

Mount Aspiring (Fact)

By Davina Borrow Jones

Summitting Mount Aspiring could have been my dream for years, but instead the seed of the dream was planted merely a week before the climb. Nic, my partner, mentioned that I should now have skills enough to climb Mount Aspiring if I wanted to, (despite only just completing Mountaineering 101!) I held on to the idea, and began to dream. I had always had vague thoughts of getting into that mountaineering thing, but now I had a dream with purpose and could maybe make it into a reality. Nic had summited the mountain before so I felt confident that together we might make it. "Aspiring" has a beautiful note; something inspiring, something perspiring..... something I could aspire to...something to climb just because it is there.

After arriving in Lake Wanaka, the mountain remained hidden for a few days, only to be read about in guide books and talked about. But when it peeped its head out from behind the clouds, I couldn't keep my eyes off it, and fell in love. Like many new loves though, Aspiring remained untouchable, and each day became a weather watching affair. Our ritual was a leisurely breakfast of black coffee and muesli on the lake followed by a drive to DoCs to get the latest report by Metview, our weather gospel. There at DoCs began endless talks of low pressure, high pressure, winds from the north, south, east and west as we leant over and interpreted maps with colourful graphs. But every day there became a new reason not to start the trip... heavy winds... low pressure... rain..... and after morning preparations had been made, our trip to DoCs would ensure that our trip was aborted. At first I was content with the delay, content to continue dreaming, to soak up the idea and prepare mentally; particularly for that early 4 am start I had been warned about. More than fitness, more than anything; that early start seemed to be the most difficult obstacle. 4 am was a my dreaming hour and not one to be disturbed with a rude awakening and forced breakfast.

But even bad thoughts of early mornings can be overcome (unlike the weather) and as each day passed at Lake Wanaka, our flight back to Sydney became closer and the possibility of making my dream into a reality and attempting Mount Aspiring, my first mountain was disappearing. Is this what mountaineering is all about I wondered? Waiting for the weather?? Maybe its not for me I thought, disappointed, disillusioned; perhaps I belong back at Castle Hill... Finally though, with just enough time to make an attempt before our flight back, DoCs confirmed a high pressure zone was due to clear the mountain give us some good summit weather in 2 days. Suddenly gripped by a fear I didn't realise existed, but very excited all the same, I jumped back in the car, and we took the bumpy road to Rasberry Flats - the beginning of the trail.

We set off with big packs at 2 that afternoon. 15kgs had never felt heavier, and I was totally unprepared for being such a humpback. Furthermore, at the start, we had to walk through farms, dodge cow patties and endure big sad cows' eyes glaring at us knowing full well that

one of them would be on our plates upon our return. I suppressed the urge to apologise to each of them and kept walking, and soon the walk became magical. We walked through the forests with giant mossy trees and lush dense scrub, and I couldn't help but pretend to be Frodo Baggins from the Lord of the Rings..

Our first campsite was at Pearl Flat; which felt like a small Elvish paradise but was soon swarming with sandflies. They knew no bounds, eating at skin and through clothes with ease, and totally ignoring our tropical strength spray. We slept quickly and easily. The next day began a far longer walk where we moved over the roots of trees, swing bridges and moraine, before beginning our dance along the ledges to reach Bevan Cole, just before the glacier.

On the glacier there were so many crevasses that a couple we saw walking ahead of us would take 3 steps, for every fall. So Nic and I tied in together on the rope and hoped for the best - even though our falls seemed to be just as frequent. Reaching Colin Tudd hut was a relief, although I was shocked that it was full. We made company with a couple from Prague who, although experienced, didn't have their crampons in NZ yet, so had waltzed across the glacier earlier that morning without any! Crazy stuff I decided... unless you really know what you are doing.

Anyway, we all sat with eager ears that evening listening to the forecast for the following day which was "fine but with 100 knot winds". But with typical skepticism which brewed after any given forecast, and undeterred enthusiasm we decided to wake the next morning at 4am, only to be whipped and rattled around outside on the way to the toilet... so much so that I even lost my balance from the wind and fell in whilst the door was repeatedly flying wide open. Ok, so it wasn't a day to be walking on exposed ridges at 3000 metres. We went back to sleep and then lazed around the hut in a bored stupor, digging too much into the leftover food and soups that other parties had left behind. All that waiting... and now more! I was pissed.

Later that day we had more visitors... Simon - a climbing guide and his client, Geoff; and we soon learned of Geoff's dream. Geoff had tried to summit Aspiring in the 70s, but bad weather had stopped him. He then tried in the 80s but fitness had stopped him. He tried again with his son in the 90s and the weather again was a killer. But his dream was still alive and well as he told us he had been training even harder this time, and this time the guiding company had hung out for a break in the weather for him. I felt almost guilty telling him of our hastily hashed together plan - my dream which had merely been sown together a week prior, and the fact that Nic, as chilled as ever was waltzing up a second time.

The following morning we set off soon after Simon and Geoff; about 4.30..... The forecast the night before had been perfect and only predicted some 20 knot winds arriving late in the day, and after stepping out the door to an eerily still morning we were grateful that the

prediction seemed right on. The climbing wasn't as hard as I expected, but it was consistent, long and exposed. Nic was in essence guiding me, leading the whole way as my experience was limited to bouldering and sport climbs. But this experience was something altogether different; something magical. When I saw the summit ridge, I burst into tears. It was so out there, so beautiful, so extreme. But to ensure I was safe Nic encouraged me to "bite" my crampons in... so I went into a "bite" mantra; all the while knowing that any one step that didn't bite could be the one step that caused me to slide, and it wasn't a small drop below but rather a 3000 metre one.

Being on the summit was exhilarating! But short. I knew I wouldn't be a gun for summit fever, as the journey itself had been far more amazing than the few moments on top. But my little dream had become a big reality; I had summited my first mountain, and shortly after, after 4 previous attempts, and a life long dream Geoff summited Aspiring too.