## ALPINE SKILLS



## BY BEN SANFORD

## HONE YOUR SKILLS WITH INSTRUCTION TO TAKE YOUR CLIMBING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

y climbing partner Tom and I lacked alpine experience; this was our first trip to the Southern Alps. Hailing from Australia's Blue Mountains, we were experienced rock climbers-having done first ascents, crag development and many canyons, we had skills to move quickly with any rope work. Unfortunately, in Australia we lack serious mountains; our mountains are more like hills sprinkled with snow. New Zealand is the obvious place to start mountaineering for Australians.

We started our alpine experience traversing Sebastopol Ridge, then Mt Olivier, Mt Kitchener, Mt Wakefield, Peak 9144, Hochstetter Dome, Mt Sealy and an attempt on Mt Green. For two people with no formal alpine training, we thought we did okay. However, we both knew that before we could attempt anything serious, we'd need to fill our knowledge gaps.

We came across the experienced guide Paul Rogers when at Tasman Saddle Hut. He mentioned an Alpine Skills Course he was teaching for NZAC. I contacted Paul in Spring 2017 and he organised an Advanced Mountaineering Course for Tom and I. The course would enable us to quickly gain the knowledge and skills we needed, without wasting time on skills we already had, hence why we didn't consider any Technical Mountaineering courses.



 ABOVE Tom Gilbert and the author ascending Lendenfeld Peak via Marcel Col. PAUL ROGERS LEFT Tom Gilbert leading through the 'cheval' section of Malte Brun's West Ridge on the descent. BEN SANFORD

While reading about a course can't replace the invaluable learning experiences of actually doing one, I thought it might be worth talking about some of the key learning points from the course, so readers may think about their own experience level and whether their climbing could benefit from similar training. The invaluable lessons learnt on the course included:

-Any objective must be suitable for all members of the party. The phrase 'A chain is only as strong as its weakest link' definitely applies here. If your partner is not confident in their skills and decisionmaking and you can't confidently rely on them, either pick an easier objective or find another partner. On our first trip to New Zealand, we were a group of three, but soon realised one group member wasn't comfortable with many of the objectives we wanted to attempt. On our second trip, the other two of us went on to complete the objectives without any drama. We managed to summit the South West Ridge of Aspiring and the West Ridge of Malte Brun after our course with Paul. Had we continued to climb with the third member, we wouldn't have been able to attempt or successfully climb these peaks. -The weather forecast must support the objective. For example, if there have been strong westerly winds-especially during a storm-you don't want to be climbing any eastern aspects where there's greater avalanche risk due to wind slabbing over the ridges. Going out within 24 hours of a large snowstorm significantly increases your chances of being dragged to the bottom of a crevasse by an







avalanche. The snow needs time for a solid melt-freeze to bind to the lower layers of ice or to release any loose snow.

The week that our course was due to start, the weather had dropped large amounts of precipitation from northerlies and ended with strong westerlies that created wind-slabbing on the eastern faces of the main divide. A guide had fallen five metres into a crevasse, which is generally unheard of. For these reasons we altered plans in the Tasman valley and flew into Pioneer Hut a week later. The West Coast nêvês were full, conditions were great, and the forecast south-easterly winds never impacted our objectives.

In the course, we went over skills such as crevasse rescue, selfarrest, appropriate rope techniques for terrain and many more. We climbed Humdinger via the North West Face couloir and Lendenfeld via Marcel Col.

-Changes in landscape and terrain. It's important to have a quick discussion with your partner on which technique to apply to ensure optimal safety of both members. What technique does the terrain require? Glacier travel, pitch climbing, running belay or soloing? If the rope isn't acting as a safety, take it off; it's a trip hazard and gives you a false sense of security. You also don't want to pull your partner off the mountain—which, sadly, too many inexperienced parties have done in the past.

Glacier travel technique is for moving through areas where you may not see the crevasses and may unexpectedly fall in. If you're climbing through an iceall with crevasses you can see, where a run-out is bad (meaning a fall will drag you both into a crevasse), then a running belay, pitching or soloing is needed. Soloing will allow you to climb at your own pace, as there's nothing worse than trying to keep up an uncomfortable speed. An example is that after moving set up for glacier travel technique, once crossing the bergschrund, if you're not pitching then you need to solo.

-Plan ahead for rests. Simple things can save you valuable time in the mountains. When you put a helmet on, you should also adjust clothing, eat, drink, toilet if necessary. When the sunglasses go on, so too a buff and sunscreen. Keep up a good food intake to prevent low blood sugar. Lack of nutrition can affect balance, cause cramps and lead to poor decision-making. Sustaining a nasty cramp whilst on a difficult section of terrain could also be fatal.

-Efficient decision-making in regards to building anchors. Time is most valuable in the mountains. Quick, intelligent decisions will greatly improve your experience on the mountain. When building anchors there's an acronym that covers important aspects of a good anchor, known as SERENE: Strong- The stronger the better

Equalized- Anchors should be constructed so that each component

LEFT Paul Rogers and Tom Gilbert navigating through crevasses on the Explore Glacier. BEN SANFORD

TOP Tom Gilbert lowering into a crevasse near Pioneer Hut in order to practice rescue techniques. BEN SANFORD

 $\mathsf{ABOVE}$  In solo mode at dawn on the South West Ridge of Mt Aspiring. <code>BEN SANFORD</code>

shares an equal amount of load. The aim is to distribute the force equally to each fixed point. Create a V-shape. A focal point with an angle exceeding 90 degrees to the components will create huge forces that compromise the system strength.

Redundant- Anchors should consist of multiple components in case one piece fails. However, there are times that one component may be all you need e.g. a super solid snow stake or T-slot. When there is the option to places wires or cams in rock, three pieces is ideal. Obviously, there are times when one solid cam is all you can use. There's no point placing poor protection, it may give a false sense of security.

Efficient- Anchors must be kept simple and be created quickly, without forfeiting the other SERENE qualities.

No Extension- Anchors should be created to avoid shock-loading in the instance that one or more components fail.

Use knots that are quick to adjust, such as clove hitches, so that it's easy to alter the system if necessary e.g. shorten/ lengthen safety strand.

-Aim to summit between 6-9am. Always aim to be off the mountain by 10am and back to the hut by midday; this will give you pleasant glacier travel in the most favourable conditions. For east-facing peaks on the main divide you want to summit as close to sunrise as possible to avoid a hazardous descent. Once the sun is shining, the snow and ice conditions on eastern slopes degrade rapidly from solar exposure. Soft snow can trigger wet slide avalanches, and rime ice also shoots down off the mountain when it melts. On my first trip, in 2016, we had unpleasant conditions coming down from the Annette Plateau onto Sebastopol Ridge after summiting Mt Sealy via the South West Face. Whilst sun is rarely an issue for southern aspects like Sealy, we made a fairly late descent for an eastern aspect and had some very soft snow that triggered wet slide avalanches. But we weren't sure we'd get a freeze overnight, and so if we had left the bivouac site earlier in the morning, ascending the ridge may have been unfavourable too. Either way, we were due some poor conditions, but it was a great lesson learnt on how guickly the sun can impact conditions. When descending Lendenfeld with Paul, conditions became soft very quickly. Snow stakes became weak as the layers of ice and snow weren't bulletproof right through, forcing us to solo down the north-east face or build T-slots, which are time-consuming. Luckily, we were confident we

could solo, and saving time here made the descent through the ice fall much more enjoyable.

-Work the aspects and angle. For the same reasons as above, working the angle to stay in quality conditions is essential. Paul's first mountain with us was Humdinger via the couloir on the North West Face. Paul chose this objective as it was out of the sun till late morning. The main objective danger was falling rime. We had bits and pieces coming down but as long as we moved quickly the risk was minimal. Because we had moved quickly through our pitches we were able to rappel and then solo down the north face, rather than reversing the couloir. The sun hadn't been on the north face long, so it made for some great soloing and allowed us to avoid falling rime.

-Boot track preparation. Prior to the summit day, put in a boot track if the conditions are soft. This makes crossing the glacier easier and faster. By leaving early, you give yourself extra time (daylight) to solve any problems that could occur and prevent becoming benighted. On our course we put in a track across the glacier, one for Humdinger and one for Lendenfeld. At 5am it's much easier to scoot along the compact tracks rather than 'breaking in' and wasting energy. It really can make a big difference to your journey heading to and from the hut/basecamp.

-'Don't go trophy hunting until you're ready for big game,'-Paul Rogers. It's important to stay off the big peaks such as Aoraki and Tasman until you have your skills dialled. You must know when to move for glacier travel, when to pitch climb, solo and use running belay techniques safely and efficiently. It's about keeping it together for 'x' amount of metres. For example, from Plateau Hut (2200m) to the summit of Aoraki (3724m) it's 1524 vertical metres of focus, taking 12–15 hours for many parties. Whereas from the West Coast nêvês to the main divide summits, the elevation is roughly half the vertical distance of an attempt on Aoraki or Tasman from the Tasman valley. From hut to hut, we took seven hours to complete Lendenfeld (3194m), with half an hour to enjoy the summit. Ultimately, I suggest refining your skills on more forgiving peaks in the West Coast region first.

If you are looking to advance your climbing, it's really worth doing a course through NZAC, or something similar to the private course Paul offered us.

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TOP Tom Gilbert and the author descending Fox Glacier. PAUL ROGERS ABOVE Moving with a running belay on Lendenfeld Peak. PAUL ROGERS

