

summit

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Pioneer Hut region. Note hut. Photo by Mike Andrew

TRAMPING IN THE NEW ZEALAND ALPS

by Arlene Blum

Dear T.,

Time for a vacation from snow and cold. "Try tramping — jolly good fun," suggested Margaret Clark and Faye Kerr, New Zealand friends with whom I'd climbed McKinley a few years back. I

began having romantic visions of hoboes sitting by campfires, jumping from freight car to freight car, nibbling on big rock candy mountains. "Tramping is what you call hiking in the States," Margaret disillusioned me. Well, it was good fun but a rather



Two climbers on the Silberhorn-Tasman ridge.

Photo by Mike Andrew

different phenomenon from hiking. First hint came when we packed our gear.

"May as well take ice axes, crampons and ropes." My hope for a restful stroll through meadows of flowers began to diminish.

"I suppose you even take ice screws tramping," I suggested, jokingly.

"Hmm, may not hurt to toss in a couple ice screws."

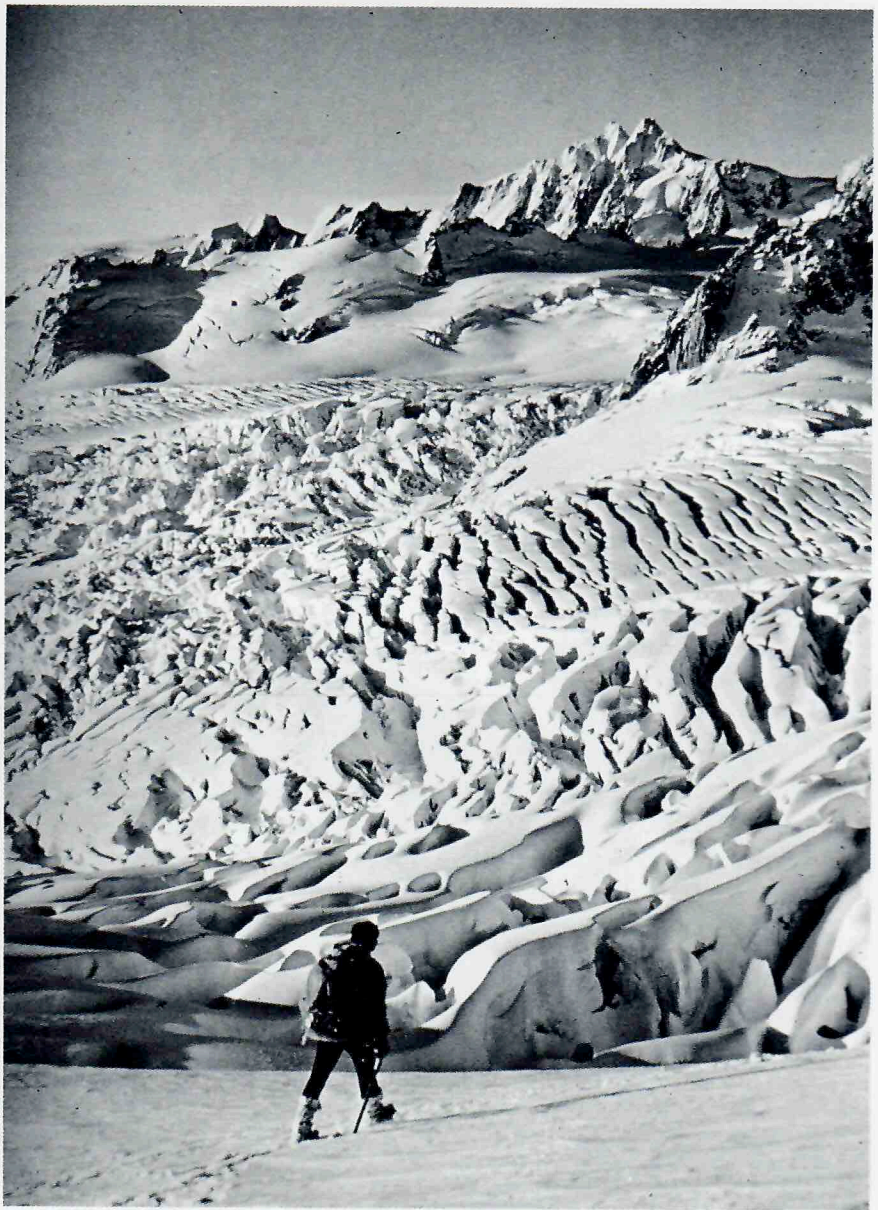
Our walk was to take us up a typical New Zealand Valley, across a six thousand-foot pass to another valley and then up to the region around Mt. Cook (12,349'), the highest peak in New Zealand. After bouncing up the dry river bed that pretended to be a road, we were greeted by a swarm of sandflies, one of the more aggressive local creatures. Apparently an immunity to their bites can be developed.

"Don't let them bite you," said Faye rather smugly, as I ruefully surveyed the large itchy red

welts appearing all over my arms and legs. The New Zealanders wore shorts for the warm walk up to the first hut; I wore long pants, parka, gloves and hat — at least until the sandflies deserted us.

"Good track to the hut." Well, it was quite a good track — really much more interesting than the wide graded path that would be considered a good trail in the States. Had to stay alert though to realize where to go. We followed blazes through the woods, waded across rivers, strolled through meadows knee-deep in thick grass and clover, and finally went quite steeply up through the forest. A long suspension bridge, reminiscent of Nepal, came into view.

"Cross at your own risk — one person only," one of the very few signs of people we saw on the entire track. As I never get quite accustomed to swaying fifty feet above a foaming river on a swing bridge, my adrenalin level was high after cautiously walking across the bridge. My companions told me if I



Upper Franz Josef Glacier.

Photo by Mike Andrew

was lucky we'd encounter an old style bridge — two cables, one for your feet and one for your hands. I hoped I wouldn't be lucky.

Soon we were at the hut drying our boots by a crackling fire and committing atrocities upon the resident sandfly population while the rain fell. Pleasant huts like this are found throughout the alpine valleys of New Zealand. Built mainly to accommodate the deer cullers, they also provide shelter for trampers.

"Deer cullers?" Strangely enough, deer are considered noxious animals in New Zealand, and the government employs hunters to try and keep their population down. When Europeans first came to

New Zealand, there were virtually no native mammals. The lush green islands were a paradise for birds — many species of which had lost the ability to fly. Rabbits, deer, and other creatures were introduced with rather disastrous results. With no predators to keep their numbers under control, they multiplied explosively, destroying the vegetation and habitats for the native creatures. All the introduced creatures are now considered pests. (Some New Zealanders exempt sheep from this generalization.) Many deer inhabit rugged mountain areas where their eradication is impossible and their control is difficult. Deer cullers walk or are helicoptered into these remote areas where they

try to kill as many deer, chamois, and Himalayan tahr as possible.

A beautiful walk in the sun brought us to Richardson Bivy — a large rock with a small cozy sheltered area underneath. Following a river, the track to the bivy consisted of a cairn every few miles. Up, over, and around, we climbed the New Zealand pebbles that lined the river banks. The nearby peaks looked most interesting. Though they are little more than 8000 feet high, climbing these mountains is not really easy under good conditions and can be extremely difficult given the soft snow and changeable weather often found in these parts.

"Tomorrow we go over Tragedy Col. May have to rope up a wee bit, but this is just a trumper's trip — no problem." My visions of flowers and forests began to recede even further. The walk up to the Col was like many climbs in the Sierra. The belayed descent was steeper, ending with a mixture of very steep grass interspersed with cliff bands. If this was what New Zealander's called hiking I was curious what they considered climbing.

Though the elevation of mountains in New Zealand are between 7,000 and 12,000 feet, the climbs tend to be long and rugged. Weather sense and route finding ability are invaluable, as is the patience to wait out bad weather. "Training ground for the Himalaya," is a trite phrase that rolls easily off the tongue, but these mountains are just that. Both Everest and Kanchenjunga were first ascended by New Zealanders. Two local climbers went to Europe a couple years ago and climbed the seven great north faces in a season, many outstanding routes in the Andes are being pioneered by New Zealanders. I think part of the reason is that climbing here is such a serious business. The climbs are generally long without easy descent routes. Since this is an island, the peaks are all close to the sea and the weather changes rapidly. If there is a period of warm sunny weather, the snow may well be too soft for safe climbing. The rock tends to be rotten. In spite of these difficulties, there are a large number of enthusiastic New Zealanders doing fine ascents. The era of face climbing has begun here recently. The Caroline Face of Mt. Cook, long considered unclimbable, now seems almost routine.

Considering the elevation and latitude, the de-

gree of glaciation is unique. The Tasman Glacier extends 18 miles from about 2,400 to 10,000 feet, and is 2,500 feet thick at 3,300 feet in elevation. Ice cliffs on the face of Mt. Sefton are several hundred feet thick. The mountains are young and steep.

Oh, yes, Tragedy Col. Well, we crossed over it without tragedy and saw a snug little hut across a swiftly flowing river.

"How fortunate. Arlene is going to get to learn about river crossing."

"How fortunate," I chorused dutifully. The technique used was rather interesting. With linked arms we all held on to a stout stick lying horizontal. While crossing, the upstream person who felt the full force of the river was supported by those downstream. It all worked quite well, amazingly enough.

The stream cut in close to the bank a short way above the cozy hut where we'd spent the night.

"We'll avoid wading the stream by going up through the bush above the stream." To me the bush appeared so dense that a fat mosquito might not have gotten through it.

"Us get through that? Never." An hour later we'd fought our way through about fifty feet of the stuff. I felt great empathy for marines in basic training as my Kelty got caught on every branch around. At least our boots were still dry.

Minutes later we waded across a stream thoroughly wetting our boots. And so it went, along and through glacial torrents. Then a moraine, and finally snow. By now the unpromising morning weather had turned to light rain and heavy wind. Our tramping trip continued up a steep snow slope from which gusts of wind threatened to dislodge us and at last to the hut at Baron Saddle.

Though it shook a lot the hut did not get blown away in the next day and at last the sun shone. Our descent route led us over the top of Mt. Darby, a small peak with fine views. "Just tramping," I mumbled as we belayed down a steep slope. At last, leaving winter for spring, we reached the bush and finally "the Hermitage." Ah. What a delight to sit on the green grass just looking at the mountains through a screen of lupine. That's the life.

Sincerely,
Arlene



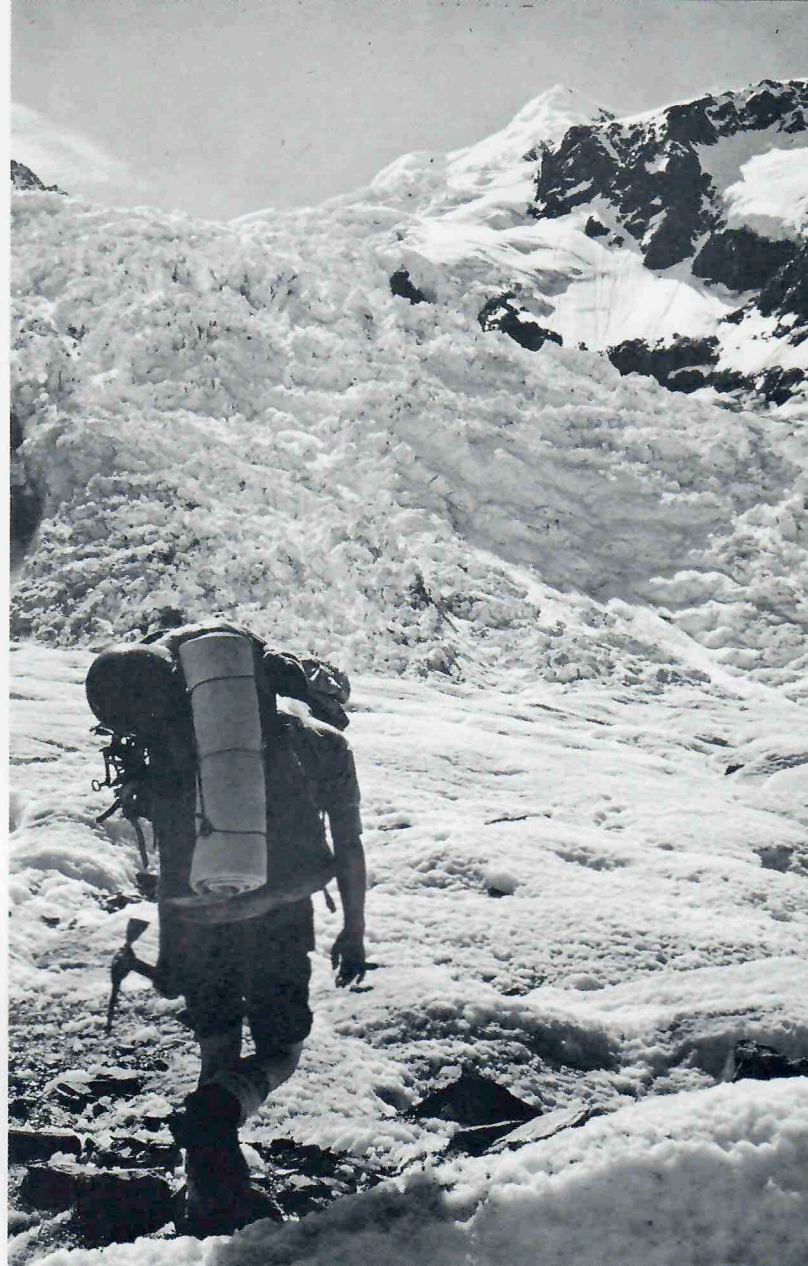
Photos by the Author

Bivouac hut just below Copland Pass.

P.S. There's lots of other fine tramping trips to be done in New Zealand.

Two others I particularly enjoyed were crossing the Copland Pass and the Routetsurn Track. The Copland Pass trip takes you from the icy splendor of the high Alps to the dense rain forest of the coast in only a few miles. At Welcome Flat Hut, there are hot sulphur pools in which to swim and an inquisitive family of Wekas, a curious flightless bird. The Routetsurn Track in Fiordland boasts magnificent views of heavily glaciated peaks, dense bush, and very comfortable huts.

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Margaret Clark walking along Tasman Glacier with Hochstetter icefall in the background.

New Zealand is one of the best places in the world to learn to climb steep snow and ice. A good week-long course is taught by Alpine Guides, Ltd. You can get further information by writing them or to Mt. Cook National Park Headquarters, Mt. Cook, South Island, New Zealand.

New Zealand has many other national parks with less difficult climbing than that in the vicinity of Mt. Cook. Both Arthur's Pass and Nelson Lakes Parks are suitable for the less experienced climber. Good topographic maps of all these areas may be readily obtained in New Zealand.