

# 'A dream come true'



Pete Oswald, pictured with Jeremy Lytle and Simon Reeves, skied the east face of Aoraki/Mt Cook with childhood friend Neil Williman last year.

## Extreme sport Sophie Trigger

It had been a "life goal" for Neil Williman and Pete Oswald to ski the east face of Aoraki/Mt Cook, a feat only accomplished by a handful of people before them.

While New Zealand's highest peak has been climbed and skied many times, the particular descent the best friends and old school mates took last November was unusual.

"From the summit down the east face without using a rope or taking your skis off to put on crampons and ice hacks and stuff like that doesn't get done too often," Williman said.

"It was first done, either debatedly in the early 90s or 2013, but either way it's only been done by about six groups of people and we were part of the sixth group to do that."

While there are more difficult "technical ski slopes", there are several factors that make this particular 1600 metre route so perilous.

Oswald said what makes the east face of Aoraki/Mt Cook so tricky is its "sustained steepness for such a long slope".

"When you're looking down, it's something you could tumble down from the very top to the very bottom if you make one mistake," the professional skier said.

It had also been "a stroke of luck" that perfect conditions on the precarious slope aligned with Williman's visit to New Zealand. Normally based in Austria, he had been in the country for Oswald's wedding.

"You had to have clear weather to ski and not enough wind to make it unsafe, but you also want the temperature to be cold enough to keep the snow stable," Oswald said.

"So you can imagine how many stars have to align to make it actually possible."

Even with good conditions the peak was gusty, Oswald said. "At one point, when I was transitioning I nearly got blown off the peak still, just lying down, it was really strong wind."

Setting out at 1am, it took the group eight hours to summit the mountain, and just 20 minutes to ski down the slope.

With a background in free skiing – "finding something quite technical to



While New Zealand's highest peak, Aoraki/Mt Cook, has been climbed and skied many times, school friends Neil Williman and Pete Oswald believe only six or seven groups have skied the east face. Since meeting at Bohally School as kids, Williman and Oswald have skied together in New Zealand, Japan and France.



ski down" – as opposed to ski mountaineering, Williman hadn't been sure his skill set would be up there.

"I'd say it's the most challenging ski mountaineering that I've done, because it's such a long, steep technical face," he said.

"It's different in that way because it's not skiing as fast as you can or jumping off the biggest cliff that you can, because the consequences are higher if you get it wrong."

"It was challenging in that way, mentally, and scary."

Describing the ride as a "dream come true", Williman said his father had also been among one of the first six groups to climb the east face of Aoraki/Mt Cook.

Since meeting at Bohally Intermediate School as students, Williman and Oswald have skied together in New Zealand, Japan and Charmonix in France. But the east face of Aoraki/Mount Cook in their home country will be a ride they will always remember.

Describing it as "thrilling and scary" and "type B fun", Williman said it was a dream come true to achieve this milestone with childhood friends.

"It was very much a dream come true, especially to do it with those guys, most of whom I've known for a very long time," he said.

"Just a really special experience to get to the top of your country and to ski it on the east face."

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