

Nordic Ski Touring in New Zealand

The ridgeline snakes upward at a gentle angle and the hard windblown snow has provided a quick means of ascent. It's winter in New Zealand, and the blue sky has the occasional puff of cloud wafting across. The sun is shining brightly though a cool breeze keeps the temperature down and keeps us from overheating. Across to the left, the Caroline Face of Mt Cook chisels into the skyline, the individual summits are visible along the ridge; the Liebig Range crowds in, glistening with fresh snow; steep, narrow arêtes soar. At the head of the main valley Mt Sibbald squats, massive and draped in glacier. It's big country and we're safe as houses, revelling in the view.

Of course, it's never this easy. Yesterday, 12 hours of rain kept us cooped up in the hut for a relaxed day of chat, reading, eating and – eventually – drinking a little too much wine and whisky. But the hut is warm – with a big pot-belly stove in the main room, gas cookers, and solar powered lights: and for a day it was marvellous to be forced to do nothing. After a week however I could see that dismemberment with titanium cutlery could seem the only option. I listen in awe to stories of an 8 day long hut confinement in a particularly vicious storm on Cook. No food; no way of getting to the long-drop. Apparently all toilet necessities were done on one of the snow shovels, which was then stuck out of a porthole door for a few seconds; when pulled back in, the shovel was scrubbed clean as new by the violent snow...

We're here with a local guide – Gottlieb, who owns the hut. The group also contains some guides from the Antarctic Survey, a couple of guides fresh from a crossing of Denali, a journalist who wants to write the trip up for Air NZ's in-flight magazine, and us. There is a relaxed air despite the huge gulf in our experience and abilities, and we all chip in with the work - the atmosphere is of friends going away for a weekend, rather than any formal guide/client relationship. The hut is stocked up with necessities – wine, chocolate, that sort of thing – by helicopter occasionally, so we have to carry in loads made heavy by a loaf of garlic bread, or perhaps a few vegetables. Everything fits in my 50 litre sack nicely, except my skis and boots that are strapped to the side, as I've opted to walk in approach shoes. It's two hours from the roadside, which is itself an hour up a gravel road from the nearest town, Tekapo, and the chances of meeting someone else is zero. A month previously the Prime Minister had been up here doing exactly the same route, as an escape from the strain of government, and instantly we realise our vote was not wasted on a self-serving politician, but a real human being. Apart from her, a handful of groups come this way in winter. It's not like Langdale in August.

We're here for a weekend Nordic touring. Nordic occupies the middle ground in ski activities. With some of the kick and glide ability of classic cross-country ski, coupled with metal edges and an ability to turn on the downhill, Nordic is an excellent option for winter hill travel. The classical Nordic boot has a vibram sole and is generally made of leather so it's fine for walking below the snowline or over rocky sections, and the freedom of not having the heel locked down to the skis makes ski travel on flat sections pleasurable. At it's most basic, you can just walk along with skis on – but with a little more effort in technique you can begin to allow your momentum to slide the ski through

before repeating the process with the other ski. The distance travelled per stride rapidly doubles, triples or more, and the miles can fly by. The downhill bits are possible on Nordic skis – unlike the Olympic XC skiers who wobble like bambi on ice on the gentlest slopes. The metal edges hold well and it's possible with practice to turn in styles other than wobbly snowplough. If you're good you can crank out telemark turns, with the rear knee down close to the ski; a beautiful and effective turn – but still an absolute sod to achieve. I can't do them on classical Nordic skis at all, though on fatter carvers it's another story...A quick trip onto the snow the afternoon of our arrival has confirmed that the skis aren't any easier to turn than I remembered, and I measure my length in the snow regularly; but hey, it's soft and the free heels mean that you don't rip your knee joints open when falling or trying to get back up again.

The skis enable travel uphill by one of three methods. First is waxing: by applying wax to the area under the ski binding when the ski is weighted the wax contacts with the snow and grips it. It's incredibly efficient providing you choose the right wax, and just as frustrating if you choose wax incorrectly – the different waxes work better over different temperature ranges. In predictable snow conditions it's easily the best method of getting uphill traction. The second method is by using a fishscale, waxless base to the ski; this allows forward slide, but the scales prevent back slipping. It works well unless the scales ice up, but the main problem is that it reduces the glide of the ski and creates a curious thrumming sound when going downhill. The last method works best on steeper uphill: applying self adhesive nylon "skins" to the bases, rather like stroking the fur on your cat, it slides one way and sticks the other. As Ron Fawcett would say, they "stick like sh*t to a blanket", and so it's skins over fishscales for us on this trip. Gottlieb's garage is chock full of skis, boots, poles, shovels, avalanche transceivers and mountaineering kit, so it was a simple matter to find some suitable skis – my pair had just returned from a traverse of the Patagonian ice-cap with Gottlieb. With my own plastic telemark boots to supply a little extra turning power, I have no excuses other than incompetence when I fall.

Snake Ridge extends for 6km, a sinuous curve of hill leading to a high point on the Mt Hope ridge, at 2086m. It takes a couple of hours to climb the 800m extra height along the ridge. We pause on a small sub peak above the Stag Saddle to remove skins; a stiff wind whistles across and the windchill starts to bite. A descent from the saddle into the upper Camp Stream basin is calling, and the Nordic types drop over the lip for a steep traverse into the basin, whilst the ski-mountaineers go higher, looking for big cornices to jump. We eat lunch quickly as extremities exposed to the wind rapidly turn a funny blue colour. The downhill demons bust the cornice and lay down beautiful turns on the steep, fantastic snow – their whoops of joy travel around the headwall of the basin. Reunited, the Nordic wobblers set off on a series of improbable traverses and wobbly snowploughs, but as time goes by and our skinny ski legs return the turns get smoother and more confident. Its miles of gentle downhill back to the hut now – the wind has dropped, and the sun is warming the hard snow to perfection. We strip down to thermals and ski on in glorious conditions, the fishscales making short work of the flats and occasional uphill bump. We pass our tracks from the ascent and fired up for a fast shredding tele descent to the hut on the steeper slopes I drop a knee into a beautiful tele turn. The ski squirrels out and I measure my length on the slope again. The other beauty of free heels is the chance of

falling well enough to get the ski tip imprinting on your forehead, and this is one of those higher velocity specials. Of course, no-one saw...or laughed much....

Snowplough turns return me inelegantly but safely to the hut, ready for tea and medals. We tidy up and pack for the walkout – it's still only just gone 2pm and we have a long walk out and a drive of 4 hours to get home. Packs are shouldered and we head off into the subalpine tussocks for the walk back to the van with images of Snake Ridge floating below an extraordinary sky.

The trip was organised by Gottlieb of Alpine Recreation – their website is at www.alpinerecreation.co.nz and further photos are available at www.alpinerecreation.co.nz/tekapo - thanks to all at Alpine Recreation for an excellent trip.