

THE DOUBLE WHAMMY

Aoraki / Mt Cook East Face and Tititea / Mt Aspiring by bike in consecutive weekends

by NEIL WILLIMAN

Emails. Emails from my boss are not first on the 'list of things that get me stoked'. But this one was a biggie. It said, 'Yes, you can take a month off from your engineering job in Europe to attend two weddings in New Zealand that happen to be four weeks apart.' Pretty generous, especially after I'd said I would work all European summer to make up for months of absence during the northern winter. The froth washed over me as I realised I was booking flights to Aotearoa for an unmissable stag do, two weddings where I was a groomsman, and three trips into the mountains.

I was quickly brought back down to earth, though. As soon as I posted that plan on the book of faces, comments emerged. 'Three big trips into the mountains? I hope you're bringing good weather with you.' 'You remember that the New Zealand alpine



The author skinning towards Tititea / Mt Aspiring. Simon Reeves



TOP *Jeremy Lyttle and Pete Oswald ascending Aoraki / Mt Cook's East Face.* Neil Williman

BOTTOM *Pete Oswald moments before dropping in to ski the East Face.* Neil Williman

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP *Pete Oswald shredding the East Face.* Neil Williman

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM *Pete Oswald getting the last turns in between the end of the Boys Glacier and the start of the long and intimidating moraine walk down to the Tasman Glacier.* Neil Williman

is notoriously windy in spring, right?' Since those comments were from Steve Eastwood, a ski photographer who's had many images on these pages and is somewhat of an oracle of ski mountaineering in New Zealand, and Simon Reeves, one of my oldest skiing buddies and one of the crew I was hoping to assemble for the missions, I had to remind myself yet again that no amount of enthusiasm can guarantee success.

And so it was with equal parts of surprise, nervousness and excitement that I found myself driving into Aoraki / Mt Cook village on the last days of October 2019 with Simon Reeves, Jeremy Lyttle and Pete Oswald. A small weather window had opened post Charlie Lyons' stag do and wedding, but there were only a few days before I planned to walk the Milford Track with my parents. It was on.

It was to be the first experience of New Zealand's highest mountain for all of us, which didn't help with the nerves. Although the Linda Glacier route is the most common and 'easiest' route to the summit, climbing and skiing the East Face was our goal as it was apparently in good condition—something that doesn't happen very often at all. The East Face is one of the most obvious and beautiful lines that can be seen from Plateau Hut, and must have received countless hours of admiration and scrutiny from would-be climbers and skiers, though conditions rarely align. There is debate about when it was first skied. Although some sources credit Kiwis Tyrone Low and Niki Begg together with the late, great Swedish skiers Magnus Kastengrenn and Andreas Fransson in 2013, there is also a record of Ardi Reichlin skiing it in 1993, less than two years after it first took its current form following the summit collapse in December 1991. Whichever the first party was, there is consensus that it doesn't get done often, especially from the summit, which is what we were hoping to do. I was puckering already.

So many experiences and emotions were packed into the next few days. The heli ride in, the magic of Plateau Hut with a good crew, starting from there at 1am by skiing down onto the Grand Plateau, beginning the more-than-1600m of altitude gain through a straight-up boot pack and via crevasse crossings in the dark, and then experiencing one of the most incredible sunrises of my life, halfway up the face. The intense cold and the frost-nipped toes. Coming to the top of the face and peaking over the summit ridge, the point where Sam Smoothy says 'holy shit' in *The Sky Piercer*. The slightly muted celebration on the summit (actually just below, in order to respect its Tapu nature) because we were so in awe of nature at its rawest and the fact that we were lucky enough to experience it. The hugs and personal moments we had up there. The quiet certainty that this would be something we would remember with crystal clarity for the rest of our lives.

The wind was starting to pick up, and the gusts felt like they were threatening to pluck us from this special

peak. It was time to click into our skis and make our way down the bone-juddering sastrugi of the summit ridge to the drop in for the East Face. There were several other teams around—word had got out that the East Face was in the best condition it had been in for years. The other groups left their skis/snowboards at the top of the East Face drop-in though—even though most seemed capable of riding from the summit, especially the team of Sam McGrath, Joe Collinson and Zack Wentz who had done more than their fair share of setting the boot pack. In retrospect, it made me think more about the relevance of lists of 'firsts' and what counts as doing things 'properly'. We didn't downclimb or abseil to get onto the East Face because we didn't have to. Conditions were perfect. I'm sure there are many skiers in the world that could have skied the East Face that day, and for a little while it felt like they were all there—14 people skied it (or most of it) within a couple of hours, which must be a significant portion of those who have skied it ever. When Sam Smoothy, Fraser McDougall, Nadine Wallner and Xavier de la Rue rode it in 2017, it wasn't from the summit. They could have easily done so, but they just wanted to film it before the light moved off the face. So I'm not sure how much it really means to count how many groups have skied the East Face from the summit without using a rope or crampons on the way down, but I think we may have been about the sixth group, and I like to believe that because my father Brin was part of the sixth group to climb it.

Wait a second. Did I just say that the conditions were perfect? Yes. They were. It was one of those days that just don't happen. The westerly wind that had created the icy sastrugi on the summit ridge had been gently loading the East Face with spindrift the entire time we'd been climbing the face (hence the cold), which had somehow stuck to the spring snow underneath perfectly. Once this aspect got significant solar heat, the avalanche danger would soar. But the day's temperature was perfectly cool, and the end result was grippy snow that sprayed magic fairy dust with every soulful turn. The stuff of dreams.

Skiing down the Boys Glacier and walking out along the Tasman Glacier rock field and moraine wall was also quite an experience. Most people take a heli out to avoid that (as we had on the way in). A month later, the moraine wall collapsed severely during heavy rainfall and is now barely passable, so I'm not sure how often it's going to get done in the future. Big ups to Ruari Macfarlane for when he walked in and out to do the first snowboard ascent/descent of the East Face.

We made it back to Queenstown just in time for me to take the last bus to Te Anau, meet my family, and take the boat to start the Milford Track. Tears were shed together about Aoraki. It felt very much like the end of the story.

Wait, was that the end? I had literally just got back to Queenstown from the Milford Sound when Si and I realised there was a pretty darn good wee weather window coming up a couple of days away—which happened to be the weekend. So Si came home from work on Friday afternoon and we packed the same bags as last week with the same stuff (which was starting to get a bit smelly by this stage), did the same shop at the same supermarket, and got up early Saturday morning to drive out of town the same way. The differences started coming as soon as we left State Highway 6, this time driving up over the Crown Range instead of down the Kawarau Gorge. And from there, the surprisingly smooth sailing that had been the Aoraki / Mt Cook trip started transitioning into the bumpy ride that was going to be our Tititea/Mt Aspiring adventure.

Jeremy Lyttle and Pete Oswald, the other two members of our team the previous weekend, weren't able to make it this time, having both used the 'once in a lifetime opportu-





Simon Reeves with skis and bicycle in the Matukituki valley. Neil Williman

nity' clause the previous weekend to get permission to miss ultrasound scans for their soon-to-be-born daughters. Although the legitimacy of that claim had been 100 per cent true, it would've been a bit of a boundary push for them to head out for another big trip five days later, which turned out to be lucky because this time we had to fit bikes in the car as well—one of which was picked up from Fraser McDougall in Wanaka on the way. (Thanks for lending me your Dad's bike, Fraser. Did he ever know?). It was also lucky because we might have been ten minutes slower if we'd been more people. That would have left us still inside the Wanaka DOC Visitors Centre when they got the call that the Mt Aspiring Road was closed from the Treble Cone turnoff due to heavy rain washing out the fords. As it was, Si and I cruised out of town blissfully unaware until we reached the 'road closed' sign at the TC turnoff for first-hand info. After a few minutes of milling around and talking to others parked there, we decided to give it a go, with a confidence (that I lack in Europe) that we could talk our way through any situation. It was soon tested. We met a grader driver a few kilometres down the road who seemed *very* unimpressed with us, but surprisingly only left us with strict instructions on how far we'd be able to drive instead of telling us we had to turn around immediately. We were on again.

The grader driver hadn't been kidding when he told us we wouldn't be going any further than the next major ford. Even the Snowmads truck would've had trouble crossing that one. So it was time to load up our bikes with our bag-loaded selves, with the bags themselves loaded with the full rig of New Zealand ski-mountaineering gear. Overuse of the word 'load'? Well, it certainly didn't feel like it at the time. I was starting to feel increasingly intimidated by the fact that Fraser told us: 'Oh, you're going to climb and ski Aspiring in two days without a heli? Nice one. I've done that. Hell of a big couple of days.' Fraser runs

ultramarathons. And now we were starting a good number of kilometres further away than usual on a borrowed bike that didn't really fit me, and without having rested properly before the trip. I would have been puckering again if my pucker-hole wasn't busy being hammered between an overloaded body and an under-inflated mountain bike.

We biked. There were more washouts. We biked some more. There were more river crossings. We fell into some of them. Then we biked some more. Eventually we got to Aspiring Hut, which was empty. Initial surprise gave way to the sudden realisation that we were almost alone in the valley due to the road closure ... and the second realisation that we hadn't actually made it that far yet, and still had a long way to go and a lot of vertical to get to French Ridge Hut. Then it started raining, which at least gave me the chance to try out a trick that Jeremy had taught me the week before: clipping your boots 'upside down' into your ski bindings on your bag so the rain doesn't get into them while you're walking. This would've worked great if I hadn't tried it an hour or two *after* it started raining. It was snowing by the time we got to French Ridge Hut, a wee surprise for that altitude in early November, but we were too happy to have made it to the hut to really care what was falling out of the sky at the time.

The 'wee' weather window that we'd used to justify the trip had been just that—only Sunday morning was forecast to be clear and calm. We'd known (but forgotten/ignored) that it was going to be wet on the way in on Saturday, and windy/cloudy on the way out on Sunday afternoon. But a half day of clear and calm weather on the Main Divide is nothing to shake a pole at.

The Main Divide was the subject of conversation as we left the hut at 5.30am the next morning, which ended up with me betting Simon that the main body of the Bonar Glacier is on the West Coast, while 'The Breakaway' part of it that we were about to tour up drains to the east. We wagered a beer consumed out of a ski boot on it, something that he still owes me at the time of writing—and I'm expecting some kind of interest payment. By the time we made it up The Breakaway, including multiple transitions between skins, ski crampons and boot crampons, the sun was lighting up Tititea majestically for my first view of the special peak. It made me proud to think that my parents had climbed it together.

The climb itself was reasonably uneventful, with the exception of the snow on the ramp being just hard enough to warrant some careful crampon and tool placement, and for some unknown reason Si being significantly faster than me on the way up, while I was faster on the way down. We left our skis at the top of the ramp as the summit ridge had been blasted by the westerly storm, making it look like it would be a pretty unenjoyable, bone-juddering sideslip. It wasn't too long before we were standing on the summit, doing our best to name the peaks we could see, and smiling fondly at Aoraki in the distance. The main feature was that we were completely alone and had almost the entire Matukituki valley to ourselves. It may not have been the blower pow that we'd scored on the East Face of Cook a week before, but it was another set of very special conditions that just don't happen.

High cloud was gathering, and the windy afternoon that had been forecast seemed to be coming in, so it was time to skidaddle. After trotting down the ridge in crampons, the ski down the ramp was better than expected, and the pleasure of skiing down to the Bonar Glacier made it more than worth dragging our planks over that long distance.

The real choice we had to make was whether to ski back to French Ridge Hut the way we'd come, via The Breakaway side glacier, or to tour up to Quarterdeck Pass and drop down from there. Fraser's warnings about how quickly foggy cloud can come up from the West Coast (maybe before we could skin to Quarterdeck; Pete had previously spent a night out on the Bonar for a similar reason) were being weighed against the risk of skiing down The Breakaway as the day got warmer. The Breakaway is west-facing, has steep faces above it, and had fresh snow from yesterday's storm that was about to warm up for the first time, hence our concern. We made the call that we were still early enough that the wet-slide risk wasn't significant yet, and darted across The Breakaway with constant eyes to the sky. The snow was sticky but not dangerous, and we could ski all the way back to French Ridge Hut for a very grateful removal of the ski boots and a solid hug.

'All' that was left was to back-track what had seemed like a huge day the day before. At least the river crossings weren't as high anymore, but we still managed to fall off our bikes in one of them. There was a ranger at Aspiring Hut this time and we stopped there at about 10:30pm to say 'hi' and pay the fees for staying in French Ridge the night before. By the time we'd ridden back to the car (with my headtorch failing), unloaded and driven back to Si's place in Queenstown, it was 2:30am—22 hours after our alarms had gone off the day before. And this time it was definitely the end of the story, except that Si got up and went to work the next morning, he's still awesome, while I slept till about 2:30pm.

The next weekend, we partied for Pete and Soph's New Zealand wedding at PK Bay, also with amazing weather, and Jeremy told me that I'd been rolling sixes the whole month that I'd been in New Zealand. I didn't argue. I just smiled, and we clinked beers with Pete and Si in one of those silent but meaningful moments.



TOP *Simon Reeves skiing The Ramp on Tititea / Mt Aspiring.* Neil Williman

BOTTOM *The team enjoying the view of Aoraki / Mt Cook and the freshly skied East Face from across the Grand Plateau at Plateau Hut.* Neil Williman

Neil Williman is supported by Fischer, Black Diamond, Contour Skins, Komperdell Poles, Pieps, Sungod, Axamer Lizum, and Lenz Socks.