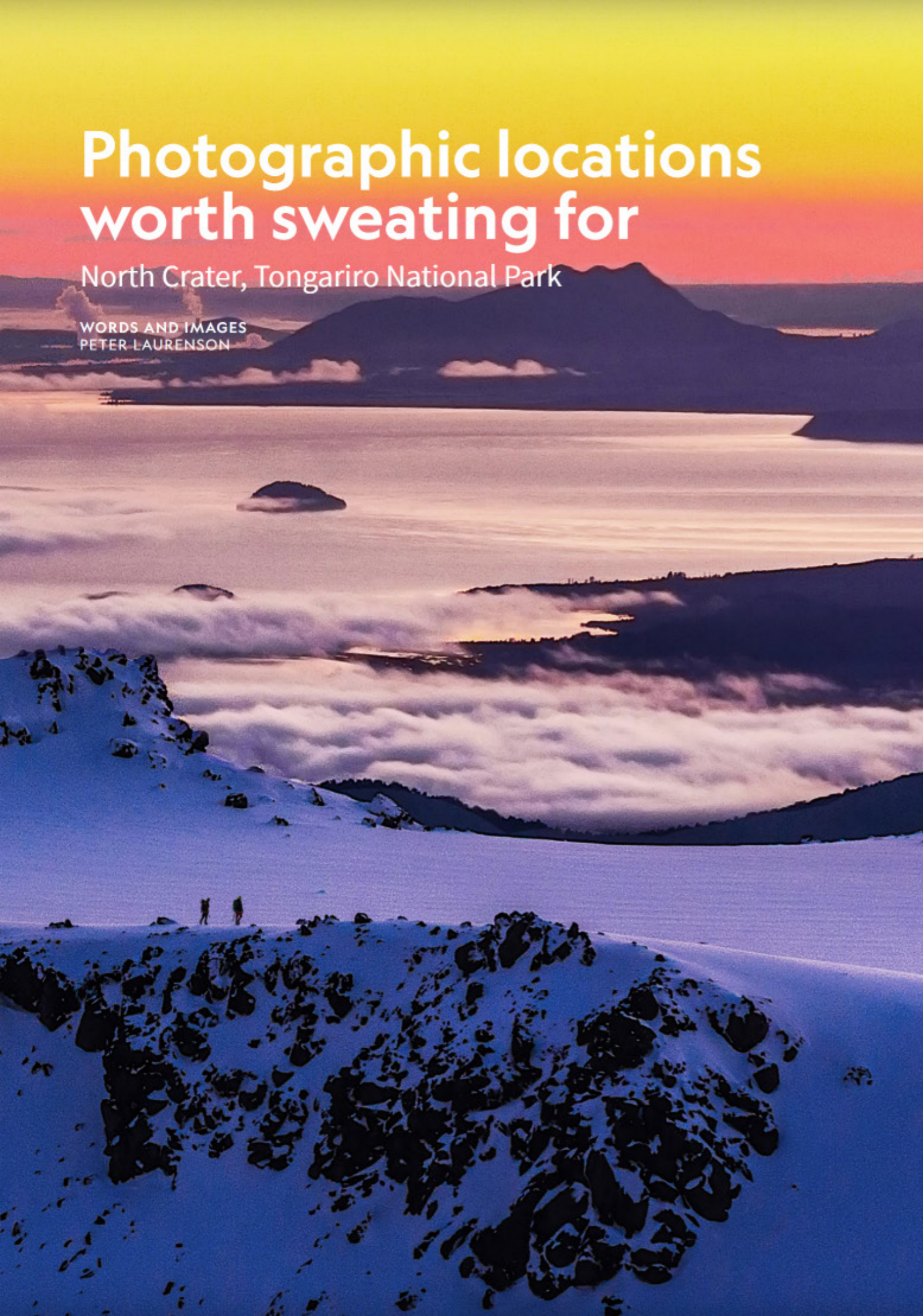


Photographic locations worth sweating for

North Crater, Tongariro National Park

WORDS AND IMAGES
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MT TARANAKI, VIEWED FROM THE SOUTHERN END CAR PARK OF THE TONGARIRO CROSSING AT SUNSET. F8, 1/200 SEC, ISO 100, 152MM.

In the third article in this series, we embark on a journey to the famed Tongariro Crossing together with Peter. Once a serene spot, it's now bustling with day walkers, especially in warmer months. After a Covid-19 dip, visitor numbers rebounded, but with tighter controls on crossings and parking. We also learn about how local culture now shapes activities in this volcanic landscape, including respecting indigenous wishes about summit climbs.

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The Tongariro Crossing has become internationally famous, seething with day walkers during the warmer months. Since the passing of the worst of Covid 19, those big numbers quickly returned – although now more control is being applied to how many (and in what direction) cross on any given day. Parking options at both ends of the crossing are also now tightly controlled, and cultural sensitivities exert greater influence on what can be done when crossing this spectacular volcanic, alpine landscape. Today, local iwi ask that people respect their requirement for people not to climb to the relatively accessible summits of Ngauruhoe and Tongariro.

Over the years, I have been privileged to visit Tongariro National Park many times, in both summer and winter, and enjoying a far greater degree of spontaneity than is now possible. To avoid the crowds and to seek out

new photographic perspectives, I have often ventured off the main tourist 'highway'. The pressure that large numbers of humans bring to any location has effectively closed a window for visitors wishing to explore, unconstrained, on the Tongariro Crossing.

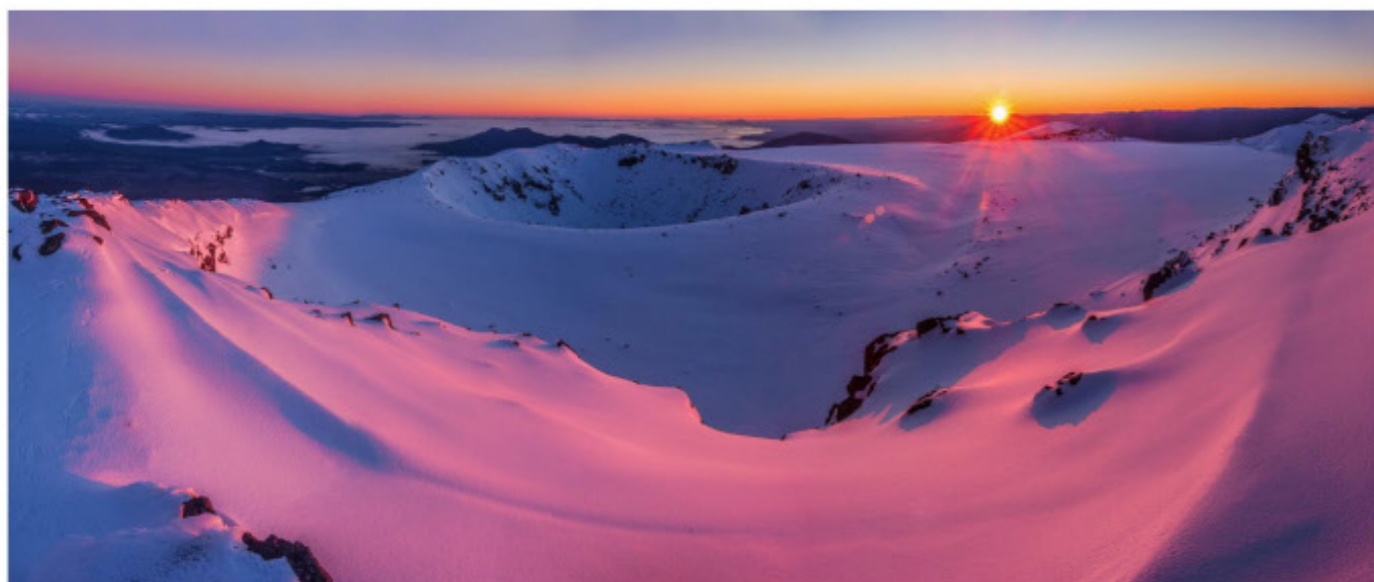
Of all the trips I have made to this area, the highlight was an overnight stay in a flat saddle between Mount Tongariro and North Crater, in August 2017. I walked in during clearing weather, motivated by a blue-bird forecast for the next day. My route left the main trail down at Mangatepopo Hut (1,190m), crossing the stream, and following the ridge up Tongariro's snow-dusted flanks. I did cross over Tongariro's rime encrusted summit that day, but it is also possible to traverse north beneath the summit to reach North Crater.



DAWN ON NORTH CRATER'S SOUTHERN RIM. THE SUMMITS OF NGAURUHOE (2,287M) AND TONGARIRO (1,967M) RIGHT SIDE. STITCH OF 2 PORTRAIT IMAGES F4.5, 1/30 SEC, ISO 125, 28MM.



MT TARANAKI AT SUNSET (ON A SEPARATE VISIT), VIEWED FROM THE FLANKS OF MT TONGARIRO. NIKON D70S, SIGMA AF APO 75-300, SETTINGS: F5, 1/640 SEC, ISO 100, 292MM.



A VIEW NORTH FROM THE OUTER RIM OF NORTH CRATER, WITH THE INNER CRATER BEYOND. STITCH OF 5 PORTRAIT IMAGES F8, 1/30 SEC, ISO 100, 28MM.



MT RUAPEHU AT SUNSET FROM NEAR NATIONAL PARK. F5.6, 1/100 SEC, ISO 100, 42MM.

Bivvying on snow at 1,820 metres in mid winter was one of the coldest nights out under the stars I've experienced. But the night sky was magnificent and, where I slept, placed me in an ideal spot to photograph a unique crater-pocked landscape, draped in snow and painted in alpenglow.

Eventually the first hint of dawn was the signal to extract myself, somewhat stiffly, from my cocoon. Donning boots and crampons (I had slept with all my clothes on), it was a relief to feel the warmth of uphill movement as I made a beeline for North Crater's outer rim, nearly 100 metres above.

Dawn in the mountains – this is what I had primarily come for, and Mother Nature didn't disappoint.

The perspective from the southern rim of North Crater was so visually rich, both close-up and into the distance, that my first challenge was deciding where to focus first. In crisp, windless

silence, intoxicated by a blend of photographer's excitement and absolute natural tranquillity, I took photo after photo as the drama unfolded. At the same time, I was enjoying the gradual warming of the new day's first light.

While I'm sure this spot also offers fantastic photographic possibilities in summer, being there in winter is unbeatable. To do that though requires appropriate gear and experience. The route itself is not particularly difficult, crossing open tussock, scoria and volcanic rock, but winter in Tongariro National Park demands respect.

As I began my drive back home late the following day, my luck held as the mountains were again painted in magic-hour light. Tongariro National Park is a special location that offers fabulous photographic opportunities from an abundance of vantage points.