sloping snow when the surface hardened up at a point where a fall meant a plummet down a steep gully and over ice cliffs. Lulled into a sense of security by the close proximity of the hut, when the climber slipped he had both hands full carrying a banana box of food. I asked why she hadn't mentioned that at the outset and she explained that she saw no point in darkening our joy at arriving. This was typical of her thoughtful and considered approach.

Down inside the hut Shaun and I began to absorb its ambience and history. I asked when the hut had been built. The answer—1962, the same year as I had arrived. And much more significant than that, this was Shaun's 800th hut. Given the great weather forecast, we'd expected the hut to be busy. Our guide explained that there had been times she was there when some 30 people had been in residence at this 17 bunk hut. As it was, we shared the hut with just one other ski touring party and another guide/client pair—Brendan Maggs and Jon Colbert. It all felt rather auspicious.

That afternoon, we geared up and headed out to climb something. While the sky remained almost completely clear, the forecast indicated a short period of precipitation late afternoon and over night. Given time constraints, our guide suggested we climb the southwest face of Mount Aylmer. From our vantage point above the hut it didn't



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Shaun Barnett on the summit of Mt Aylmer.



look like much, but two steep pitches up hard frozen snow later giving access to the 2699m summit had me feeling like the real climbing had indeed begun. For the next few days all upward movement was led by our guide, who installed a suitable anchor from which to top rope us up. Sometimes Shaun and I climbed simultaneously, tied in several metres apart, to save time. When the surface got really hard, we went up one at a time.

On top of Aylmer, clouds soon engulfed us, adding to a sense of adventure. We got glimpses of the ridge leading westward on to Hochstetter Dome and, from this perspective, the peak looked far more impressive than the large pudding-like blob it appeared to be when viewed from the south. From that viewpoint, there is no hint of the 1500m plummet down ice cliffs to the Whymper Glacier and Whataroa valley on the northern side.

Depending on surface conditions and steepness, descent mode was either two brats on a leash short roping, or top rope down-climbing. Much of our descent was in thick cloud. Our guide was thoroughly familiar with the terrain, negating any need for us to navigate. We became lazy but grateful brats.

Back down at the hut, she prepared hot soup, a great selection of mostly plant-based snacks, then got stuck in to preparing dinner. Over the next few days Shaun and I repeatedly offered to help out, but the super guide usually had everything in hand. Even after she'd finished tending to our needs she would busy herself tidying the hut.

Overnight it snowed continuously—coating the hut exterior in snow and micro rime. This allowed us to have a guilt-free lie in while we awaited the weather clearing, which arrived mid morning, as forecast. Time to get out and explore.

First we plodded across gentle snow slopes towards Kelman Hut (2460m). Neither Shaun nor I had set foot in this iconic hut either, known as the Kelvinator due to its freezing reputation, so our excitement built and our shutter fingers twitched increasingly as we drew nearer. This is still crevasse terrain so we moved forward in glacier travel mode.

Even though we'd taken precautions to protect our faces from sunburn the day before, Shaun's nose had copped quite a bashing. So today we were all taking extra precautions as the clearing sky unleashed unrelenting rays.

Just reaching the main door of Kelman Hut is memorable. The snow had banked up so high on the east side of the hut that several metres of steep downward snow plugging were required to reach it. With 22 bunks and two storeys, Kelman is quite a bit larger than Tasman Saddle, yet it exuded the same rustic charm. We had it to ourselves while there, so the large cooking and dining area felt quite cavernous. After a brew, we saw that the last of the clouds were clearing. Time to set off on an east-west traverse of Hochstetter Dome.

Our approach to the 2630m saddle between Aylmer and the Dome was gradual, but steepened to a schrund below the saddle. Our cameras were kept in constant use as we encountered one magnificent Main Divide view after another as our vantage point changed. The snowscape right in front of us was also often beautifully sculpted and scalloped. Thankfully our guide has a high tolerance for 'photographer drag' and was quite partial to taking a few of her own shots too, so our little party proceeded in a state of type one euphoria much of the time.



*Shaun Barnett looking to the Whataroa, from the saddle west of the summit of Hochstetter Dome.*

The crux of the traverse is a steep arête soon after the saddle. With the reassurance of our guide's top rope always in place Shaun and I enjoyed some spectacular, exposed terrain. Our guide reckoned she'd never seen the Whataroa so clear of jungle mist. Oh, better pause for another photo then. Eventually, at about 4pm, we reached the main summit at 2827m. From there a small dip to an outrageously snow-sculpted saddle gave access to the secondary summit 17 metres lower than the main one. As we descended the western side clouds returned and the remainder of our descent to Tasman Saddle Hut was in a white out. Our guide's knowledge proved invaluable as one yawning crevasse after another emerged from the clag.

Back at the hut, to our amazement no new parties had arrived and the ski touring party had moved on. It felt luxurious to spread our gear out without a concern. While we were on Hochstetter Dome, Brendan and Jon had gone over to the Anna Glacier to check out our intended route for the following day. Unfortunately, the news wasn't good. A schrund at about the 2500m mark gaped as wide as the hut according to Brendan. This ruled out the most direct and favoured route up Elie.

That evening, after the scheduled radio weather forecast confirmed that our weather window was not going anywhere, we discussed options.

Our guide's suggestion was that we attempt Elie via Mount Walter. This is a much longer route, so she proposed that we carry bivvy gear and sleep out on the north side of Walter. She also mentioned that if our progress was slowed for any reason, this route offered several other options if Elie turned out not to be on. We had a plan.

The next morning dawned crystal clear, with alpenglow reflecting off myriad snow peaks and mountain faces. The view from a tiny balcony accessed via a window at the southern end of the hut afforded particularly spectacular panoramic views. Once the camera brats had settled down, we set off again, this time heading almost directly west to the base of a steep snow ridge leading to a snow field between Mounts Green (2837m) and Walter (2905m) that also leads to Divers Col (2681m).

Brendan and Jon joined us, although they were moving much quicker, soon becoming two tiny dots high above us as the day progressed. The snow ridge above us was straight forward—an almost unbroken face tapering to an arête further up. But it was huge and the situation underfoot was not comforting, with crampons and axes only just biting in for large sections. And of course, the exposure escalated the higher we climbed. An initial couple of pitches got us to a small level shoulder. From there, the business end of our day commenced—six pitches before the

gradient relented on the arête. It was an interesting experience for me; and not type one. Even though I had the certainty of the top rope, as we climbed higher a little knot in my gut tightened. I began to realise that my tolerance for exposure was diminishing. I found this disappointing, and my ego flinched, yet another part of me just simply acknowledged it for what it was. I have nothing to prove with my mountaineering. It's simply something I've loved to do. Perhaps my ambition needs some recalibration as I age. Well, I concluded, at worst, that's a first world problem.

Given the terrain was more challenging than we'd expected, our progress with three on a rope was slow. By the time we reached 'friendly' ground beneath Divers Col it was apparent that our plan to traverse Walter before nightfall was overly ambitious. We agreed to bivvy where we stood and reconsider our options. Mount Green towered above us, just to the south-west. Its flanks were steeper than the slope we'd just climbed and the glistening sheen on them spoke of hard ice. This didn't deter Brendan and Jon, who set off for the summit.

While Shaun had handled the exposed slope more happily than me, when I asked him if I was holding him back he emphatically denied it. He agreed that Green looked in scary condition. We decided that a good consolation would be to climb Walter next morning, before retracing our

steps back down to Tasman Glacier. With this decision made, we happily set about cutting out a snow platform nestled into a crevasse. A bit later, our guide set off to check out our route for tomorrow. Her face wasn't filled with joy on her return and she explained that the surface on Walter was bullet proof.

As Shaun and I snuggled warmly in our bags, perched on short thermal mats, extended with our packs, gaiters and packliners, we gazed out across the vastness of the glacier below as the sun slowly set. Before us lay Aylmer, Hochstetter Dome and the tiny dots of Kelman and Tasman Saddle Huts. Whatever we weren't going to be able to do on this trip, what we had done was still an absolute blast. We were content, although the knowledge that we still had to down-climb the big frozen snow slope wouldn't quite evaporate from our thoughts.

The next morning again dawned clear. We enjoyed stupendous views out to the West Coast from Divers Col, before packing up and beginning our descent. Our guide had a little surprise in store for us. Rather than down-climb the big slope, she was going to employ the lowering technique. Essentially it's like abseiling, but the guide retains control over the brats. In beautiful weather our descent was a pleasure. No pounding of toes or knees, just a methodical, relaxed process—for us at least. She still had to down-climb.



Later, back safely on the glacier, we plodded slowly back uphill in softening snow to Tasman Saddle Hut. By now, Shaun had taken to taping up his nose as protection from the relentless sun, but our guide and I harboured cringing concerns about what would happen to his nose when he tried to tug the very sticky tape off. At least we'd enjoy the shelter of the hut again that evening. Upon arrival we were again amazed that no one else had joined us—three nights of uncongested bliss at the iconic Tasman Saddle Hut!

On our final morning, still diligently concerned to maximise our time with her, our guide took us through more climbing options. However, the photographers in us opted for a tour of the crevasse field directly beneath the towering cliff the hut was perched on. After completing our pre-departure tidy up of the hut, and once Shaun had completed creating his ET-esque nose cover (taped to his sunglasses, it was truly a thing of magnificence), we geared up for glacier travel and made our way around and down the eastern side.

For an hour or so, after dropping our packs at the base of the crevasses, we wended our way up through gullies, in and out of ice grottoes and between monster-sized ice formations. In the shadow of one crevasse wall we got

in some V thread building practise, while our guide also explained that this field had been far larger before the effects of global warming had kicked in. Still, it was a fabulous landscape within which to complete our Tasman Glacier tour. All that remained was to trudge gradually downhill to Darwin Corner (1600m), where out of another cobalt sky on the flat white expanse of the glacier, our chopper soon arrived.

See more images from this trip at [www.occasionalclimber.co.nz](http://www.occasionalclimber.co.nz)

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*Brendan Maggs and Jon Colbert on the snow arête leading back to the Tasman Glacier below Mt Green.*