

If you've read the other reports of clambering up Taranaki and Ruapehu in both the Summer and the Winter, (<http://www.belchamber.org/index1.html>) you'll know that the last of the main North Island mountains left for me to climb in the Winter was Ngauruhoe and, once again, I relied on Steve to come with me.

Ngauruhoe is classified as an active volcano that formed about 2 500 years ago and last went 'pop' in 1975, although now it is classed as inherently stable. Most people will recognise it as Mount Doom from Lord Of The Rings (thankfully Sauron was out when we were there). It's 2 291 metres (7 515 feet) high.



*That's a volcano, that is*

I was more prepared for Steve's call this time so when it came I jumped at the chance...there was a bit of a twist, however: Ngauruhoe might be quite icy and we might have to rope up and belay for part of the ascent/descent. Steve suggested a whole weekend of attacking mountains – practising rope techniques on Ruapehu on the first day and climbing Ngauruhoe on the second. Sounded good to me!

A couple of evenings at home after a meal saw us with climbing gear and gloves on, (sweatily!) tying knots and using ropes inside and generally getting me acquainted with the right way of doing things. It all *seemed* pretty straightforward and if nothing else I looked the part with my harness, carabiners, belaying tools, rope and ice axe!

Soon enough the weekend arrived – the weekend when the weather had gone from stunning Winter/Spring sunshine in the week to cloud, rain and even snow forecast for the weekend. There was a brief moment where I considered cancelling going as I'm

not one of these dyed-in-the-wool mountaineers; I'm more of a fair weather-nice-sunshiny-day mountaineer than one of those rougthy-toughty-ascend/walk/traverse-anything-larger-than-a-pimple-even-if-it's-blowing-a-Force-10-gale-and-lashing-down-with-rain mountaineer. Anyway, there was a chance that the forecast would improve and, partly because I didn't want to let Steve down and partly because I'd be spitting tacks if the weekend *did* turn out to be good, I said I was happy to go.

The obligatory overnight stay at the backpacker's was fine for what it was and the owner said tomorrow's weather looked 'changeable' but better over 1 500 metres so there was a chance that we'd start off with poor weather and walk out above the clouds. Hopefully.

I don't enjoy breakfast much when I'm climbing as you have to eat high fibre, high energy stuff to keep your energy levels up and that's not my kind of breakfast. However I forced it down and before long we were at a cold, windy, miserable Ruapehu car park and hoping to practice using bizarre sounding things like Münter hitches, ATCs, snow stakes and ice anchors.



*Look, just use your ATC and tie a Münter hitch. (And again in English please?)*

A short walk up the (foggy/cold/windy) valley took us to a steep slope that Steve thought would do for our practice and almost instantly the clouds cleared above us and the sun came out! This was more like it...now to find out what all this rope tying stuff was all about. Steve explained how we were going to climb up the side of the mountain face and I nodded sagely, pretending to understand it all but secretly hoping it would all become clear.

Suddenly we were off and, truth be told, all the practice at home next to the fire did pay off. Climbing like this was basically about being logical, methodical and not taking chances, and slowly but surely we ascended a steep, relatively icy ridge that I would definitely *not* have climbed unharnessed. Abseiling down was quite fun...it all took a while but we made safe progress and I felt much more comfortable with the gear, should we need it.



*...Er Steve, did you need this ice axe at all?*



*Tied up and stationary: me at my safest!*

Just for fun we then walked over to a frozen waterfall and did a bit of simple ice climbing with ice axes. It requires a lot of strength, the right boots and crampons and utmost confidence in your technique. I had *none* of those in the requisite quantities and so after a while - and after managing a whole heady metre in altitude up the waterfall - I retired gracefully. As the weather closed in again, we walked out.



*Not so much Sir Edmund Hilary...more Edmund Blackadder*

A bit of time in the afternoon allowed us to relax at a local hot pools after which we returned to the backpacker's where, at 6 o'clock after tea, I was ready for bed. I desperately tried to stay awake but at 9 pm I lost the fight.

The weather rained and rained and rained – it looked like it had set in.

Sunday morning arrived and with it a surprisingly clear morning. Maybe this *was* going to be OK after all. More forcing down of rabbit food/fibre and the brief drive to Ngauruhoe was very pleasant. The sky looked like it might behave and I was cautiously optimistic...

To get to the base of Ngauruhoe you first have to walk through the lower slopes towards Tongariro which is easy enough. That takes about an hour and a half and, as you get closer, the base of Ngauruhoe just presents itself to you. You walk up into South Crater between the two mountains and turn right towards the large thing that looks like a volcano! Crampons, harnesses and other paraphernalia were all adorned and we started up my final personal challenge – the snow summit of Ngauruhoe.



*Ngauruhoe? Yes mate, turn right at the big icy conical thing...*

Mount Taranaki was far away to the right across to the West and looked spectacular, if much smaller than I'm used to, Tongariro adorned in snow was to our left and a white Ngauruhoe beckoned. I remembered the scramble up the scree a couple of years ago when we'd been up as part of the Tongariro Crossing in the Summer and this was much easier in a way. At least on the hardened snow every step was a step forward and up, whereas on the scree it's often one step up and two steps back – and energy sapping. The slope angle varies between 35° and 45° on either surface so each presents its challenges!

The trip up was thankfully fairly 'normal', first Steve tiring and having to break for a bit and then me realising that my nutrition had lapsed a bit so I found myself struggling and had to correct that. The snow seemed to be perfect for crampons and

there was a good 'bite' in it; the angle of ascent was tiring and unrelenting however we got up together as the Winter/Spring sun shone on us and the (sometimes harsh) wind chipped away at us.

The views and panoramas were amazing. The clouds to the West were gently rolling towards us but below us while the snow covered scenery around us shone and glistened. Above us Ngauruhoe stretched up but the crater was ever closer – and in parts strangely snowless. It seems that although this volcano is classed as inactive, there is enough warmth in the ground to prevent significant prolonged ice. We had to hop between snow/ice patches but eventually walked into the lip around the cone and up onto the ridge – to see the Tama Lakes and Ruapehu opposite, bathed in brilliant sunshine. For yet another climb we were on our own, seemingly on top of the World in fantastic weather. I really *would* have been gutted if I'd backed out of this earlier in the week! And we never did need those ropes...



*Perfect views towards Ruapehu and the Tama Lakes*

We walked over to the cone which is the closest thing to a perfect volcano cone I've seen – and it was *deep*. It was also lipped by a very thick ice overhang (which happened to be what we were standing on) so we hoped it was firm! There were regular reminders that, while this volcano might be considered inactive, it is still very definitely living. Steam vents, hot gasses, very warm rocks and the occasional gurgling/hissing noise all told of a mountain that was breathing.



*This overhang literally isn't there in the Summer. We're standing on nothing...*

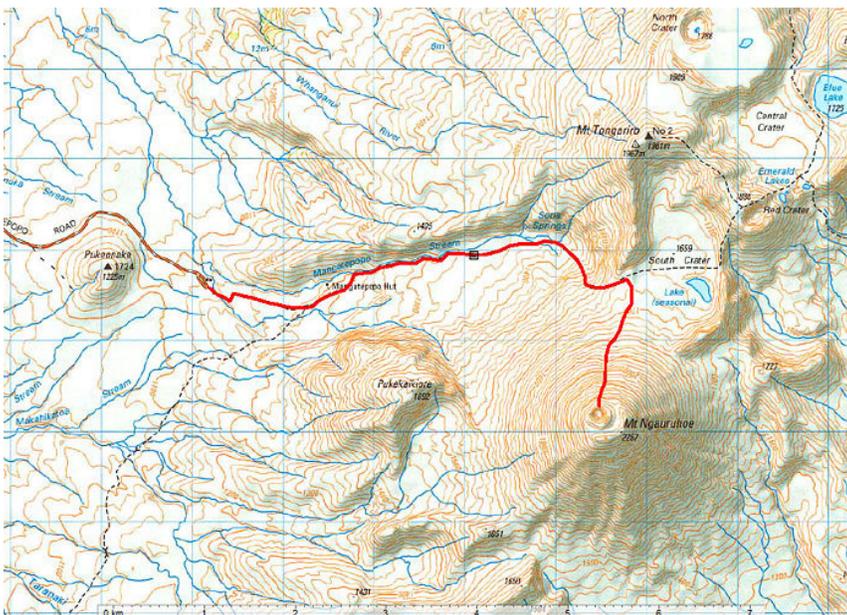
We ambled away from the cone and began our descent from Ngauruhoe. The weather could do what it wanted now, I didn't care! However it did hold up and allowed us yet more superb vistas on the way down...that is until we decided to slide all the way down Ngauruhoe on our bums on the compacted snow. What took us just over an hour and half to climb, took us less than 30 minutes to descend and the last half probably only took 10 minutes - at a cost of two numb bums and nasty dose of botty rash the following day! But it was a *lot* of fun...



*Walking round the lip of the crater*

The walk out to the car park seemed longer than it should have done – but that’s always the way: you’ve done what you wanted, now it’s time to go home!

So that’s it: Taranaki, Tongariro, Naguruhoe and Ruapehu all done in both Summer and Winter - all amazing experiences. I think I might just have to do them all again, just *one* more time...





*A stitched shot of the whole crater*