

CLIMB YOUR OWN EVEREST:


10 - DAY ALPINE CLIMBING COURSE WITH ADVENTURE CONSULTANTS

Words by Sal Abubakar, Paddy Pallin Staff Member



I arrived at Lake Wanaka, a placid expanse of crystal-clear water, nestled in the shadow of the mountains as the sun dropped low on the horizon. The lights pierced deep between the peaks in the distance - a humble greeting to my 10-day mountaineering course. It was a beautiful place, filled with other adventure-tourists, and people wanting to feel the great openness of a wild country.

Our first day began with a thorough gear check. My essential gear consisted of a set of Icebreaker thermals, an Icebreaker T, a pair of Arc'teryx Gamma LT softshell pants, ExOfficio underwear and Icebreaker socks, a Mountain Hardwear softshell jacket, Western Mountaineering down jacket, a Mountain Hardwear shell, and a Buff. All of that was jammed strategically into my Osprey Aether 70 along with my Black Diamond and Petzl climbing hardware. With the gear check finished, we then took a quick drive out of Wanaka to the utilitarian-sized airport, home to the helicop-

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ters and planes of the Mount Cook Ski-planes company. Our first real taste of the mountains raced beneath us as we took a ride in the workhorse AS350 B2 "Squirrel" helicopter.

Three inexperienced mountaineers-to-be formed our group. Our basecamp for the course was Kelman hut. It was a well-established but weathered shelter perched precariously at 2480m ASL, at the end of a ridge, overlooking Tasman Saddle.

In the days that followed, our instructor taught us the multitude of disciplines involved in being in that pristine, hostile environment. We learnt everything from basic rope skills, to ice-climbing, to glacier travel. Clear weather graced our locale for the first three days, which allowed us our first taste of summitting a semi-technical peak - Mount Aylmer, a shade under 2700m ASL. It was a slow-going day, learning as we went, fumbling with the ropes, sitting at the belay-station making sure everything was connected to the right

people and anchored safely to the ice. Every moment we spent learning and trudging through was well worth our concentrated efforts as we reached the summit - a glorious, crystal-clear view of the glaciated valley and in the distance, Aoraki, Mount Cook - the "Cloud-Piercer".

As the week progressed, we were embraced by the capriciousness of New Zealand's inclement weather systems. At first, receiving high-level cloud cover, then heavy winds, drizzle, rain, sleet and finally a night of light snow. As the weather pushed desperately against the flexing walls of the hut, our time indoors allowed us to devour the theoretical aspects of mountaineering, building on our knowledge of anchor systems, crevasse rescue, belaying and just plain chilling out.

With the weather clearing, we made an attempt at another nearby peak. This time, it was Hoshstetter Dome, a mountain with a peak that stood 2823m above sea level. We started early in the day, around 8:00am, knowing our route was to cover deep crevasse territory and rockfall zones. Each segment of the climb (known as a pitch), was long and arduous, but again, well worth the effort. However, this time, our attempts were unsuccessful as we reached the west ridge at an alarming 3:30pm in the afternoon. Quickly running out of light and time, we said our hoo-rays, had our lunch and made a quick retreat off the mountain. The walk off the mountain was in a different direction to our ascent, and after slow, concentrated navigation around the abysmal crevasses in the newly-found twilight; we finally made it back to the warmth and security of the hut. It was 9:30pm.

Looking back at my own photos now, I'm glad that I've experienced those mountains, their serenity and isolation. And it was a privilege to have been guided by an instructor of one of the most reputable companies in the world. With all that new-found knowledge and confidence, I find myself pining for that next great adventure and who knows? Maybe I might end up in the big mountains, chasing that unclimbed summit.

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