
PAUL KNOTT

A Mountaineer's New Zealand

(Plates 12, 13, 24, 25)

New Zealand: green, clean and wild, a land of adventure sports and famous walking trails through wild country, an Antipodean version of Britain but with bigger mountains. These are some popular images of the country I have come to know over the past four years. Though they hold some truth, there is much more here for the mountaineer than the photogenic scenery and packaged wilderness attractions. Most importantly, nearly all the wilderness is untamed and well beyond the reach of popular tourism.

The wildness of New Zealand contrasts strikingly with the picture in most of Britain and Europe, where it seems human activity has long since tamed nature and even seems set to banish it entirely. Here, nature is often still in control. Sometimes mountain access has become harder over time, not easier. The Ball Hut road near Mount Cook is steadily disappearing as the moraine erodes with glacial recession. Huts often have to be moved before the land they stand on collapses. Mount Cook itself lost a huge mass and ten metres in height in a landslide in 1991. On the drive to the mountains, if the roads are blocked it is by landslip, flood or snow, not by traffic, even where both road and rail in both directions share a single-lane bridge. Once at the road-head, the typical walk-in covers many miles and involves multiple river crossings. Bridges are an occasional luxury. For me, all this is somehow appealing.

With this wildness goes a culture that understands the outdoors and adventure. With broad support, a number of Wilderness Areas have been designated, the Olivines, for example, and the Adams Wilderness. These are true wilderness, with no maintained tracks, no huts or facilities of any kind, and no aircraft landings. One must approach them over several days, heavily laden, over wild and often difficult terrain.

In New Zealand this level of effort and adventure is downplayed as the norm. Naturally, one seldom meets others in the hills, and perhaps because of such infrequent visits the guidebooks have a refreshing simplicity about them, with exquisite understatement and sometimes even a reluctance to give grades. Again, for me this only adds to the experience.

In this article I try to give an impression of the available potential by describing some of the trips I have made to date. Starting from the south, the first of the major massifs is the Darran Mountains, a huge wilderness

that would be practically inaccessible were it not for the thin line of tarmac of the Milford Road. Above the road are huge, steep granite walls revealing extensive climbing potential within easy reach. The crux of the journey, the Homer Tunnel, adds to the sense of awe with its irregular rock walls, gushing water and narrow width. There are excellent ice routes in the area in winter, although the terrain and an incredibly high precipitation rate often lead to extreme avalanche risk even on the main road.

The steep and complex terrain here makes the mountains much grander than their heights would suggest. On my first visit, ignorant of its reputation, Graham Holden and I had a naive plan to climb the SE Ridge of the highest peak, Tutoko (2746m). In perfect January weather we drove directly to Milford Airport, and within a short space of time found ourselves alone and committed in the middle of intimidating alpine terrain. Stunned by our surroundings, we spent a good while looking around, orienting ourselves and working out how we might get to the mountain. We also wondered how we would find our way out, but left that problem until later.

We elected to walk along an obvious rocky ledge to a bivi closer to the start of our route. After four hours of traversing ice pinnacles and repeatedly re-ascending to higher glaciers, we finally overcame all the hidden obstacles and reached the chosen flat piece of rock. The reascents continued in the dark the next morning, along with some down-climbing of glacier ice, until we entered the couloir leading to Turner's Pass, which we found poorly frozen. From its top we also had to negotiate an airy ridge traverse and make a steep abseil before at last reaching the start of the route proper.

We climbed the ridge's three rock steps without problems, though some of the snow between them was rather insecure. Our progress slowed on the sharp arête above, as we had to meticulously consolidate every footstep while watching in horror the gathering wet snow slides we were setting off. Finally a section forcing us onto a steep face made us concede to the poor conditions. Despite turning back below the summit, we were late reaching the bottom of the first rock step and elected to bivi.

For our descent the next day we decided to avoid the discontinuous ledges we had used on the ascent by continuing down the Age Glacier. Finding no exit at its bottom we had to climb up a glacier-worn side-wall, which although easy angled took us several hours to surmount with some marginal climbing and sparse protection. When we eventually made it back to our gear stash we were fortunate to meet some people, who solved several problems for us by showing us the way to Turner's Bivi, describing the descent route, and even giving us a can of beer.

The descent involved two long abseils off small shrubs, much bush bashing and wading, and finally a long descent on a trail through rainforest full of ferns and lichens that seemed to go mostly uphill. The first signal we might be nearing civilization was a faint whiff of diesel. A few metres on we stepped disbelievingly onto the road.

The next major massif along the main alpine chain is the Mt Aspiring region. An ascent of Mt Aspiring was described in AJ106; here I will briefly describe my early December ascent of the classic South Face. We approached by walking in to French Ridge – a way I would also recommend for accessing the soaring South-west Ridge of the mountain. As is typical, the walk was almost level for some hours then climbed abruptly and brutally up what seemed like vertical rainforest. Eventually the angle eased a little and the forest gave way to scrub and grass leading to French Ridge Hut. The tattered rubber door seal indicated an active kea population; later we heard them sliding down the steel roof and peering in upside-down from the gutters to watch our reaction.

We waited out three days of cloud, wind and warmth, making the ascent on our last available day. We were lucky. Often north-westerlies can bring storm conditions to the mountains for a week or more. Starting soon after midnight we made rapid progress up the 700m ascent to the 'Quarterdeck' and across the névé to the face, where pre-dawn light helped us find a way across the bergschrund. On the route itself we made slower progress, pitching the 500m main section on strength-sapping water ice. Right-slanting ramps kept the climbing angle low, but took us over fantastic terrain. Retreat would have been difficult and I was glad of Graham's steadiness at the sharp end.

We finally reached the summit at 3.30pm, finding the snow on the west side of the mountain softened by the sun and enveloped in transpiration cloud. Playing safe, we took the long way down via the standard route on the North-west Ridge. From here our return to French Ridge involved several hundred metres of reascent up heavy snow on the Bonar Glacier. Exhausted and dehydrated, we finally staggered back to the hut at 9.30pm.

As well as ice and mixed alpine routes, New Zealand also offers plenty of mountain rock climbs. These can be on good rock, in spite of the often deserved reputation for looseness in the mountains. Highlights include sub-alpine rock to a high standard at Twin Streams near Mount Cook and high alpine rock in several areas including the Balfour and Fox Glaciers. There is much unexplored terrain.

Nearer to Christchurch is Cloudy Peak, another subalpine venue. The wonderful ambience here is established even on the drive in, over a gravel road with tantalising views to the isolated Mt d'Archiac, ending at the pretty Erehwon ('nowhere' backwards) high country station. From here the four to five-hour walk-in starts with a crossing of the Clyde River, and continues up the stones and braided channels of the Havelock. This terrain rewards skill at finding the least foot-turning gravel and picking shallow crossing points, as well as a go-for-it attitude to wet feet. On one visit we were forced to link up for the crossings and in flood the rivers cannot be crossed except by aircraft. Above, the route involves climbing the steep scrubby hillside. This is another energy-sapping activity, the 'scrub' being a dense blanket of exotic and often spine-covered vegetation.

The climbing itself is up to 400m, with several different crags and a high ratio of rock to existing routes. So far, I have only touched its potential with an ascent of the modest but pleasant South-west Ridge in windy conditions. For me, the rock quality and situation more than compensated for the effort involved in accessing the area.

A more accessible destination is Mt Somers, where the attraction is a vast array of crags consisting mostly of rhyolite columns, many of them directly above the conveniently sited Pinnacles Hut. This is a mere two hours' walk from the road on an undulating forest trail. The routes are a full rope-length, sometimes with infrequent protection, but with great views out across the Canterbury Plains. Despite its obvious attraction the area is only moderately popular, and potential new routes can be seen even from the hut. On one visit aimed at scoping these out a mist from the plains sent us to the far side of the mountain where we were presented with a promising-looking but untouched red buttress. We climbed two nice routes (around VS-HVS) with good friction and gear, and the added bonus of some spectacular trundles, although at the price of one of the ropes. Another trip, also chancing a mediocre weather forecast, worked less well. After some warm spring afternoon climbing near the hut, the trip ended prematurely when we woke the next morning to a white landscape of late spring snow.

The rainforests of the West Coast embody all that is real about the New Zealand outdoors. My first real exposure to them was on a Christmas attempt on Mt Whitcombe, an experience that was also enhanced by being for once the sole 'international' on a real Kiwi trip. We drove for two hours from Christchurch and stopped as arranged by a small plane sitting in an open barn. The plane's dulled paint-work and general rustic appearance fitted the setting perfectly. The farmer turned up in his pickup, and soon we took off through the uncut grass of his paddock. The landing strip was a narrow thread of gravel someone had levelled many years earlier. We landed fast with the breeze behind us.

It was a short walk up onto the Ramsey Glacier, then up to a 'slate quarry' campsite. To our surprise it was a starry night and we made rapid progress on the frozen névé, to reach Erehwon Col in two hours. Here we surveyed the options for climbing Mts Whitcombe and Evans. We had only limited information available. Neither mountain features in a guidebook although Mt Whitcombe features in Hugh Logan's excellent *Classic Peaks of New Zealand*. Nor are they frequently climbed.

We opted for an indirect route to Mt Whitcombe via Snowdome. This involved a 300m descent and reascent on the wild West-Coast side, thus exposing us to the storms that come from this direction. Out in the Tasman Sea there was indeed a line of black cloud, but we ignored it. Arriving at the final slopes of Snowdome in wet snow and thick mist, we elected to forego the 1km ridge leading to Mt Whitcombe and descended before

conditions worsened further. Our return involved stonefall, an exhausting trudge through heavy wet snow, and a crevasse fall.

Christmas Day dawned murky and dull. We descended to the landing strip, giving up on climbing in favour of our stash of wine and goodies. Shortly afterwards rain gave us the excuse we needed to indulge in the usual Christmas gluttony, but not before we had made a start on the sporting way out via Whitcombe Pass to the West Coast. The next morning we soon began to encounter some more scrub, which in this case meant thick head-high vegetation covering bouldery ground. Prolonged close combat was required, unassisted by any signs of a trail in spite of the fact that we were on one of the better known, and easier, of the trans-alpine routes.

A few kilometres beyond the pass we started to see trail markers, but this did not herald the start of any discernible track. We spent much time negotiating river boulders, thick scrub, and unstable landslips. This was fun in its own way – rather like a Lake District ghyll scramble or a moderate canyoning trip – but many of the boulders were liberally covered in wet moss, and on this unrelenting terrain some slips and falls were inevitable.

Periodically this primeval wilderness would be relieved by a small grassy oasis with a neat little hut equipped with bunks, fireplace and much-needed sandfly screens. Our arrival at the Wilkinson Hut was marked by torrential rain and intense thunder, which continued for another 15 hours. The following day our concerns about our passage being blocked by raging torrents, landslips and fallen trees turned out to be well founded. We spent two hours crossing the first side stream, then another four on steep descents and exhausting reascents, ducking, weaving, slipping and splashing to reach the next hut. We had covered five kilometres on the map. Fortunately, after this the terrain relented a little.

On the third walking day we winched one another over a final cable-way across the main river to join a rough vehicle track and a gradual transition to civilisation. News reports about flooding suggested it had been wet even by West Coast standards, yet my companions talked of trips with wetter, harder and slower going. I have no desire to test their claims; to a degree this activity reminds me of the 'mountain tourist' scene in Russia, with which it seems to share a certain sense of masochism. That said, the trip overall was both memorable and surprisingly enjoyable.

Ski touring is another mainstream mountain activity in New Zealand, since there is a natural transition to touring from the ski fields, which provide starting points for ridge traverses, back bowls, and even ski-lodge to ski-lodge touring. Another alternative, which worked in early season 2001 and 2002, is the Lewis Pass. This has the added advantage of nearby Maruia hot springs; there are also secret 'wild' springs. Chilled by the frosty midwinter air and teetering barefoot over the verglas-covered rock I couldn't help feeling dubious as I approached them, but once in it was a great pleasure to be so warm in the open air under the stars and snowy hills.

My introductory ski tour in the higher mountains started with a spectacular flight around and amongst the cloud to the tiny Barron Saddle Hut. From here we followed a pleasant and mostly downhill ski route along a shelf and over Sladden Saddle to the beautifully situated Mueller Hut. As the cloud cleared, our mild exertions were rewarded by inspiring views of Mount Cook and the sérac-torn face of Mt Sefton.

A more energetic venture is the nearest New Zealand has to the European Haute Route, sometimes known as Symphony on Skis. Starting in the Rutherford Stream above the Godley Valley, and finishing down the Fox Glacier on the West Coast, this was first traversed on a single day in 1985. Most parties take up to a week to allow for a more leisurely pace and time for bad weather and side trips. In August 2002 I undertook a slightly truncated version of this by flying into the Murchison Glacier. After a bumpy landing on scoured glacier ice we skinned up to Tasman Saddle in a strengthening southerly wind that was loading the headwall with windblown snow. We stopped in the Kelman Hut to shelter and ate the fresh eggs someone had left, then went over to the busier but warmer Tasman Saddle Hut.

The next day was the crux of the journey, the crossing of the main divide, and as we had planned, this was the best weather day with blue skies and little wind. We skied down the Tasman Glacier to an alarmingly low 1250m, then crossed some moraine to commence skinning up the Rudolf Glacier. The headwall here can be problematic, and we were a little concerned by the sight of fresh avalanche debris. We took the safest-looking line, cramponning up the broad and somewhat icy couloir to the right of the main icefall. At its top we crossed back onto the upper glacier for a weary final pull up to the 2635m Graham Saddle. Approaching its crest, teetering on scoured ice, we were rewarded for the long climb by what felt like the climax of a symphony. A wonderful evening winter sun was glinting on the Tasman Sea, far below and only 30km distant, and the peaks around the Franz Joseph névé were subtly tinged with its warmth.

We descended on the western side to the névés of the Franz Joseph Glacier, then traversed across to Centennial Hut. The scenery and situation were wonderful, but as is apparently quite common there were big sastrugi everywhere, so our skiing was not wonderful. The hut was full of people who had flown in, many of them discovering the limitations of snowboards for traversing glaciers. After a night there we crossed our final pass, the Newton Pass, to the Fox Glacier. Here too there is a useful hut, Pioneer Hut, which gives easy access to some excellent alpine ice routes and rock climbs. We continued down the glacier, finally managing some proper turns in the spring snow, to Chancellor Hut overlooking the spectacular icefall of the Fox Glacier. The walk out from here involves crossing the lower glacier, whose difficulty and feasibility changes rapidly. Unenthusiastic about walking out in ski boots, we elected to finish the trip with a short helicopter ride.

As I conclude this article I realise that I have covered only a fraction of New Zealand's mountain opportunities. I could certainly write as much again based on my unrealised projects. As with other adventurous locations, climbs here require dedication, energy and time. They also require the right conditions, a good window in the typically unsettled weather, and often more than one attempt. My attempt on Mt d'Archiac last spring was a case in point. On the second day walking in we found ourselves repulsed by a prolonged and rather alarming display of wet snow avalanches before even reaching the mountain. It would not be too wide of the mark to talk of Scottish weather in alpine mountains with greater ranges approaches. Nonetheless, given a willingness to adapt the activity to the season, conditions and weather, fulfilling mountain adventures can be found at any time of year. For the best of these it still helps to be, as R L G Irving put it in his 1955 *History of British Mountaineering*, 'undaunted by heavy swags, by constant and prolonged spells of vile weather and trained to deal with all sorts of conditions and formations of snow and ice'.



12. From Centennial Hut. (*Paul Knott*) (p116)



13. Looking across Graham Saddle to the NW. (*Paul Knott*) (p116)



24. Grant Piper on Sladden Saddle (2344m) with Aoraki/Mount Cook behind. (*Paul Knott*) (p116)



25. Fox Glacier from Chancellor Hut. (*Paul Knott*) (p116)