

JUST ANOTHER DAY IN THE HILLS

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The plan, as I suggested to Murray, was a simple one. On Saturday I climb solo up the south side of Ngauruhoe, descend down the north side, whizz to the top of Tongariro and join his snow caving group for the night. Quite a simple plan born from a desire to climb solo on the snow flanked slopes on one of my favourite mountains.

This particular weekend, Murray and his party of 10 intended to leave from the Mangatepopo road end, tramp up onto South Crater and then climb to the summit of Tongariro, where they would construct a snow cave. Murray would leave his mountain bike hidden in the scrub at the road end, ready for a fast ride on Sunday to recover the van from the Chateau car park, where it would be safer from a break-in. My mission was to drive the van to the Chateau, climb up to the Tama Lakes, up and over Ngauruhoe and join his team.

Saturday morning was dull and grey but warm as I strode the track from the Chateau through the beautiful ochres and russet colours that typify the Central Plateau. The gravel crunched underfoot and the clouds obscuring the sun gave no hint of what the day was to become. Lower Tama Lake came and went and I paused at the rock shelter at Upper Tama for a food stuff and drink. It was late morning and while the top third of the mountain was now shrouded by cloud I knew the route was straight forward.

It was time to take stock. The temperature was dropping. While it had been a windless start to the day, a chilly breeze had developed. It was time for over trousers, parka and sunnies and to organize myself with compass and map handy. The conditions were perfect for climbing and just what I had hoped for with my boots kicking even and perfectly formed pigeon holes. Half way up the slope things started to change.

At first it was a few scattered wisps of gently falling snow, but then within a minute or two the snow was thickening. Nothing to worry about as the summit was only about 30 minutes away. Within another minute or so however, the conditions had now turned to what could be described as challenging. The storm suddenly bore down on me from behind and with the wind blasting at gale force it was time for me to reconsider my predicament. Donning balaclava and heavy mittens I thought about my options. Only two really – up or down. Option one was to carry on with the summit not too far away and I knew it would be sheltered for my descent down the North side. Option two was to get the hell down and out of there, but I knew that would mean four or five hours back to the Chateau heading into the blizzard. Turning round I looked downwards only to recoil with the wind and snow lashing my face. I would go for option one. By now the snow was losing its Christmas card appeal and was up over my knees, necessitating a beached whale approach at every step, which in trying to make headway uphill was proving rather demanding.

It was about now with visibility reduced to absolutely nothing that I think I lost my sense of proportion. Picturing the summit above I became acutely aware of the need to arrive on the crest at the right spot. From previous journeys to the top I knew too far to the right I would arrive at the lip of the old crater and face a short but steep drop to the summit plateau. Too far to the left I would arrive at a lip and a plummet into the crater proper. Not a nice thought. I set my compass for the spot in between and recommenced my beached whale northern migration. Every 5 metres or so I stopped to catch my breath and check the compass. By then I was usually a few degrees out but the big problem proved to be keeping the compass clear. It would ice up within seconds, however sucking it and wiping with wet gloves seemed to work provided I could get a reading fast before it refroze. Upward I floundered gasping for every breath, wondering how Murray's team was faring in this.

Something was up ahead to my right. Something a shade or two darker than the driving white landscape. The faintest touch of blue. Making my way up and across to it I discovered it was a wall of ice and had been just 3 metres away. There appeared to be a slope on the other side. Gingerly I traversed round to where I could feel my feet were on forward sloping ground. My spirits soared as I gently made my way down the gentle slope and then with an overwhelming feeling of relief, I found myself on level ground. Through the driving snow I headed across the 100 metres that is the summit plateau and started descending the familiar territory of the northern slope. As if the angels had been watching over me, the cloud ceiling was suddenly above me and the wind and driving snow had gone. Utterly stuffed I crammed in the very best muesli bar I had ever tasted.

The next issue was to make for Murray's cave but the thought of climbing on up to Tongariro was but a foolish notion. I turned my thoughts to a bum slide all the way to the bottom and a descent to Mangatepopo Hut for Saturday night. On Tongariro, Murray had his hands full. The snow caving was not going to according to the script either.

Murray's party had climbed from the Mangatepopo valley and by lunch time had explored the outer slopes of the North Crater of Tongariro for a cave site. There was none but they were well into building a couple of snow mounds when with very little warning the storm front swept over them and rain began to soften the snow markedly. Spurring the diggers and snow clearers on to greater efforts, Murray gathered those still outside and exposed to the elements into a small huddled group, their backs to the chill wind. Shortly after, with visibility at almost nil and darkness falling, the snow mounds both collapsed. The group was starting to show the effects of the cold. Michael was shivering uncontrollably and vomiting. "Can I just lie down amongst those trees over there, Murray?" he asked. "I can hear the birds singing." A more than a slightly hallucinatory comment seeing as trees don't grow on snow covered crater plateaus.

His mind racing, Murray knew he had to get the party to shelter and that meant Ketetahi Hut, nearly two hours away on the northern side of the mountain. Appointing Brent and two helpers to act as route blazers, Murray and Dave, their arms around Michael, set about the daunting task of escorting their patient and the balance of the team to safety. Setting a compass bearing across Central Crater, Brent knew to keep his eyes peeled for

the marker poles of the Tongariro Crossing. Half an hour passed with all the fury that nature could muster being thrown at them. Time and time again Michael stumbled, to be supported by his companions. Behind them, the rest of the group battled in support of each other, the wind shrieking in from their right reducing them to hand signals and gestures. Resplendent in heavy gloves, balaclavas and with hoods fastened so tightly only goggles were visible it was a tough little party of mountain warriors that struggled across the crater plateau that afternoon.

Eureka! Brent stabbed towards the tip of a marker pole with his gloved hand. Only the top few centimeters were visible above the snow. It was with huge relief Murray and team, just a few metres behind and in visible contact, arrived. Turning left, the storm battered them from the other side along the far lip of the crater, up and down through the descent saddle. An hour later at Ketetahi Hut, sharing grins from ear to ear and with a rapidly recovering Michael warmly tucked up in his sleeping bag, they drank hot soup and counted their blessings. Murray was worried how I had fared but there was nothing that could be done except hope that I was safe, somewhere.

Sunday morning saw me plodding the track from Mangatepopo Hut to the Chateau and rather than feeling exhausted I felt strangely fit and buoyant. The van stood safe in the car park and as I unhitched my pack and opened the rear door a mountain biker puffed into the park. “Boy am I glad to see you – how did it go?” said Murray. The grins told it all as we pummeled each other. “Just another day in the hills” I retorted.