

Taranaki Alpine Club Snow Course September 2006

We moved to New Zealand from England in October '05 and instantly fell in love with the mountain. It took me until February '06 to climb it and then I went up once more in April...and then the snow landed. It looked amazing from my Inglewood window – but it was definitely out of bounds for me as I had no real experience of snow/ice tramping. Next Summer seemed a long way off.

Taranaki, standing at 2518 metres (8261 feet) is 1174 metres (3851 feet) higher than the highest UK mountain (Ben Nevis in Scotland at 1344 metres/4409 feet) and all other mountains I've climbed over that height have been in tropical (or at least very warm) areas. Taranaki is cruel if you don't respect the conditions so the nearest I got to climbing it again was standing at the Egmont memorial, or Stratford Plateau car park and admiring the mountain. Until a friend mentioned he'd been on a recent snow course with the Taranaki Alpine Club (TAC)...

I knew a member of the TAC (Glenys) and she said that I might be able to do a snow course – there was one in September. I was forwarded to her colleague, Greg, and on the 'phone I blurted out how inexperienced I was and that I really didn't mind if he said no, but that I *did* know that you were supposed to use crampons with the spiky side down. Despite this, Greg seemed surprisingly relaxed and assured me I would be fine – he even offered to drop off the information I needed to my home address. The TAC subsidised rate for hire of crampons, harness, ice axe and helmet was \$20 – which *included* the instruction and advice over the weekend of the snow course - and so on the Friday night I drove with some trepidation up to North Egmont car park.

The car park gradually filled up and I kept a low profile as everyone seemed to have better or more gear than me (except for a new pair of gaiters which I'd gone out and bought) and I assumed that I was probably the only one who hadn't done this before. Truthfully I felt nervous and out of my depth, especially when an instructor called Ross pulled out the ice axes and crampons...I'd never even *seen* them in real life before!

At the car park before we started up the four wheel drive Translator Track we practised fitting crampons to our boots as apparently the last few hundred meters were snow bound. Then we packed and made our way up the Track and I concentrated hard on not killing anyone with the ice axe I was carrying. The sky cleared as the moon lit the path and soon all the cloud was gone and the myriad stars made a few night photographs look stunning.



Tahurangi Lodge lights against Mount Taranaki

With the exception of a very startled possum, the walk to just below 'base camp' at Tahurangi Lodge was uneventful. As we walked up I could see the snow getting closer and I desperately tried to remember how I'd put the crampons on at the car park. Something about keeping the straps flat...loop the strap through the back of the ring thingy...pull it tight...I hoped someone would help me!

We stopped at the snow and someone did take pity on me and make sure that the crampons I'd tried to put on were actually of some use and not flapping around like a fashion accessory. I took my first ever tentative cramponed foot step on compacted snow...



To those of you who've done all this before, this is probably really mundane – but WOW – I was amazed how effective those spiky things were. From now on the whole weekend was going to be a learning experience – from now on, *everything* was new. I hoped the instructors knew what they were letting themselves in for! We practised walking on the spikes and just got used to being 2 inches taller and having to actually pick your feet up (otherwise the spikes drag on the snow and you trip yourself up – not a good look!) Soon we continued on and finally had to ascend a fairly steep (well I thought it was anyway!) slope to the lodge with the aid of a guide rope. The instructors were on hand to give advice and help and I we all made it up safely. I began to feel that this was not going to be as scary as I first thought.





Snow, cloud... peace

At the lodge we ate, unpacked and had an ‘introduce yourselves’ session, followed by a chat about what to expect from the instructors. I was really impressed that they talked to us patiently and clearly and weren’t bothered by daft questions. They didn’t even call themselves instructors very often – the word ‘helper’ was used a lot. The atmosphere was quite relaxed and I learned two important things that night:

- 1) there were other people with the same level of experience and worries that I had and
- 2) none of the heros and egos you see in the films were there. These people were normal.



Tahurangi Lodge



Bed!

I woke up on the Saturday quite excited but a little nervous. Greg and Glenys had drawn the short straw as I was in their group and we started with a chat about basic snow and ice skills. Then it was on to the practical – digging the side of your boot into the snow to create a little step for yourself to walk on. This was on a slight incline so I started off really tentatively (I wanted to at least *start* without falling over) and gradually became a bit more adept at it (I think I had every muscle clenched in an attempt not to fall over but didn't do *too* badly). I was however very slow, but both of my instructors seemed OK with that. Then it was time to use the ice axe. *Safely*, if at all possible. Greg demonstrated how to use the axe to cut little steps into the snow to give you something to walk on and I realised that these things called steps weren't, as I had imagined, things like you get up to a front door (I'd always wondered how you did that in the snow – and how long it must take!) 3 cuts with the axe had Greg cutting a good niche...I managed it in 23 to start with, but with practice reduced that to about 5.



Greg watching a pathetic attempt at cutting ice steps

Greg and Glenys then demonstrated self-arresting which basically consisted of hurling themselves down a hill and using the pointy part of the ice axe as a brake in the snow. They made it look so easy, but I gave it a go and was about as graceful (and

successful at the first attempt) as a hyperactive elephant doing the splits upside down with an offensive weapon flailing about aimlessly. When I finally stopped at the bottom Greg simply said “That needs practice, Mark”. Maybe he was just being picky. When we’d got the hang of doing it feet first, we were ‘encouraged’ to go upside down, head first. More elephant impressions, more flailing. And quite a lot of laughing too.



Self-arresting

Eventually all the things we were being taught began to fall into place and all of a sudden I found myself getting more confident. We all tramped off (without crampons at first) up (what I thought was) a steep slope. It didn't seem too bad and the instructors kept us pretty close so we couldn't get ourselves into too much trouble. We practised kicking steps and cutting steps – I was very grateful that I had learned to self arrest as the slopes did seem *very* steep and snowy! It must have seemed very slow progress to our instructors but they were ever patient and I got used to recognising them by their boots as I spent most of my time looking at the ground and where I was going to put my foot next so that I didn't have to practice an unplanned self-arrest!



Soon we were allowed to put the crampons on amid warnings of how NOT to shred your own clothes or tread on anyone else's toes. Glenys demonstrated a couple of ways to use crampons up and down a hill and we all practised that before trotting off on a walk up a Taranaki slope. Having climbed this part of the mountain in the Summer, it was amazing how different the landscape was and how deep some of the snow was. We followed the path of an old avalanche and had lunch out of the wind – pasta, chocolate, bananas – high energy stuff. I was surprised at how thirsty I was too – we were working quite hard even though we hadn't gone very far and despite the wind and cold.



The last part of the day consisted of going for a 'walk' using all the skills we had learned up to now. It did all seem to come together and I started feeling rather pleased with myself, even though I did get my 2 points of contact at all times – both feet, or one foot and an ice axe handle dug in – a bit mixed up (which Greg never seemed to miss and always reminded me about!) I even accidentally slipped over and did a little self-arrest – but no one saw me so I shall deny it if anyone ever asks me!!



Making our way back to Tahurangi lodge we traversed a very steep part of Taranaki which, had I fallen, would have launched me over one of the bluffs. Although I was happy to go at my own (slow) pace, the instructors felt that a 'confidence rope' attaching me to Greg would be safest. I secretly wanted to do the whole snow walk on my own, but was actually grateful for the caution and sense shown by Greg – eight hours ago I'd never even seen a pair of crampons in real life and I'd probably have accidentally killed someone with my ice axe...now I was on a mountain walking across a 45 degree slope that could easily have hurt if not killed me. I resolved to 'not need' Greg; in other words if I fell I knew I would have been saved by the rope, but I didn't intend to fall and I intended to prove that I *could* do it and remain vertical all the way. It was slow and Greg showed fantastic patience – but I *did* get back to the lodge without falling.

Back at the lodge we took off our gear, ate, drank tea and recovered. The sides of my legs and ankles were beginning to ache as I had just used a whole set of new muscles whilst attempting to keep 20 little spikes on the bottom of my boots in the snow on a steep mountain slope. Ross did a little session on knots and then – sadly - it was time for me to head back down the Translator Track as I had to work on the Sunday (the course is a 2 day course and everyone else re-used their skills on the Sunday and also learned glissading). As I wandered down the track I reflected on how much I'd learned and done in the last 24 hours – I'd gone from total and utter novice to someone who had learned and practised a whole new set of skills, skills which I could come and use again. It had been a fantastic day.

Taranaki clouded over and I went to bed – but I got up the next morning and it was clear. I looked at where I'd been from my window and then looked at the white summit. It seemed a lot closer now and one day I'd be able to get up there all year round...

My thanks go to all the instructors who made the weekend so good, but especially to Greg and Glenys for letting me loose with offensive weapons and making sure I stayed safe. I'll be back...

The Taranaki Alpine Club always welcomes new members. Their website can be found at <http://www.taranakialpineclub.co.nz/>