

THE flavour surrounding Unwin Hut and Mt Cook Village is distinctly United Nations on any given day, which is not surprising considering the world-class nature of the area's geography. But why so few locals?

No one seemed to have the answer, and having just experienced one of the most awe-inspiring experiences of my life — on top of a 2800-metre peak in the Southern Alps — it seemed impossible that others could be so close and not be part of this.

The previous few days had been the culmination of months of preparation that had been set in motion over a bottle of wine with my partner five months earlier. Thirtysomething professionals with two children each, we had found ourselves in a routine that gave little back to our physical wellbeing. Talk of a holiday in Fiji gave way to a decision to use that time for a better purpose — climbing a mountain.

After committing to the idea by booking a trip with Adventure Consultants of Wanaka, we then had to transform ourselves from wine-quaffing procrastinators into something resembling fit human beings.

It took a few months, and dozens of walks up the bush ridge behind our Days Bay house, but it worked and eventually we were flying on a single-engine ski plane through the Alps and up to the head of the Tasman Glacier.

The journey to the snow was exhilarating; stepping on to the ice in the glacial compression zone was exciting, and watching hundreds of tonnes of ice avalanche with a thunderous roar a mere two hundred metres from our starting point was sobering.

Our guide, Paul Rogers, originally from London's East End, was a reassuring presence, though the irony of being guided up our own territory by a Londoner was not lost on us.

Roped up, we advanced on our first destination, Tasman Saddle Hut, improbably perched on a rock high above the glacier.

There was a small risk of falling into a crevasse and I figured that, if that happened, it would make more sense for me to fall into a hole and be rescued by Paul than the reverse.

So, taking the lead, I crossed my first snow bridge — packed snow and ice which conceals crevasses — and began the slog upward.

Trepidation soon gave way to a awe. There's nothing like ice. Impossible colours of blue from enormous building-sized ice pinnacles, the translucent magic of the crevasses under foot and the eerie snap, crackle and pop of the glacier punctuating the muffled landscape.

There was an Englishman, a Scotsman and a German . . .

. . . the joke is there were no Kiwis, with the exception of **Matt Hancock** and his partner, on a mountain adventure in the Southern Alps.

Strangers in their own paradise: Right, leaving the ski-planes behind and heading to the improbably positioned Tasman Saddle Hut, left, on the way to the 2800-metre Hochstetter Dome. Pictures: MATT HANCOCK

We made it to the hut as the light dimmed. The humble accommodation with five-star views was well stocked with survival supplies, bunks, a VHF radio and a "Gary Glitter" — Paul's rhyming slang for the long drop.

As the sun disappeared, the clarity of a star-filled sky was captivating. I could have stayed out watching it all night, but, with a start time of 4am to summit our first real mountain, a hot meal and an early night were called for.

I did not sleep well. Though I tried to blame the altitude, it was my thoughts rather than the thin air that were keeping me awake.

The wind came up in the night and delayed our start by an hour or so. As it calmed, we geared up and set off in the dark, our way illuminated by headlamps.

With little said and just the sound of biting crampons and ice axes, we progressed up an ever-steep slope toward the ridge that would take us to Hochstetter Dome, 2800 metres high.

As the light increased, the relief of spooky white gave way to intense pinks that struck Mt Cook across the glacial valley.

After about an hour, we hit the main ridge line. Being clients, and novices at that, we were roped to our

guide as we worked up ever more difficult ice till we hit a small plateau, about 40 minutes and a hundred vertical metres from the summit.

Off one edge was a sheer drop with breathtaking views of the mountains west of the divide — clouds being sucked down the mountains and an endless spine of snow-capped peaks.

Ahead was a knife-edge walk to the summit.

I wouldn't say I have a fear of heights, but what lay ahead challenged me. Being "short roped" gave some reassurance, but not much.

Still new to the various cramponing techniques, we edged our way upward.

With a massive void dropping off the concrete-hard ice on the sunny side of the slender ridge, and the unstable crumble of the dark side giving way to deep crevasses on the other, all our focus was on one step at a time. With such intense concentration, it came almost as a surprise to find ourselves standing on an exposed chunk of ice with no further way upward. We had reached the top.

It was not, however, the air-punching, Hollywood-scripted moment many might imagine.

My partner had managed to sprain her groin on the way up, so for her, silently battling the pain, conquering each step had been her mountain.

My battle had been to trust the guide and the gear when it felt unnatural to do so.

And getting back was still ahead of

us. The trio who had summited 20 minutes before us were now moving dots of humanity below the knife edge. I admired them for having climbed as equals without ropes, but was happy to click Paul's rope into my karabiner as I led the way back down the knife edge. I told myself I would climb there without a rope one day, but not today.

An ice experience is easily attainable for all New Zealanders and is something that should at least be tried if not pursued.

If hundreds of thousands of people travel the globe annually to get here, something must be going on that's worth the fuss.

■ Adventure Consultants Wanaka
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