

# White Noise

Justin Walker experiences all that mountaineering has to offer with an adrenalin-filled week in New Zealand's Southern Alps.

PHOTOS: Justin Walker and Milo Gilmour



Standing below Mt. Lendenfeld with Mt. Cook topped by cloud in the distance.

**A** hand shaking my foot woke me. In the pre-dawn alpine light that lit up the interior of Pioneer hut, I could just make out the silhouette of Aspiring Guides' Milo Gilmour.

"Do you want to climb Halcombe?" he asked. I paused for no more than a heartbeat to consult my weary legs - and the early hour - and then responded, "You bet!"

We were soon out the door and heading toward Mt Halcombe. It was day four of Summit Week, seven days of alpine climbing for myself, my wife

Rachel, and our guide Milo in New Zealand's spectacular Southern Alps.

Trekking across Explorer Glacier toward Mt Halcombe, I had the chance to reflect on what was already an awesome adventure that had started more than three years ago. Over that time Rachel and I had steadily advanced our climbing skills, summiting Mt. Aspiring and tackling an ice climbing course. When we asked Aspiring Guides Director Jean Clairmonte "What next?" she suggested Summit Week.

Aspiring Guides offers Summit Week to climbers who are looking to enhance their climbing skills while ticking off a

few summits. Pioneer hut, in Westland Tai Poutini National Park on the South Island's west coast, would be the epicentre of our mountaineering playground.

Day one was spent indoor ice climbing at Franz Joseph due to bad weather, but day two was all action, starting with a flight from Fox Township to Pioneer Hut. After dropping off our supplies, we soon found ourselves heading toward Grey Peak completely roped up, with crampons affixed and ice-axes ready.

After a six month gap between climbs - and allowing for a punishing



Fox Glacier from the air.



On top of Grey Peak, with Mt. Haidinger in the background.



preparatory fitness regime – the trek across Albert Glacier, then the climb up Grey Peak, was a reminder that living on the world's flattest populated continent makes climbing-specific training difficult!

Reaching the summit reminded us of why we climb: the view was brilliant. From our vantage point we could identify a number of peaks, including Lendenfeld, Tasman and Cook. The return trip was a whiteout, giving Milo the chance to quiz us, and offer advice, on navigating in such conditions.

The third day was a summit of Lendenfeld Peak that, due to the expected 12-hour-plus duration, meant an alpine start. Getting up at 2am and trying to force muesli and a cup of tea

down is not a memorable beginning. However, we were rewarded with a spectacular sunrise when we reached Marcel Col, below Lendenfeld.

Unfortunately, after climbing two-thirds of the way up, we had to turn around only two pitches from the summit due to poor ice conditions. We were disappointed, but it was a sober reminder that nothing in mountaineering is guaranteed – especially a climber's safety.

The view of Mt. Cook and Mt. Tasman still made it worthwhile. Mt. Cook is NZ's tallest but it was Mt. Tasman's brooding presence that stayed in my mind. Another less welcome memory of that day was the sunburn Rachel and I suffered from snow-glare.

Our original plan for day four was for Milo and I to climb Mt. Haidinger, but a radio weather warning from the Department of Conservation of an approaching storm front meant Haidinger was out.

So I found myself following Milo toward Mt. Halcombe. Rachel's severe sunburn had confined her to the hut and, as my weary legs propelled me up toward a vertical ice gutter on the side of Halcombe, I almost wished I had ignored Milo's early morning wake-up.

The challenging ice climb up the gully, though, soon had my attention, with its mix of ice and loose rock a great way to test my ice climbing skills. After two pitches Milo and I were standing on Halcombe's summit, looking back across

Explorer Glacier to Pioneer hut – and the approaching storm front, which had already reached Mt. Haidinger.

The lesson of speed and efficiency was learnt on this last climb. The summit itself had gone smoothly and quickly, but the return would mean even more speed while staying cautious and moving efficiently over potentially hazardous terrain.

We arrived back at Pioneer hut an hour before the weather closed in. It stayed closed in for the next two days, necessitating plenty of hut-based games, reading and tons of patience – a reminder of how the weather is the mountaineer's master.

It looked like we'd have to walk out to Chancellor hut, further down the Fox Glacier valley, for a helicopter pick-up, but we struck it lucky with a short blue sky period on the sixth day. Two radio calls, 15 minutes of packing, and a 20-minute flight later and we were having a hot shower at Fox – it was surreal!

Mountaineering is a sport with no guarantees, but after a week in which we experienced climbing's highs and lows, the fact that you can always expect the unexpected is enough to keep me coming back. That, and one image burnt into my memory: the looming bulk of Mt. Tasman as we climbed Lendenfeld Peak. I just can't shake it...

## The Essentials

» **Getting there:** Qantas and Air New Zealand offer direct flights to Queenstown and Christchurch in New Zealand's South Island. Queenstown offers a quick start as Wanaka is only a one-hour drive away. [www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au) [www.airnewzealand.com](http://www.airnewzealand.com)

» **When to go:** The New Zealand summer climbing season is October to April, with ice and snow conditions varying throughout the season.

» **Aspiring Guides:** Based in Wanaka, Aspiring Guides offers a range of courses to suit all levels of climbers, from introductory mountaineering courses and trekking adventures, through to guided climbs of NZ's major peaks and different levels of ice-climbing instruction. [www.aspiringguides.com](http://www.aspiringguides.com), +64 3 443 9422 [action@aspiringguides.com](mailto:action@aspiringguides.com)

» **Further info:** For more NZ-specific information check [www.newzealand.com](http://www.newzealand.com)