



ENCHAINMENT

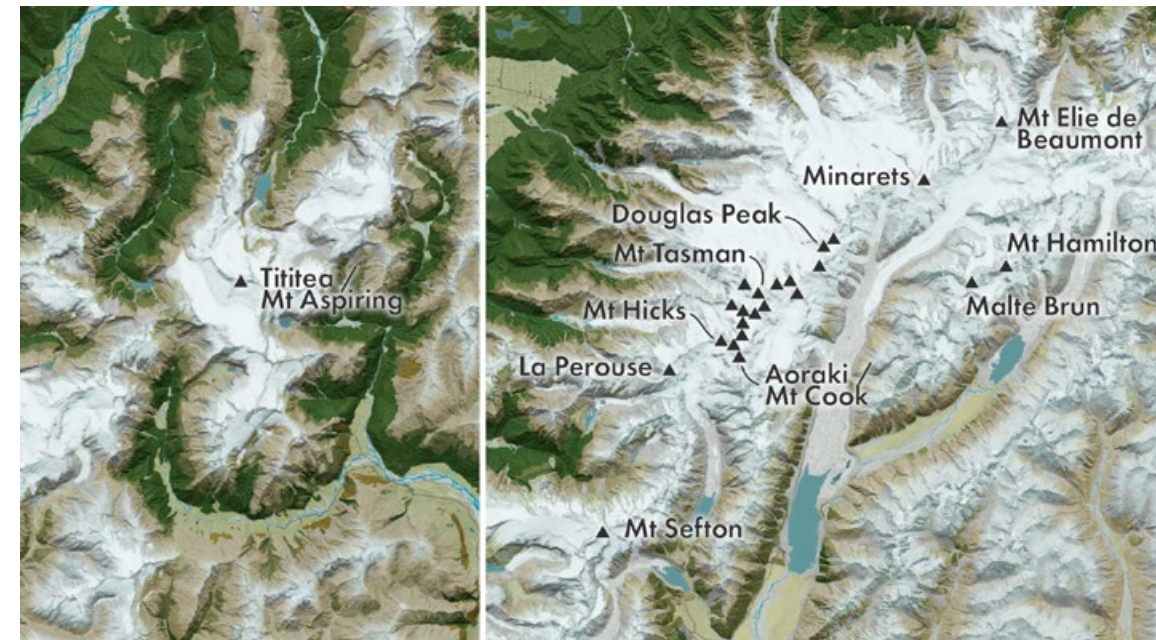
A Human-Powered Expedition to Link All of New Zealand's Highest Peaks

by ALASTAIR MCDOWELL

'All of next week looks like rain,' Hamish's girlfriend Beäte announced unapologetically, as the three of us strode down Ball Road towards Mount Cook Village. Surely not, I thought. My heart threatened to sink in disappointment, but instead, it remained buoyed by a relentless optimism. Over the last 28 days, Hamish Fleming and I had climbed 23 of New Zealand's 3000m peaks across the Aoraki region, and now there remained only one mountain to complete our quest of climbing all of New Zealand's 3000m peaks in a single month—Tititea/Mt Aspiring. Surely our luck could hold out one more time.

To arrive at this point we had invested so much into the endeavour. Energy. Time. Hardship. Risk. Our bodies and minds were deeply fatigued from continuous effort—Mt Dixon earlier that morning, Aoraki the day before—our last sleep in was a distant memory. Now we had a difficult decision to make. Our goal had been for our quest to be wholly human-powered; should we relinquish that ideal now by driving the 300km to Aspiring, and thus be able to climb it while the weather was still good? Or take the chance, cycle south, but potentially have the weather turn bad during the extra time it took to get there? If we were to fail on the final peak, would it all have been in vain?

Hamish Fleming high on Aoraki/Mt Cook (peak #22). Alastair McDowell



MAP An overview of the 3000m peaks and their proximity. South Arrow Maps

BELOW Hamish Fleming (left) and the author fresh and keen as they begin at the Copland valley road end. Beäte Manguse

Every mountainous region has its list of highest peaks. The British Munros. The 4000m peaks of the European Alps. Colorado's 14ers. The Himalayan 8000ers. In New Zealand, we have the 3000m peaks. Although the 3000m mark is arbitrary, the list of resulting 24 peaks represent the most classical of our mountains.

For over 70 years, Kiwi climbers have set themselves the goal of ticking off these 24 peaks over the course of their mountaineering careers. According to the New Zealand Alpine Club's Penny Webster, only 22 people have completed the list. Some have achieved them in a single season, such as Erica Beuzenberg and Gottlieb Braun-Elwert, in the winter of 1989. One has climbed them all solo: Guy McKinnon, completing his vision in 2010.

All but one of these peaks are clustered around Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park, the exception being Tititea/Mt Aspiring. Several summits are not distinct peaks; rather, they are high points on the mountainous chain extending from Aoraki/Mt Cook. Some, like Haidinger or Dixon, are small climbs from the névé. Others, like Sefton or La Perouse, are enormous ascents from the valley floor.

But we didn't plan to pick off these peaks one by one. We had something different in mind. The concept of enchainment, where a mountaineer aims to link multiple summits in an extended outing, comes from Europe. One of the greatest examples of it took place in 2015, when the late Ueli Steck completed a 62-day enchainment of the 4000m peaks of the European Alps. There were 82 such peaks, and Steck travelled between mountain ranges by bike, and descended from some summits by paraglider.

At an NZAC club night, Penny Webster proposed the idea to replicate this type of mountaineering in New Zealand. 'How would you do it?' she asked. My eyes glazed over. As I started to craft the route, I realised an opportunity to transcend peak bagging into trans-alpinism, and

the continuous, human-powered style Steck forged captured my imagination. But first, I needed to find a partner both competent enough for the climbing and fit enough for the effort. The first person I thought of was my friend Hamish Fleming. As soon as I mentioned the idea to Hamish, an adventure racer turned mountaineer, he was in. The next day, he booked his five weeks leave. It was on. Between our commitments, we had 34 days to work with. Would that be enough to climb all 24 peaks? Time would tell. In the Southern Alps, weather is everything. But that didn't faze us. Uncertainty makes for a great adventure.

November 13, 2021. Twenty-eight days before being confronted by that decision at Mt Cook Village, rain pounded on the roof of the car as we pulled into the Copland valley carpark. A true West Coast welcome to start our quest. As we shouldered our overloaded 40L



MAP *The route of travel and stops on Stage One: Mt Sefton and La Perouse.*
South Arrow Maps

BELOW *Hamish Fleming all commitment as he leaps across the Copland river.*
Alastair McDowell



packs and waved goodbye to Beāte, the lump in our throats was soon dissolved by the excitement of a monumental adventure ahead. Immediately, we felt enveloped by the West Coast wilderness; home was already a long way away.

After a wet day's tramping into Douglas Rock Hut and then a relaxing sleep-in, we slammed coffee and oats at the unusual time of 3:30pm. We then hit the bush prepared for a long night of climbing. Hamish had spied—amongst a week of quagmire—a miniscule overnight weather window for our first peak, Mount Sefton, the ascent of which was about to teach us a valuable first lesson: accept, and embrace. No amount of wishing or hoping could clear the clag that drenched us on our 2500m climb up Sefton's vertical bush, slippery snowgrass and gaping glaciers.

At 12:50am, we stood on the summit in boisterous wind and sleety rain. Frozen rime smeared our faces and jackets. 'Time to go down!' I yelled into the camera between



shivering gasps. Rewarmed by the descent, I was glad to have documented that wild moment.

After three days of enforced rest at Douglas Rock—heavy rain gave us no option—we were eager to face our next challenge: crossing the formidable Copland River. This bouldery torrent had caused other parties minor epics, even with lower flows. The best crossing we could find involved getting onto a rock island in the river via a two metre jump. It was a leap of commitment; once onto the mid-way rock, jumping back was impossible. Hamish didn't hesitate. Leaping across with all his gear, he clasped onto the rock. The boulder across the next smaller gap was polished and holdless. Balancing precariously, Hamish calmly stripped to bare feet and smeared onto the water-worn schist; with a few desperate moves during a tricky scramble out, he was safe. I soon followed suit. We were across, committed to the Strauchon valley.

After wrestling through the choking bush surrounding Jungle Peak, we finally saw La Perouse, 2000m above us, remote and colossal and gleaming with Himalayan grandeur. Beyond, Aoraki—framed by Baker Saddle—pierced the clouds. The only escape from this remote place was up ... and over.

From midnight 'til dawn we traversed the South West Ridge towards La Perouse, with a full moon luminous over the western ocean. During these surreal moments, the pre-dawn fear dissolves into numbness; it's difficult to process all that you're experiencing. Daggering across the summit ridge was our first taste of never-ending, exposed, grit-your-teeth classic mountaineering. It drilled into us the virtue of patience. Take your time; eventually you will get there.

The summit was spectacular; wild views of West Coast wilderness, and to the east, the Hooker faces of Aoraki—to my mind her most impressive aspect. Hamish had

never climbed any of these peaks before. His Mt Cook climbing resume consisted of a walk-in to Plateau Hut and a failed attempt on the Footstool. His eyes were blazing seeing these mountains for the first time; I leech off his enthusiasm.

A storm brewed at Harper Saddle, whipping spindrift into our eyes as I struggled to drill the next V-thread into the ice for an abseil. Empress Hut was in sight, and it would soon become a welcome refuge for three days of tempest. We were settling into a cycle of work, rest, and feast. We now thanked our past selves who, three weeks earlier, had slogged up Hooker Glacier to deliver seven days of rations. Ahead of us, in four other alpine huts around the park, we had also stashed supplies, piggy backing our food onto chopper flights of other friends' adventures.

The third day revealed the storm's impact: A frozen white blanket draping the high peaks, presaging perfect conditions for the next leg of our journey. The 11-peak traverse of Hicks to Haast—constantly straddling the exposure of the Main Divide—would be the most critical part of the project. Success here would put us in a great position. But this was also the section that filled me with the most fear.

Three months earlier, I'd climbed a new alpine route on the north-east face of Torres Peak with Pat Gray. On this climb, it was not the ten pitches of steep ice and mixed terrain that stretched me; it was mind-numbing exposure I experienced crawling across the summit ridge. For hours, I'd been filled with fatigue ... and fear. And from the summit of Torres, I looked over to Hicks and traced my eyes over the proposed route to Tasman and beyond, counting the scores of peaks. Trepidation almost overwhelmed me, to the point of reconsidering the whole mission.

But here we were, crunching out of Empress at 2am, bound for Hicks, with a three-day weather window ahead of us. A short-term memory is a mountaineer's greatest asset. Back up Harper Saddle, five pitches through *The Curtain*, sun coming up: Hicks—7am. Across to Dampier, gendarmes and hard ice—11am. Feeling it already. A Patagonian rime pitch up Vancouver, sweltering in the sun—3pm. Endless tedious and tricky terrain: Malaspina—9pm. Time to escape, out came the Escaper, a few tugs and boom, onto the snow below Clarke Saddle.

We awoke in a luxurious 'schrund camp just above Clarke Saddle, bathing in an Aoraki sunrise. Straight out of the bivvy we traversed out to Magellan, then set our sights on the mighty Mt Tasman. Into the swing of things, we celebrated summits frequently that day, so many so that Hamish could barely remember the names of each peak.

At Marcel Col, however, the last peak—Mt Haast—didn't appear straightforward. Late in the day, our motivation was waning; Haast's summit was annoyingly far out along the ridge. I don't always hold myself to the highest standard when it comes to summits. Often, a technical climb will top out on a relatively high point of the summit ridge, but not the absolute highest. I'm usually happy to



TOP *Empress Hut with Mt Hicks beyond.* Alastair McDowell

MIDDLE *Hamish Fleming on Malaspina as the sun dips into the Tasman Sea.* Alastair McDowell

BOTTOM *Surrounded by summits on Magellan.* Alastair McDowell

MAP The route for Stage Two: Mt Hicks – Mt Haast. South Arrow Maps

TOP The author on Silberhorn. Hamish Fleming

BOTTOM Hamish Fleming abseils on Torres Peak. Alastair McDowell



call it; I'm not a perfectionist. Perhaps this is a distinction between an alpinist and a mountaineer—one for the line, another for the summit.

On this challenge, however, we were mountaineers striving for true summits; we surrendered to the geographical discipline of the mountain. Admittedly, there was something deeply satisfying about going to the absolute highest point of Haast that evening, since it required more of us than we felt willing to give. Ultimately, mountaineering is a game where you play by your own rules.

Safely ensconced in Pioneer Hut, we felt the hardest climbing was over; we could relax a little. In reality, however, every peak had a sting in its tail. Haidinger threatened strong pre-frontal winds, swaying our balance and snagging our abseil ropes. Torres' North East Couloir confused us in moonless dark and route-finding mistakes wasted three hours. The crux of Glacier and Douglas was the sickening midnight alarm; we had barely unpacked from Torres.

Travel soon took on a transalpine flavour again. Hopping passes between glaciers, popping up peaks. We secured the Minarets in the rosiest of alpenglows, before plunging off the map into isolated Spencer Glacier and camping at the foot of Mt Elie De Beaumont—another peak so much more remote and attractive from the west. Early the next morning, she treated us with fine panoramas to the west and north, a perfect vantage to witness the next storm approaching. Nineteen peaks, twenty days. We could hardly believe it. Maybe the dream was possible?

This goal to climb 24 peaks had motivated us, to train, to plan, and to prepare—a fire in the future. But I never believed we might come so close. Now in the home straight, I felt a tension building between a determination to succeed, and a determination to survive. Heavily invested in the game, could we still temper our summit fever with sanity?



At Tasman Saddle, a deluge set in, delivering 400mm of rain in three days. We rested our tired bones. More good news arrived. Five days of 'acceptable' weather was coming. Morale was high. Was this enough time to clear the park's final four peaks?

Heavy, white murk weighed on us in the Darwin Glacier as we trudged towards Hamilton, hidden in cloud. Disappointed, our more ambitious plan of linking the Hamilton-Malte Brun skyline ridge was off the cards. We changed tack, dropped packs, and charged up and back in three hours. Hamilton ticked—we didn't come for views; we came for summits. We needed to be opportunistic and flexible to keep momentum. Established at the foot of Malte Brun that evening, I reminisced about a failed attempt nine years earlier on my first excursion to the Aoraki region. Unfinished business. Could this be redemption?

Overnight, our camp below the Bonney Rib sustained wind, snow and rain into mid-morning, plastering both our tent and the rock above with rime. We started to worry. So deep and so close; just one missed chance could spell the end of the dream. Patiently we waited, snow swirling, sun piercing. The signs of clearing gave us hope. 2pm wasn't a conventional time to start climbing, but fortune favours the bold; punching through the inversion, we arrived at Malte's famed cheval, staring across Tasman Glacier with only 3000m peaks floating above the clouds.

That was close. Again, we had squeaked through the waves of weather. Just two formidable peaks remained here: the cloud piercer, Aoraki/Mt Cook; and the little cousin, Dixon. Familiarity was on our side, but the challenge was not muted. Strong north-westerlies were predicted for late in the day. Before I could touch my midnight breakfast, something churned in my guts, and I vomited over the unfrozen glacier. So deep and so close.

Up to this point, I'd taken charge of all the technical

MAP The route for Stage Three: Torres Peak – Tasman Saddle Hut. South Arrow Maps

BELOW Hamish Fleming on the summit of Malte Brun. Alastair McDowell



climbing, but now it was time for Hamish to take the lead. He'd served a fine apprenticeship over the past weeks; now he was ready for the sharp end. Mentoring is integral to mountaineering culture, and it was amazing to see how much Hamish had progressed in this short time. Thanks to all the mentoring I've received over the years through the New Zealand Alpine Team, friends like Hamish could now benefit down the line.

Hamish led through Aoraki's summit rocks with confidence. Before long, we stood on Aoraki, still and clear. We peered out to the north-west, baffled that the winds had abated momentarily to allow our ascent. Threading back through the broken Linda Glacier, ice contrails vortexed over the summit ridge. One peak left in the park—Dixon. We struck the South East Ridge at dawn, hoping for another morning lull in the wind. Our guts churned again this morning, but now only out of trepidation. Dixon also offers a tricky bergschrund crossing: question marks always loom; nothing can be taken for granted. Hamish led us across the void, and we pushed head-on into boisterous wind up the ridge. Pumped up and invigorated by the storm's power, we felt gratitude for the mountain's

MAP Stage Four involved more travel between summits: Tasman Saddle Hut – Ball Shelter, via Mt Hamilton, Malte Brun, Mt Dixon and Aoraki / Mt Cook. South Arrow Maps



BELOW Enjoying some well-deserved treats after the end of the Aoraki / Mt Cook National Park stint. Beāte Manguse



mercy. Three days remained to finish in a month. We knew well our time goals were arbitrary, but the limit of time created an uncertainty of success which drove us on.

Later that day, Hamish and I were staggering up the moraine wall towards Ball Shelter when we spotted a girl jogging through the rocks way below. Beāte! She'd come to meet us for our final walk back into civilisation after 28 days in the mountains. She brought coke and beer, sandwiches and avocados and salad. But most importantly, she brought our road bikes. Six weeks earlier, it felt ridiculous to be stashing those bikes at Wyn Irwin Lodge. Surely the chances of using these, it seemed, were next to zero. But now, with our cleats clipped in, this was reality.

We had visualised and anticipated this unlikely moment for so long, since it signified the completion of Aoraki's 23 peaks. The ride to Aspiring gave us a chance to reflect on what we had experienced so far.

Though we relished the urgency and uncertainty of charging into the unknown, the real reason for being here was not just about speed. It was about slowing down. It was to experience an expedition-length adventure in New Zealand. A deep immersion in the hills for an extended period, on nature's terms. It allowed us to connect with the mountain environment, to watch storms roll in and out, sense the changing conditions of snow and ice and rock, and to embrace a patient wait for short opportunities to dash up to those high summits.

Through the hardship of these harsh mountains, we renewed our appreciation of Aotearoa's special wild places, lands that deserve protection and celebration. We must know our mountains to know how to protect them.

The nor'wester brewing on Dixon earlier that morning had flared into a full-blown storm. Now it was a raging tailwind, whisking us along the banks of Lake Pukaki. What is this bicycle power, so swift? We spent the night in the town of Twizel; the following morning we were



MAP Stage Five involved a long bike 'commute' between the Mt Cook area and Aspiring National Park in order to climb the final peak. South Arrow Maps

BELOW Approaching Tititea / Mt Aspiring on weary legs. Alastair McDowell

back in the saddle for the State Highway 1 café crawl over Lindis Pass in pouring rain. We rolled into Wānaka late that evening, sore in the saddle. One day of fine weather remained before a week of unsettledness. The momentum could not stop now; the only option was to somehow summit Aspiring the following day.

Up early, road bikes swapped for mountain bikes, the 65km ride to Aspiring Hut was plagued by sleepiness and lethargy. 'Come on!' I yelled, trying to rouse myself. Our faithful support crew offered drinks from the car window Tour de France style; we needed all the help we could get at this stage. In the Matukituki valley, clag shrouded us all day until, in dramatic style, we rose above the cloud at Bevan Col to glimpse our final mountain, Tititea/Mt Aspiring, standing tall. Morale soared.

It's hard to describe the emotions on that final summit because there were none. Despite the glorious, windless evening, I felt devoid of any feeling. I was simply too tired. Confused. Jet lagged. Aoraki was just over there, we could see it clearly. Two days ago, we were there. Now we were here. Everything had worked. Feelings would come later.

The peaks - in order of ascent:

- Mt Sefton (3151m)
- La Perouse (3078m)
- Mt Hicks (3198m)
- Mt Dampier (3440m)
- Mt Vancouver (3309m)
- Malaspina (3042m)
- Magellan (3049m)
- Mt Teichelmann (3144m)
- Mt Graham (3184m)
- Silberhorn (3300m)
- Mt Tasman (3497m)
- Lendenfield Peak (3194m)
- Mt Haast (3114m)
- Mt Haidinger (3070m)
- Torres Peak (3160m)
- Glacier Peak (3002m)
- Douglas Peak (3077m)
- Minarets (3040m)
- Mt Elie de Beaumont (3109m)
- Mt Hamilton (3025m)
- Malte Brun (3199m)
- Aoraki/Mt Cook (3724m)
- Mt Dixon (3004m)
- Tititea/Mt Aspiring (3033m)

