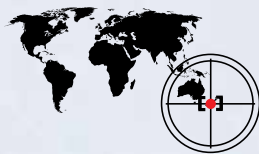


School of **ROCK** & **ICE**



After nearly killing himself, Damian Hall decided it was time to learn some mountaineering skills – and sit on New Zealand's most spectacular toilet.

WORDS AND IMAGES Damian Hall

LEARNT THE HARD WAY. MOUNTAINEERING ISN'T AS SIMPLE as grabbing an ice axe, jumping into some crampons and skipping off for a breezy gambol up a summit or two before popping to the nearest public house to chat up the girls. In fact, mountaineering requires a few more skills (plus usually some rope), as does the act of wooing womenfolk (minus the rope). But, it wasn't until I almost killed myself in New Zealand's Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park that I got to the bottom – or top – of it all.

To cut a longer story short, I'd been an armchair mountaineer for some years, greedily devouring the books of Jon Krakauer, Joe Simpson and Sir Chris Bonington. But, the first time I did any real mountaineering, on the Ball Pass Crossing, I was lucky to survive.

There are no signposts on the two-day route and the pass itself is blanketed in snow. The Department of Conservation (DOC) label it "demanding", but I'd done plenty of hiking in New Zealand – how difficult could it be? I hired crampons and an ice axe and started out, full of gung-ho hubris and misplaced ideas of heroism. I thought I was Reinhold Messner. But, I was about to become a different type of mess.

Facing a patch of soft-looking snow, I simply couldn't be bothered putting my crampons back on. I was too good for that! It was just a bit of snow. Kids play in snow. I didn't show the mountain due respect and it kicked me in the butt. After some cart-wheeling legs, just like in the cartoons, I was heading downhill fast, towards an edge and thin air.

I saved myself by rolling off sideways into some sharp, but welcome rocks. Lots of skin was broken, but no bones were. It could have been much worse. I felt small. And, I thought that maybe I'd better learn a few basic mountain skills. Like, um, when to use crampons.

So, a few months later, cuts and bruises healed and my ego still somewhat intact, I rock up a little more meekly to beautiful Wanaka for a seven-day Mountaineering Instruction Course with Adventure Consultants. The company has been guiding trips on Mt Everest for many years. In fact one of their two founding members, Rob Hall, breathed his last on the world's highest peak in 1996 when he refused to leave a dying client and save himself. The tragedy is told in Krakauer's memoir *Into Thin Air*. Rob and his great friend, Guy Cotter, completed the Seven Summits in seven months in 1990 and Guy still runs the company now.

We were the perfect marriage of temporary convenience. Adventure Consultants know stuff about mountains and I needed to know stuff about mountains. Specifically, how to be much safer in them. Even if secretly I was most excited about the glamour skill: ice climbing.

I meet Anna, our guide. She is softy-spoken yet heroically strong, in both senses of the word. Without a hint of the type of muscle we men like to have, she can carry far more than us, for longer, without even wincing. Plus she had not long ago lost her husband to an avalanche, which is another firm reminder of the potentially murderous nature of mountains.

There are two more participants, who have likewise flown across the Tasman especially for a week in the white stuff. We get organised and try on several thousand dollars worth of kit, before driving into the steep and alluring Matukituki Valley. I feel a tiny bit like Jack Bauer as I scramble into a helicopter for an exhilarating 20-minute ride down the narrowing valley, alighting on Bevan Col (1800m), our base camp for the week. Holy smoke. I nearly wet myself with excitement.

Nestled between the snow-clad Mount Bevan, that looms directly in front of us and the Mount Joffre range behind, with the Tasman Sea in the distance and another sea, of peaks – I count 19 in all – stretching to the south, I feel like a tiny figurine atop an iced cake. We also have front row seats for the massive Bonar Glacier, which looks like a giant silk sheet that has been repeatedly slashed by Freddy Krueger.

I can't vouch for other would-be mountaineers, but this type of bewitching spot is a big part of why I'm here. Sure, there's a sense of adrenalin and adventure, but the purity and beauty of the unsullied surroundings make me certain that if there is a heaven it would look like this.

I could sit and stare all day. In fact, there was the perfect spot for that: the toilet. Perched like a throne at the top of the Matukituki Valley, the barrel we

are to do our bathroom business in must be New Zealand's most spectacular bog. I've never, before or since, enjoyed having a good sit down half as much. There's certainly no need to grab an old copy of *Outer Edge* (other publications are available, but aren't as good) to keep you occupied here.

After admiring our surroundings and settling in, we spend the afternoon practising methods of self-arrest. Rather than involving handcuffs and a fondness for sadomasochism, it's all about using an axe to halt a slide. The technique would have stopped me much sooner on the Ball Pass Crossing, and maybe I wouldn't have scars all over my elbows. A slide is perhaps the most common risk in the mountains, especially when fatigue kicks in on the way back to base camp after a long day. There are several ways to do it and I already feel more confident.

After donning our armour the next day, including a share in a 60-metre rope, we learn how to make prusiks with slings (enabling rope ascent) and how to rope-up for glacier travel, where the threat of sliding into a hidden crevasse is omnipresent. The knots seemed impossibly and needlessly complicated at first, but by the course's end I know their value all too well and can do them blindfolded. We take it in turns to lead as we zigzag through the glacier field. I glance warily into the hidden ice worlds as we trace the length of yawning crevasses, known for swallowing up climbers, like Tolkien-esque monsters.

We practise crevasse rescue. This involves walking off a large drop and hoping your partner likes you enough to break your fall, by throwing

“ I SAVED MYSELF BY ROLLING OFF SIDeways INTO SOME SHARP, BUT WELCOME ROCKS. LOTS OF SKIN WAS BROKEN, BUT NO BONES WERE. IT COULD HAVE BEEN MUCH WORSE. I FELT SMALL. ”



LEFT: Some sideways crab-style action RIGHT: Your humble narrator. Posing.



“ WE PRACTISE CREVASSE RESCUE. THIS INVOLVES WALKING OFF A LARGE DROP AND HOPING YOUR PARTNER LIKES YOU ENOUGH TO BREAK YOUR FALL. ”

themselves to the floor and anchoring themselves to a submerged ice axe, before you reach the bottom. Then, unless you snored too loudly the night before, they construct a complicated, yet effective, pulley system to yank you back up. Like many of the skills I've picked up, it takes time, is complicated at first, at least for my little mind, but it saves lives.

We spend another day learning how to use ice screws and make safe snow anchors, how to trip plan, navigate and read the weather (how to spot those little white clouds that look so innocent, but spell doom).

At dinnertime my appetite has doubled and when the lollies are passed around during breaks I greedily gobble them down when normally I wouldn't touch them. My dreams are long and vivid. In one, I win Wimbledon and I don't even like tennis.

With the basics covered, it is finally time for the glamour skill: ice climbing. I find myself face-to-face with a cold, unfriendly ice face. Adrenalin surges like a car on a Scalextric circuit. My heart thumps fast and loud like a foreboding tribal drum. Sweat slithers down my nose. I whack the ice hard above me with the axe. Small shards of

sharp ice shoot down on my helmet as the axe fails to find a home. I swing my suddenly tired arm again. It shudders as the axe grips. But, has it gripped firmly enough? And, is the anchor above really going to hold me? How many limbs will snap if I fall? Will the others even try to rescue me knowing I've eaten all their lollies?

Snap out of it, lad. I scold myself for needless pessimism and re-occupy my mind with the simplicity of the task. Ice climbing is much harder than imagined. It seems so heavily reliant on

instinct: the sound of axe hitting ice, the feel of a precarious crampon hold.

When it's someone else's go, some wag shouts: "when do we cut the rope, like in *Touching The Void*?" (OK, it was me). Anna tells me she's ice climbed up the sheer face of nearby Mt Aspiring. "How many times did you slip?" I ask. "None," she says. I still have some way to go.

Later, I find myself vertical again. Only this time we're in the snow and the angle isn't quite as steep. Those tribal drums are beating though. I exact a



TOP LEFT: The mid-summer mountain sunsets lingering for ages. LEFT: Ice climbing is harder than it looks. ABOVE: Crevasse rescue involves a complicated but effective pulley system. RIGHT: Looking up the Matukituki Valley.



firm kick into the snow... two, three more times, to be sure, then move on tentatively. If I start to think about what might go wrong I can feel myself starting to mentally freeze up. But, if I man up and stay positive, everything tends to go swimmingly. Another minute and I've reached the others. Another 20 and the four of us are exchanging handshakes, smiles and snapping photos on the summit of Mount French (2356 metres). It's my third summit in five days. I'm thirsty as hell and the muscles all over my body are calling out for mercy. I feel absolutely fantastic. It sounds so cheesy, but I've adopted a completely different attitude to the mountains. A new and very sincere respect and awe and I'll never treat one with arrogance again.

On our last evening, after some snow cave digging, it's such a perfect night we decide to sleep out under the stars and the watchful arm of Mt Aspiring. Nicknamed "the Matterhorn of the south," at 3033 metres it's the park's highest. As ever, the lingering sunset is magical.

It's overwhelmingly peaceful watching millions of stars twinkling above the beguiling pyramid. On our final day we walk out, down the valley. Once on grass, we stroll in bare feet. We practise prusiking one last time from a bridge. Though my body aches, I hate taking my harness and helmet off for the last time. I'm completely hooked - beyond salvation. It's a honeymoon hit from a new drug. Now I just need to find a similar course for wooing womenfolk.

Seven-day Mountaineering Instruction Courses with Adventure Consultants cost NZ\$2550 (including helicopter access). Equipment hire is extra. For info, visit www.adventureconsultants.co.nz

NEW ZEALAND'S PEAK SEASON

As New Zealand's highest peak, Aoraki/Mount Cook, stands at 3763 metres compared to Everest at 8848 metres, the Southern Alps could easily be seen as a mere mountaineering playground. But it's a playground where, if the apparatus isn't treated with due respect, even the big boys fall off the swings, with the most serious consequences. This is of course where Sir Edmund Hillary learnt his clove hitch from his Italian hitch before conquering Everest with Tenzing Norgay in 1953.

The most popular climbing region is Mount Cook National Park. Situated in the middle of the South Island it has 22 peaks over 3050 metres. The quieter Mt Aspiring National Park, in the southwest, has the highest peak (Aspiring) outside the Mt Cook region and boasts more than 100 glaciers.

Though relatively small, the country has many technically challenging summits. The lack of seriously large peaks in New Zealand makes it an excellent place to hone technical skills without having to battle with the affects of altitude. Plus the traditionally capricious Kiwi weather can often make climbs eventful.

There are a handful of professional guiding companies running domestic and international excursions. The New Zealand mountaineering season runs roughly from November to April.

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