The New Zealand Experience

Mount Tasman

HAMISH NICOL

(*Plate 43*)

The plan had been brilliant. Mike and Sally Westmacott would fly out from England and meet us in Adelaide, South Australia. We would set off together for New Zealand, and climb Mt Cook. One day before they were due to arrive in Adelaide, Sally phoned to say that Mike was seriously ill with an agonising pain in his neck, and they weren't coming. At one stroke my climbing party of three was reduced to one. My wife Mary and I left Adelaide, as planned, on Friday 1 January 1988, picked up a small hire car at Christchurch and drove slowly across the sunny plains towards Mt Cook.

Hermitage Mt Cook is the base village for all climbing operations in the Mt Cook area. It contains one very expensive hotel, a youth hostel, two climbing huts, a campsite, some useful shops and the main office of Alpine Guides (Mt Cook) Ltd. I had been told that the Unwin hut, run by the New Zealand Alpine Club, was a good place to find a climbing partner, but the task did not look an easy one. New Zealand climbers, the ones I saw anyway, were young, very fit and taciturn to the point of speechlessness. How could any of them, anyway, be persuaded to take on a person of my vintage? Andrew Ruddle, who was propping up the hut door, was different. He was a glaciologist and wanted two people to accompany him to the Plateau glacier on the E side of Mt Cook. He would pay their air fare by ski plane there and back, and they would spend the day with him planting poles into the glacial ice. There being nothing better to do, Mary and I signed on for the job. I would take up a rucksack full of food in the hope of staying on in the Plateau hut if a climbing partner could be found there. No such luck. The occupants of the hut were all fully engaged and preoccupied, and about as uncommunicative as the ones I had met in the valley. Andrew, Mary and I had a very nice day plodding to and fro on the Plateau glacier, driving poles into the ice. The E face of Mt Cook looked extremely impressive, and made me feel tired and old and rather short of breath. Andrew said he would return in about six weeks' time to see where his poles had got to. In the evening the plane returned to take us back to the Hermitage.

Next day, at 8am, I booked a guide for a six-day trip in the mountains. January is the high season for New Zealand climbing and it was quite difficult to find anybody. My luck was in, however, and within an hour Shaun Norman appeared. He was a man of about 45, stocky, very tough, bearded, and friendly. Shaun was a Brit who had emigrated to New Zealand and this was another point in his favour. He looked over my equipment, made a few good suggestions and one bad one ('you can leave out your duvet jacket, we just don't wear them here!'), laid on some food and by 12 noon we were ready to go. The bill, payable by credit card in advance, made me wince. Including the guide's fee of $220 per



43. Mt Tasman, 3498m, (NZ): the N ridge leading to the summit. (*Hamish Nicol*) (p153)

day for six days, food for two people for five days, the cost of the plane ($440) and hut fees for two, the total cost came to $2000. I had never before spent £740 on myself in such a reckless and self-indulgent way but, on reflection later, it was extremely good value for money (£1 = NZ$2.70).

Shaun decided to go to Pioneer hut on the Fox glacier to the north of Mt Tasman. The Fox and its neighbour the Franz Joseph both drain into the Tasman Sea. Access from the west can be difficult and at times impossible because of the crevassed state of the glaciers. Most New Zealand climbers take a ski plane to their hut, thus saving both time and effort, and we did too. The plane took off from Hermitage airport, a strip of grass by the side of the Tasman glacier, after a minimum of formality. Within 45 minutes, which included hair-raising close-ups of Mt Cook, we had arrived at the landing site: a flat névé on the upper Albert glacier, a tributary of the Fox. The pilot had not been there recently so he made a trial landing before the actual one. To me the whole thing seemed highly dangerous, with jagged icy mountains all around and very little room to manoeuvre; but the pilot just chain-smoked calmly and we were down. Mary, who had come for the ride, waved us goodbye and took a telling photo of two little dots in the middle of an immense snowfield. I felt very lonely. How would we get out of here if anything went wrong?

A short walk, with Shaun carrying most of the gear, took us to Pioneer, a little wooden hut perched on a rocky ridge which descends from Douglas Peak. Pioneer is described in the guidebook as 'fully equipped'. This means that it has bunk-beds (but no bedding), Primus stoves, cooking utensils and a supply of paraffin. There was no sink – you just threw slops out of the front door. Four young Kiwi climbers were in residence. Shaun cooked an excellent meal; he fried some steaks and buried the unused meat in a snow-drift outside the hut. With the steak we had cabbage, fried onions and potatoes. I was impressed. Here was a guide actually performing domestic duties, something I had never seen in the Alps. The weather got steadily worse and it rained all night.

On Tuesday 5 January the weather cleared at 7am and by 9am we were off, aiming for Peak Alack (2768m). This lies just behind the hut and Shaun had never climbed it, possibly because the easy W ridge is so loose and dangerous. New Zealand rock is a metamorphosed sandstone known as 'greywacke', and interbedded with it are strips of even looser shale. We had only climbed about 100ft up the ridge when Shaun dislodged a boulder about the size of a small motor car, which narrowly missed my head. Without further disaster, and by climbing very slowly and carefully, we got up and down in about six hours.

That night at 7pm the Westland National Park wardens contacted Pioneer by radio-telephone. This is a routine part of their safety package. They send a detailed weather forecast and, in exchange, the senior climber in residence says who is there and what their plans are. There are perhaps 50 active climbers at one time in the Cook area in the height of the season. The forecast was bad, but the storm was not due until Thursday. Shaun decided to have a go at Mt Tasman next day.

Tasman (3498m) is the second highest mountain in New Zealand. It is a very beautiful peak and probably more difficult technically than Mt Cook, its higher

neighbour. It was first climbed by E A Fitzgerald and the guide Zurbriggen in 1895. We left the hut at 2am. The rushed breakfast, the careful roping up, the crampons strapped on inside the hut, the throaty feeling of apprehension were all there, as they had always been. We walked across the upper Fox glacier in moonlight without needing headtorches. The ice was well frozen and the crevasses covered over, so our progress was swift. On the northern approach to Tasman you get a bonus because you have to climb Mt Lendenfeld (3203m) first. A very steep glacier bay takes you to the Marcel col. The guidebook then says laconically: 'Turn right, and climb the easy snow-slope to the summit.' In fact it was a 45° ice-slope and quite interesting. It was still dark as we crossed Lendenfeld summit at 5am. A highly-corniced ridge fell steeply down to Engineer col, which divides Lendenfeld from Tasman. The slope on the right was about 50°. Beyond it, brutishly steep rocks dropped away to the Heemskirk glacier on the W side. The wind was getting up, it was still night, and the situation a most impressive one. On the E side was a huge cornice, so we gave that a wide berth and crept slowly and carefully downwards. 'Keep your feet well apart so you don't trip on your crampons,' said Shaun. I was frightened and he must have known it.

From Engineer col you get a splendid view of the N ridge of Tasman. It starts off with an icecliff about 250ft high. It was now 5.30 and dawn was breaking, but the lights of fishing boats on the Tasman Sea could still be seen. Shaun belayed me to an aluminium stake some three feet long. All New Zealand climbers carry one or two of these in addition to ice-pitons, two ice-axes, 12-point crampons, climbing helmets and double plastic boots. To my surprise Shaun made no attempt to avoid the obstacle. He simply went straight up it, front-pointing all the way. The ice was excellent and there was no real danger. In Wales it would have been graded 3. At the half-way point he stopped, drove in an ice-piton, brought me up and off he went again. The rest of the ridge was much easier, though it remained intimidating with steep ice faces going down for about 1000m on both sides. We got to the top at 8.45am. It was my 59th birthday. The wind had dropped and the view from the summit was immense. We could see both the Tasman Sea to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east; to the south we could see as far as Mt Aspiring, some 150 miles away. The N face of Cook, only a stone's throw away, looked desperate, and yet one could see tiny climbers on its upper glaciers. The return journey was by the same route. We got back to the hut at 3.30pm. I was very tired.

The 6pm weather forecast was now very bad, with a violent storm approaching from the west which threatened to maroon us in the hut if we didn't get out soon. So Shaun and I and the four New Zealanders left Pioneer at 11am on Thursday. It was so wet and the wind so strong that a crossing of Pioneer col and down the Haast glacier might have proved impossible. But having started up the glacier, with the wind gusting fiercely at our backs, we were deeply committed and could not have turned back easily, if at all. After an hour or so, the glacier levelled off and suddenly stopped. Here was the beginning of the Haast glacier, which drops down to the Tasman and is steep even by New Zealand standards. Shaun crawled on his stomach, while I belayed him, and looked down over the lip of the cornice to see where the bergschrund

could be breached. It was 25ft high and stretched away on both sides like the sides of a moat. The New Zealanders had not liked the look of it and were trying to get round it far away on the right. Shaun, a decisive man, simply lowered me down on a rope, took a running jump and sailed over the top into a soft bank of snow just beside me. It was a most athletic performance! We had no idea, of course, if the glacier was passable from this point but it was a good start. Shaun found a way down the Haast on its true left side and soon we had caught up with the others. From Haast it was necessary to find a way up and over Dixon ridge and thence steeply down to Plateau glacier and so to Plateau hut. I was cold and wet and much regretted not having a duvet jacket. By this time the storm was intense and a steady wind drove at the hut at speeds of up to 100mph. We spent 36 hours here, unable to move except for occasional perilous trips to the outside loo. Apparently some people, in the past, had been swept away in blizzards with their trousers down – an ignominious way to die.

On Friday night the wind dropped and it looked as if we might escape next morning. At 4am on 9 January I was up, found the day was fine, woke Shaun and by 6.15am we were off. Hut walks in the New Zealand Alps often involve tricky glaciers with big crevasses and steep cols. The descent from Plateau was an expedition in itself. The Cinerama col between Cook and the Anzac peaks was easy to cross but the Caroline glacier beyond it was steep; and I have a fine photograph of Shaun jumping a big crevasse. At length we got to the Ball hut on the right bank of the Tasman glacier. A few miles further on Mary was waiting for us in the car, and we were home.

In six days of very average weather I had bagged Tasman with the assistance of an excellent guide. Without him I could have done nothing. I considered myself very lucky.