



HOTLINE (IV, 5+, M5)

A first ascent on the east face of Mt Haast

by BEN SANFORD

Winter didn't quite come to New Zealand in 2019 for mountaineering purposes. The Remarkables skifield had huge bald patches on the resort—in late July. Usually people laugh from the chairlift at climbers walking up, but this time skiers were sheepishly walking sections of the resort. Looking out toward the Doolans Range from Wye Saddle, I saw nothing but patchy snow amongst grass.

This was yet another unsuccessful trip to New Zealand, my previous being November 2018, which had turbulent weather systems with no considerable weather windows allowing us to do anything other than running, hiking and rock climbing amongst the rain. This crazy period claimed the lives of four incredibly strong and experienced climbers across the Alps in three separate avalanche events.

In July 2019, I went up the Tasman valley in what turned out to be horrendous ski touring conditions. Local guides had said it was one of the worst breakable crusts they'd ever seen. The crust was sitting on top of 200mm of powder. It was slow going, tiresome and frustrating, but also hilarious to watch everyone fall over at random. I also had ice climbing objectives, but was forced to turn around at the base of Mt Walter's east face due to unprotectable ice conditions.

This was the second trip in a row now that I'd returned home to Australia weeks earlier than I'd intended to, but my spirit was not yet broken. Gavin Lang and I watched the weather for the following month. He'd waited all winter for an opportunity. The only way we'd make any rainbow work amongst the storms work was to be flexible enough to drop everything and go. Finally, the forecast looked favourable, but it was still ambiguous—with the system looking to move too far north. I gambled and booked my flights.

The author skinning back to Pioneer Hut after a conditions scout of Mt Haast (behind). Gavin Lang



Two days later Milo Gilmour, Llewellyn Murdoch, Gavin Lang and I flew up to Pioneer Hut. After dropping our gear at the hut, we'd immediately put the skis on to assess the conditions and determine which beautiful lines were possible. We'd toured over to the Abel Janszoon below Mt Tasman, then around to Marcel Col and finally up near Pioneer Pass where we'd found two variants of particular interest up the east face of Mt Haast (3114m).

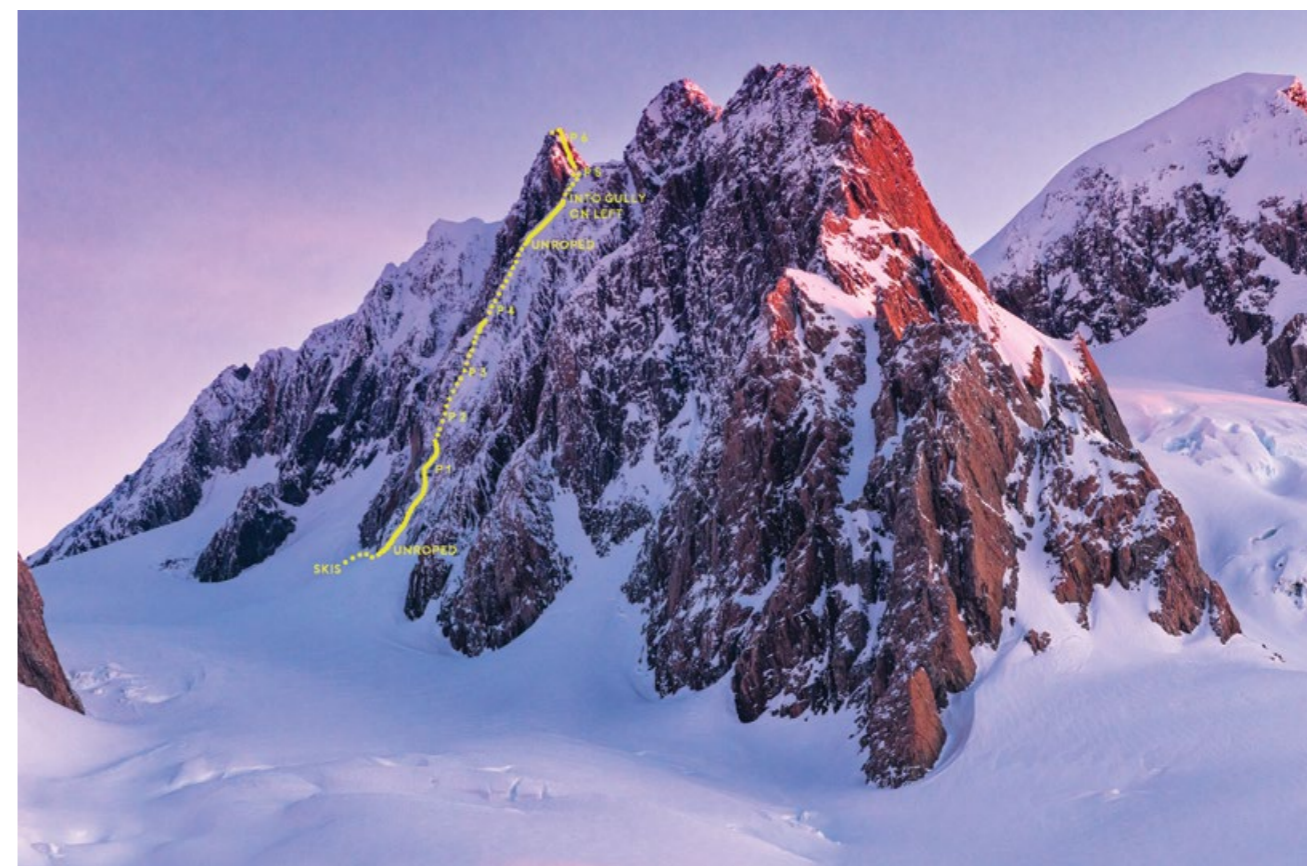
It was a few days before we'd return for our attempt on Haast. Since it was our first time climbing together, Gavin and I decided to start with something easier. We climbed the West Ridge of Glacier Peak and skied down the face. It was not without a couple of mishaps. Part way up, Gavin's crampon broke at the toe bail on an ice pitch. Immediately I thought it was all over and that summiting was out of the question. Fortunately with Gavin happy to proceed, I then roped up, climbed past and belayed him up the ice pitch. Later, I had a rock blow out under my right foot as we gained the sharp ridge. My heart must've skipped a beat—it's a horrible feeling when travelling unroped.

The cloud came in as we saddled onto our imaginary horses, one leg either side of the ridge as we slid along the soft snow cautiously. Finally, we reached mellow slopes and the summit.

We quickly transitioned to skis and set off down the slippery rime-covered slope. A few turns in, I looked over to Gavin as he was making a kick-turn. He'd skied into some ice in a tricky spot and, when trying to reposition, his ski ejected. I'd watched the event unfold, almost as though time stood still, but I'm sure it was the opposite for Gavin as his ski made a solo descent down into the unknown and most likely into a crevasse.

The snow had just become fun, arghhh! Gavin trudged down and saw his ski was located a hundred metres away. I'd managed to enjoy the run in sections, and Gavin still managed to ski a few turns before we reached the glacier floor.

The following day, it was my turn for the gear failure challenges as my split-board binding pin disappeared somewhere on the Davis Snowfield on the way to the Minarets (3040m). The pin is crucial for touring mode. I'd improvised with spectra prusik cord and we decided to head for Centennial Hut, hoping to make a makeshift pin. My prusik cord quickly wore thin and I was confident our day was done as I plodded up the shin-deep snow carrying the board, feeling rather depressed whilst the wind battered me. Gavin had found thick wire and we bent it into shape. We had enough wit to fashion a spare, which worked considerably well for the rest of the trip.



Conditions were great on the Minarets. A single axe each got us to the summit. However, just shy of the summit I'd been following Gavin's steps and, being a heavy human, I broke through and slid chest-deep into a crevasse. Fortunately, I managed to bring my feet up onto the wall and push myself back downhill.

Phew. Never a nice feeling when the pressure under your feet disappears. Within five minutes from leaving the windy summit we were back on the glacier, slowed only by a section of rime ice at the top of the west face. As my feet were blistered and tender, we took a rest day at Pioneer Hut to recharge for Mt Haast.

Fortunately, Gavin was able to borrow Milo's crampons, as they were leaving a day before us. Setting off for Mt Haast on skis, we reached the base of the route around 7:30am. We began by trying the variant on the left that looked more direct and aesthetic. Upon inspection, the ice was thin and delaminating, with questionable protection for vertical dry-tooling. We weren't interested in warming up and potentially taking whippers on a marginal anchor. We quickly agreed the right-hand side was a better option. The sun was already thawing out the face, creating rime ice and rock fall hazards.

ABOVE *The route taken by Hotline on Mt Haast's east face.* Ben Sanford
PREVIOUS PAGE *Gavin Lang climbing on the Minarets.* Ben Sanford

We were able to move unroped for the first 100m of climbing, which was in pristine condition with tacky ice.

Upon reaching the first difficult section, where we decided to rope up, I managed to foolishly drop a glove as the drawstring didn't hold. I was so disappointed. My back-up pair were bulky gloves for arctic conditions and had much less dexterity—which made things tricky. For this reason I did less leading than intended, and I also figured we'd move faster with Gavin leading. His experience far outweighed mine and I was already fumbling around when trying to take gear out—which had me grunting in frustration many times throughout the climb.

The next section moved left through mixed terrain to gain steep ice. Unfortunately, communication was quickly lost due to the nature of the terrain. Eventually, the rope was at full stretch. Numerous warning calls of minimal rope remaining seemed to go unheard. There was no movement for a while, so I decided to bump my belay up five metres, which thankfully allowed Gavin to reach rock and make a reasonable anchor to avoid hang fire.



The next section was solid water ice, but there were hazards overhead. Rocks and rime ice of all sizes whizzed past. The ice was in a funnel, so we both moved as fast as possible through that section. A few times I had to hunker down and try to move to the right of the line as the small, loose wet avalanches triggered by falling rime ice would funnel down. I copped a few hits to the helmet and shoulders before moving over an M4+ step to find safety.

The following pitch was mine to lead. I decided to climb the snow that had been in the sun for less time. I drove a picket in, but it was useless in the soft conditions and I clipped it back to my harness. I desperately wanted to get something solid in to avoid falling on the anchor, but only managed to place a wire and a small cam on the entire 60m-pitch before creating a strong anchor by slinging a frozen-in rock and placing a cam in a small crack. At this point, it was really warm on the route, hence naming the route 'Hotline' later.

Gavin set off out of sight again on what turned out to be the crux pitch at M5. It went left from the anchor, which was essentially a small cave formed by rime ice. Once around the corner, the line trended right up a steepening snow-ice ramp until it came to a short vertical section with loose overhang-

The author enjoying the exposure to be found on the shoulder between Mt Haast's middle and high peaks. Gavin Lang

ing rock, rime and water ice bulges. I recall doing a couple of pull-ups on my tools and scratching around on a blank wall until I got a high foot on a small edge for a front point. After that, the line relented up the spur.

From here we unroped, climbing 70m of the ridgeline until it steepened into an overhang. We then rappelled four metres to the left to regain a direct line toward the peak. We didn't totally trust the anchor due to the loose rock, so down-climbed with minimal weight on the rope, using it as a precaution. Finally, we unroped and climbed another 40m up the exit gully to reach the shoulder between Haast's middle and high peaks.

Another 70m to the high summit remained. Overhead hazards were ever-present, with sheets of rime ice occasionally dropping down onto me while belaying. I had to do some dodging, but fortunately nothing too painful connected—other than a little block to my hand. The following two pitches were certainly the most consistently interesting sections on the entire route, with great mixed climbing that required thought.

Once at the top, we unroped for the last section of ridge-travel to the summit, which delivered an enjoyable vista of Malte Brun, Aoraki / Mt Cook and the Tasman Lake. At last, we had set foot on the highest point. An elated embrace was shared but we knew the time to focus was not over yet.

The views up there were unparalleled. If you've been on the Main Divide, you'll know what I mean—it's indescribable. Better yet, we were up there late in the day. It was absolutely stunning looking out to the snaking rivers—shining golden as the sun was setting—that feed out of the Fox Glacier and flow into the sea. Juxtaposed to this, the climbing wasn't difficult, but required full attention and had me at my most intimidated—with either side dropping away for hundreds of metres.

We made three rappels back down to Marcel Col, with a focus on avoiding the knot getting jammed amongst rime ice for the first rappel. The second abseil was a tentative affair loading the picket; after watching it move slightly under Gavin's weight, I decided to pack it down and didn't load it for 15 metres of the descent. The third abseil was enjoyable, off a V-thread through a little wave of ice formed by melt and wind. Once off the mountain, I felt the beautiful wave of safety and relief come over me, followed by stoke. We walked around to the base of the route near Pioneer Pass to collect our skis. There was still debris coming down off the east face even after the sun had set, which was one of the reasons we'd chosen not to descend this side.

Knackered but eager to experience the simply incredible feeling of water sliding down our throats, we raced back to the empty hut. We decided to postpone our continuation down to Chancellor Hut until early the following morning before the weather moved in. What an amazing six-day weather window it was. I left New Zealand feeling fulfilled. The region had three first ascents in four days, as Milo and Llewellyn enjoyed two beautiful lines of their own.

TOP The author on the shoulder between Mt Haast's middle and high peaks. Gavin Lang

RIGHT There are few better places to be in the Southern Alps than the West Coast névés with good weather in spring. Gavin Lang

