

Living in Taranaki, I always love looking across to the centre of the island and seeing the three great 'central mountains' in the distance. Ruapehu looks huge and awe inspiring, especially snow bound, Ngauruhoe is the perfect (well almost!) volcanic cone and Tongariro sits there to the side, a shadow of its former self after it blew itself to bits goodness-knows-when (well, 260 000 years ago, but judging from it's remaining girth it would have been a monster of a volcano and one heck of an eruption).



From left to right: Tongariro (the flat bit); Ngauruhoe; Ruapehu

Like Taranaki, I prefer the mountains with snow on and I'd often wondered what it would be like to climb Ruapehu in the Winter. It is a gorgeous mountain that is 2 797 metres (9 177 feet) at its highest peak and is classed as an active volcano (it erupted spectacularly in 1995 and 1996 – thankfully two weeks before the skiing season opened). I'd heard of the crater lake and the massive summit and after doing the Tongariro Crossing (and summiting Ngauruhoe) last year, it was a latent wondering waiting to be realised.

I'd mentioned this in passing to my friend Steve and we may have even vaguely agreed it would be fun, but that was ages ago and I'd forgotten all about it. So when he phoned and said "What are you doing next weekend, the weather looks good for climbing Ruapehu?" my first thought was...(GULP). Truth be told, the training had tailed off a bit and I hadn't been in crampons since last Winter, so I hoped I was going to be OK. Ruapehu does look *awfully* big! I didn't mention this to Steve, just checked my wife hadn't got anything planned and said yes.

The drive to National Park was crystal clear and quite cold in the evening but it augured well for the following day. We stayed in a backpackers literally as somewhere to put our heads down before the 06:00 alarm call and I managed to get a reasonable night's sleep in one of eight mixed-room(!) bunk beds despite various snorings, fartings and nocturnal wanderings from my other room mates.

The alarm woke us to a crisp (3°) clear dawn, the sun just threatening to peek over Tongariro as I tried to force down a BLT sandwich and bananas that I'd brought with me. I didn't want it (egg on toast is more my sort of breakfast) but I knew I needed to 'fuel up'.



Goodness, that's bigger than I'd realised!

It was only a short drive to the park below the mountain but as we parked up, to be honest, I was a little worried about climbing it: Ruapehu looks *huge* when you stand at the bottom of it! Snow and ice were all around so crampons were required pretty much from the beginning - and despite my initial worries about the length of time I'd last donned the 12 pointed spiky things, it all came back almost instantly. Together with the ice axe, we started out on the crisp snow under a deep blue sky while the sun slowly rose over the backgrounds of Ngauruhoe and Tongariro...

To start with, you follow the ski lifts which don't open 'till later in the day and then you veer away up the mountain side. (If you want to cheat you can wait for the ski lift to open and get a lift half way up!) I found the first 500 metres *really* tough going - don't ask me why - but I began to get very worried about my ability to make the first kilometre, let alone the summit! It's not even that steep...maybe the snow was a bit

too soft, or the angle of ascent was just wrong for me...possibly I just hadn't eaten correctly or it hadn't metabolised yet...whatever the reason, there was no way I could give up (or tell Steve!) and I just hoped that the fatigue would go.

Just putting one foot in front of the other seemed to work and soon the sun warmed us against the fabulous backdrop: the two other central mountains covered in snow and dominating the landscape behind and to our left. As time went on we gradually got higher, a couple of eager early bird skiers whirled past in the chairs and the summit came gradually closer.



This kind of view just inspires you...

Whereas Taranaki in the ice is a fairly constant climb, Ruapehu has peaks and troughs where you have a fairly steep incline and then a flatter section. This is probably because it isn't the *whole* mountain but the remnants of an erupted volcano (you are effectively climbing the lower and middle slopes of what's left). Sometimes this is welcome because you get a bit of a breather from the uphill angle, and sometimes it can be hard because you think you're nearing the top but just ahead is another climb. However it was interesting to climb a different hill and with regular rest/sustenance stops, the summit appeared ahead.



Gaining height

All this time we had been the only people climbing and the few skiers who *were* about were way below us. Behind us was one skier who was traversing up the mountain so he could ski from the summit (possible, but you've got to get up the hard way first...) but otherwise we were it! It felt amazing to be on this beautiful volcano and being the only ones there. Sure enough, after four hours and one final fairly cruel false crater (it's actually just a dent in the mountain side but at a fairly shallow angle) we entered the crater proper...it was massive! Whenever this thing went up, it went up in a big way and would have left a monstrous hole and lots of debris in its wake. I chose not to think about the fact that this is actually classed as an active volcano and was spectacularly spewing and belching only 15 years ago.



Part of the crater with lake. The two little black dots (left of the lake) are people

Moving further into the crater we came across the thermally heated crater lake (when full to overflowing it contains between eight and ten million m³ of acid waters) which changes colour as you watch it and different ripples appear...it really *is* active and is one of only three in the world surrounded by ice and snow. The wind was quite cold and whipped through the crater so we found some shelter and had lunch.

In a mad moment I thought about skinny dipping in the lake...where else would you get to go naked 2 700 metres up an active volcano? Steve thought I was absolutely barking mad (he probably had a point) but in true *carpe diem* fashion I went to see how accessible the lake was. While probably possible in the Summer, the depth of snow formed a high ledge all around the lake...I was quite disappointed! "Stuff it" I thought, "I'm going to do it anyway" and so to Steve's amusement I worked out the quickest way of getting into my birthday suit, removing boots and crampons, running in front of the lake, getting back into clothes and warming up my feet (and various other parts!) I laid everything out in an organised fashion and when I was ready, removed as much as possible as quickly as possible. (I had actually forgotten to see if anyone else had joined us in the crater but to be honest it was *so* cold when the wind howled that nothing was really on display!)

As soon as my toes touched the snow and the cold wind hit my body I knew about it. My feet almost instantly went from cold to painful as I ran to the lake for Steve to take the evidentiary photographs - one in just a helmet and sunglasses holding an ice pick and one totally in the buff. As soon as he said he'd got them I hobbled back to my clothes and put everything back on; from start to finish the whole episode probably took two minutes. I warmed up fairly quickly but it took longer than I'd have liked for socks and boots to go back on and I had to get Steve to lace up my crampons as my hands had gone numb.



*You **what**...?!*

Whilst this little escapade caused much merriment and a bit of *joie de vivre*, it did bring home to me how essential it is to have the right equipment, spare clothing and respect for what the elements can do to you. Now I accept that running around starkers a few thousand metres above sea level to prove a point is a bit extreme, but I knew how long my exposure (ahem) would be for and I knew I had the correct clothing (+ spares), layers and support. I've seen people attempt to climb Taranaki with little more than a picnic and wearing trainers and a T shirt with no idea that wind chill can kill you if you're well, let alone what can happen if you become injured.

That little interlude over, we climbed up out of the crater and onto a peak called Paretetaitonga (PARA te tye TONG er) where the wind was fierce. The scenery was spectacular and in the shelter the sun was hot, but as soon as you stepped out into that wind...



Sastrugi – wind-formed ice

We played for a while up there, walking where we wanted to and enjoyed being the only ones up there. Whereas we normally see Ruapahu in the distance from Taranaki, this time we saw Taranaki in the distance from Ruapehu and it was nice to see it from a different angle. The sky was cloudless and blue, the wind kept it cool and we were privileged enough to be the first people that day into the crater and round the summit. Perfect!



Inside the crater

A few other people did arrive – some extreme skiers who had walked up and a few thrill seeking snowboarders, all of whom wanted to be able to say they'd been from the top of the mountain to the bottom.

Mad if you ask me, but then some idiot ran around naked up there once.



Breathtaking!

The descent was really enjoyable – we started by going back in to the crater and then climbing up onto a ridge called Dome where the views were fantastic and it felt like we were on top of the World in between two craters. To our left was part of the main crater out of which we had just climbed and to our right was another part of the crater; it looks like the last eruption left a bit of a lip that we could get onto so we could stand above and look down onto the whole thing. The sun had softened some of the ice and we could just literally drop down slopes hundreds of metres on our ice axe points and land in soft powdery snow further down. As we neared the ski lifts we could see that business was booming and hundreds upon hundreds of people below us were enjoying their sports. We were back with civilisation! A chair lift operator asked us where we'd been and, after we'd told him, he offered us a free ride down for the last few hundred metres which was a really pleasant end to the climb: suspended 20 metres in the air on a silent moving seat, viewing the scenery and reflecting on the day.



Looking back with very expensive Chateau Tongariro in the foreground (we were on the peak on the right)

Back at the car park I looked up again at Ruapehu and Steve pointed out where we'd been. It still looked imposing, massive, improbable that we'd actually climbed to the top. But I had the feeling of aching muscles, slight fatigue and a warm glow that assured me I really *had* been there, really *had* stood on those ice slopes, really *had* - at last - done it.

I can see the central mountains from the road to my house and after the drive home I looked over fondly at Ruapehu just before I pulled into the drive.

But this time I looked at it just a *bit* differently and smiled to myself.

"I've *been* up there", I thought.