



*THE*  
**HARPER  
MANNERING  
ROSS** *CHALLENGE*

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PHOTOS BY GAVIN LANG/FIRST LIGHT GUIDING

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE SOUTHERN ALPS WITH THE AIM OF VISITING GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES NAMED FOR THE 1891 FOUNDERS OF NZAC: AP HARPER, GUY MANNERING AND MALCOLM ROSS.

# I AM NOW MORE DRAWN TO JOURNEYS THAN TO DESTINATIONS, AS JOURNEYS OFFER MORE OPTIONS, MORE FLEXIBILITY, AND MORE TO LEARN

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learnt some things in 2016. If you run into a guide you haven't climbed with but you know from a handful of encounters over the years, and idly comment that if you ever did any more guided climbing you'd like to go with him, he will pursue you relentlessly. If you pose a 125th anniversary challenge to 3900 NZAC members to tag geographical features named for the 1891 founders of the club AP Harper,

Guy Mannering and Malcolm Ross, you might find that challenge reflected straight back at you. I learnt that turning 60 is a lot harder than turning 50. Ten years ago there was still plenty of time to chase all those hopes and aspirations, but where has all that time gone now? I already know there's a lot of space between intrepid and trepidation, but these days I wake up every day feeling closer to the latter, in part because one hip now consists of more titanium, Teflon and ceramic than bone. I also know I am now more drawn to journeys than to destinations, as journeys offer more options, more flexibility, and more to learn.

I made my idle comment to Gavin Lang of First Light Guiding at the Remarkables Ice and Mixed Festival in Queenstown in August 2016. I talked about my bifurcated climbing career, my early passion and successes in the 1970s and 1980s, the two subsequent missing decades I spent focussed on my family and career, and how now, surprisingly, I've found myself immersed back in the New Zealand climbing world. I had never been to the head of the Hooker, only as far up the valley as the late Hooker Hut back in the 1970s when getting there was a walk in the park. I wanted to sleep at Empress, New Zealand's highest hut, and gaze up at the big faces, climb a peak, and tick the NZAC challenge box on Harper Saddle. We began to hatch a plan.

Then an email arrived from Gavin with the subject line: 'I'll see your Harper-Mannering-Ross challenge and I'll raise ya ...'. Yes, we'd visit the Hooker valley, but we'd start in the Murchison! That makes perfect sense—between the Murchison and the Hooker there are three glaciers, one peak and one saddle named for Harper, Mannering or Ross. We'd take eight days, cache a food-drop at Plateau Hut to lighten our loads, and maybe even do some ice climbing on the Forrest Ross Glacier. There would be some long days and some big climbs, and a mix of new and familiar territory for each of us. We were on! A Southern Alps journey.

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There's something satisfying about a symmetrical start date: 16-12-16. I meet Gavin at 8:30am in Wanaka. We drive to Mt Cook airport, where the conditions are windy and gusty, with cloud over the divide. Another party is waiting to fly in to Plateau—it's too windy for them, but they'll take our box of food when they do fly in. Conditions are okay for us, and suddenly here we are, at the head of the Murchison. I was last here half a lifetime ago—in October 1986 I celebrated my 30th birthday in Murchison Hut with packet cheesecake, a can of peaches and a pot of thickened cream.

I had just returned to New Zealand after six years living in California. My American husband-to-be David Ware and I flew in by ski plane, and toured the Murchison, Aida and Mannering glaciers on skinny skis with metal edges and three-pin bindings. My quads could do telemark turns back then, age 60 was in the distant future, and a total hip joint replacement was unimaginable.

Gavin and I do a quick gear sort before we set off for our first objective: to tag the Harper Glacier. We'll be 'stretching our legs' according to Gavin's plan. It's a sunny afternoon but snow conditions are variable, with a crusty surface and deep, sugary stuff underneath. We head up the Aida Glacier to about the 1900m contour, then angle up slopes to the south-west towards the col just east of Coopers Mate at 2200m. It's good to have the gear on, get moving, and focus on the rhythm of uphill movement after the stress of my day-job, driving a desk that goes nowhere. 'Breath-ing, bal-ance, foot-work', one syllable per step, over and over. I learnt that trick when I climbed Aspiring and Aoraki Mt Cook with Marty Schmidt in 2013. We walked in and out for both climbs, and the mantra grew out of my need to calm my mind and focus only on the things that would get me up those big hills. I mention my uphill mantra to Gavin, and we share our different interpretations of it. For him, breathing is the essence of life, balance is what we strive for, and footwork connects us to the earth. For me, breathing, balance and footwork are simply the physical processes I need to maintain the focus required to get up the hill.

Even with the slushy conditions it doesn't take too long to reach the col. I pull out a flag with the NZAC 125th anniversary logo for photographic evidence that we've tagged the top of the Harper Glacier. We think about Coopers Mate too, but the deep snow, rotten rock and lengthening shadows make heading back to the hut an easy decision.

There is no freeze overnight but it's firm enough the next morning for good travel across the Murchison Glacier. The glaciers are in good shape—there's plenty of late spring snow, and recent warm conditions mean everything is well filled in and consolidated. We climb steadily to Classen Saddle, then we angle around on the broad shelf east of Brodrick Peak and Whataroa Saddle towards Mt Mannering. The classic ascent route on Mannering goes up the south-west ridge from Whataroa Saddle, but the alternative of continuing along the shelf to the east rib looks straightforward and appealing. And so it is—there is softish snow on the east-facing slope, only smallish schrunds to contend with, and two pitches to the



📷 Penny making the final few steps up to Clarke Saddle (2978m), between the Linda and La Perouse glaciers. This was the highest point on the journey.

# THERE'S NO TIME TO LINGER ... A NOR-WEST WIND IS BREWING ON THE DIVIDE, AND GALES ARE FORECAST

summit at 2669m. It's out with the NZAC flag for a photo with the second tag, Mt Mannering. We also get panorama shots across the Whymper Glacier towards the eastern aspects of Elie de Beaumont, which I climbed via the Anna Glacier on the 1986 trip with David. To the east, the Classen Glacier tumbles below us to its terminal lake, and we catch glimpses of the Godley, with D'Archiac towering above it. There's no time to linger—it's sunny and calm on the eastern flank of Mt Mannering, but a nor-west wind is brewing on the divide, and gales are forecast.

We return to the hut the same way we'd come. Murchison is an NZAC hut in a great spot, but the 200-metre climb up from the glacier in soft snow at the end of a long day requires an extra application of the uphill mantra. Rising gusts and high cloud signal the forecasted bad weather system so we repair to the hut and batten down the hatches. It's a wild ride overnight as gale force winds buffet the hut from the north-west, rocking it on its foundations. The windows are on the north-west corner, and the wind forces rain and sleet around the frames, forming puddles on the floor inside. Still, there's nothing like a good nor-west storm to make one appreciate a hut day with long naps and a 'Gourmet Gavin' lunch of tea, toast, fresh greens, avocado, cucumber, olives and fried tempeh. Long conversations too—sharing memories of people, times and places, both real and imagined. Our mutual lost friend Marty Schmidt is very present as we each recall our adventures with him.

There's a deep freeze overnight, and plenty of recently fallen precip—rain, sleet and snow—all frozen solid. The original itinerary for the trip had been to ascend from the hut to the col north-west of Mt Cooper, drop in to the head of the Mannering Glacier, exit via Starvation Saddle, and then head on over to Tasman Saddle. But the super icy conditions and cold, windy morning aren't favourable so we opt for one more descent to the Murchison Glacier, and then climb up to tag the Mannering Glacier via the col just to the west of Starvation Saddle. The NZAC pennant comes out again, and photos are snapped in a gusty whiteout.

We sidle to the Murchison headwall without losing any more height, and then carefully climb towards Tasman Saddle, with bulletproof ice making it a much more hazardous ascent than the one I remember from the skinny-ski days of 1986. It's wild and windy (over 100kph) on Tasman Saddle. We have a quick confab about whether to head to Kelman Hut or Tasman Saddle Hut. I visited the Kelman Hut site in 1986 when it was simply a foundation and some framing, and I haven't been back since.

Jill Kelman and I climbed together in the Darrans in 1978, Yosemite Valley in 1979, and Wales in 1980. For both of us it was an exhilarating experience to climb with another woman—pushing ourselves and each other, vying to take the harder leads, and developing our climbing independently for the first time, without the back-up of a stronger male climbing partner to take over when the going got tough. Jill and her partner





Nick Edge died on the Eiger not long afterwards, and Jill's family made a financial contribution towards the hut that bears her name.

Despite the desire to visit Kelman to honour of my memories of Jill, it seems more prudent to scurry down to Tasman Saddle Hut. Heads down, pushing into the wind, a sea of loose powder snow whirling past our ankles ... and finally, the short precipitous drop to the hut. We spend a cold afternoon in Tasman Saddle Hut with trepidation growing; it's a long way from Tasman Saddle to Plateau, and tomorrow will be our biggest day in terms of distance and climbing.

The forecasted perfect weather dawns as promised, with good firm

cramponing conditions and white ice all the way down to De la Beche corner. We turn off the Tasman's white ice here and cross the moraine to the confluence with the Rudolf Glacier. More memories surface when I look up the Rudolf towards Graham Saddle, which I crossed 40 years before, from the west in a whiteout and a nor-west storm, with a dramatic crevasse rescue after my climbing partner dropped through a snow-bridge into a huge hole high on the Franz Josef névé. But our objective today is the Forrest Ross Glacier, named for Malcom Ross's wife. The glacier tumbles precipitously from the east face of Douglas, high above. Many of the other smaller glaciers on the eastern flank of the divide have retreated high



## WE MARVEL AT THE MIRACLE OF SITTING AT 2700M WATCHING SURF BREAK ON THE WEST COAST

above the Tasman, but the Forrest Ross Glacier still has white ice showing where it joins the lower Rudolf Glacier.

Phase one of my climbing career involved lots of rock crags and big walls, general mountaineering and transalpine trips, but little technical ice. 'Right', says Gavin, 'you're going to learn to ice climb in 90 seconds'. A top-rope is set on a fin of ice, a quick demo from Gavin, and up I go—along with the NZAC flag to prove it. But now the fun is over, and there are still three kilometres of moraine to stumble across before it's time to start the ascent to the Freshfield Glacier. We negotiate moraine, scree, a tussock and alpine herb spur and, finally, reach the snow. It's a relief to be back in uphill-mantra territory after hours of uneven footwork. The sun is heading west, and after the heat and thirst of the moraine bash the glacier is in shadow and the air is cooling, but the snow is still soft and knee-deep. We join the upper Haast Ridge, then complete the final grind up the flank of Glacier Dome, and finally arrive at Plateau Hut.

When I climbed Aoraki Mt Cook in 2013 with Marty Schmidt, we entered and exited the Grand Plateau from Cinerama Col, and camped high under Bowie Ridge, so visiting the hut itself has long been on my bucket list. Gavin and I arrive at 8.00pm to a warm but empty hut, all its occupants having just fled in advance of the forecast storm. We spend a noisy night in the hut with the wind whistling in A minor, followed by a day of rain, sleet and snow. Our well-stocked box of fresh food provides distraction, along with more conversation. Gavin's approach to guiding



encompasses more than just the physical challenges, and there's plenty to reflect on and discuss: Vipassana meditation, psychosomatic therapy, and mindfulness—all topics a far cry from the practical, science-based world of my day job. There's the hut book to browse, but at Plateau it bears the names of too many ghosts—the sobering reality of mountaineering. Clarke Saddle, the next stage of our route, looms over the Linda Glacier, and adds to the trepidation quotient. There are only two days left on the trip, and unless we can move tomorrow we won't be able to complete our objectives.

The rain, sleet and snow abate at about 8.00am the next morning—too late to start a big day, and there is too much fresh precip for safe travel. What to do? Descend via Cinerama Col and finish the trip? Link up Cinerama Col with a Ball Pass crossing? Eventually we settle on Plan X: wait another day to let the new snow either avalanche off the risky slopes, or settle and consolidate, and then extend the trip by a day so we can complete the journey. My flight home from Queenstown is booked for 7.30pm on Christmas Eve, so we can do Plateau to Empress on the 23rd, and race out down the Hooker on the 24th.

The best fix for trepidation is action. The climb up the Linda Glacier with valley cloud below and dawn light above is a smooth ride compared to the crevasse maze I encountered in 2013. We're soon looking up at the approach to Clarke Saddle. We pitch four rope-lengths with firm front-pointing at first but by the last pitch the snow is softening in the morning sun. The divide is warm and sunny to the east, but still shadowy, icy and cold to the west. We descend to the La Perouse Glacier, and have a break to eat and drink, marvelling all over again at the miracle of sitting at 2700m watching surf break on the West Coast.

Now we are in tiger country! We need to traverse around the bottom of several rock ribs coming off Malaspina, Vancouver and Hicks. The La Perouse Glacier below Mt Vancouver is more broken than Gavin has encountered previously, and is scored by the debris from a very large and recent slab avalanche off the western flank of Vancouver. It all requires some trickery to navigate. There are seracs above us, which, along with the potential for more slab avalanches, keeps us moving. Amidst the maze of crevasses it's way too bright and very, very hot. We take a rest to eat and drink then all of a sudden convection cloud rises from the west, and

📷 Penny proudly displaying the NZAC 125th anniversary flag on Harper Saddle, the final objective of the journey.

📷 THIS PAGE The refuge of Tasman Saddle Hut—home for one night before Penny and Gavin undertook the biggest day of the journey, making it all the way to Plateau Hut the next day.



*TREPIDATION CAN BECOME INTREPID. IT IS POSSIBLE TO WAKE UP UNDER THE STARLIT SUMMIT OF AORAKI, AND GO TO SLEEP THAT NIGHT IN MY OWN BED ON THE SHORES OF THE MANUKAU HARBOUR*



within minutes it is snowing lightly. We climb to the spur off the north-west flank of Hicks, then make two 60-metre abseils to reach the snow slopes that lead up to Harper Saddle. Less than 200 metres of climbing and we are there, but by now all the views have disappeared, it's cold, windy and things have begun to freeze up. The NZAC 125th anniversary flag comes out for the last time before we make two abseils off Harper Saddle to the Sheila Glacier. I descend first on the second abseil and report that the schrund is small enough that Gavin can down-climb and step over it. There, through the shifting whiteout, is Empress Hut, but the big faces and the peaks are lost in cloud. We power-march to the hut and arrive just in time for the radio sched.

It's Christmas Eve. I have a plane to catch to get home in time for Christmas, so we get up at 2.00am and head down the Hooker. I do achieve my goal of seeing the peaks and big faces but only by starlight. We pass more landmarks: the Gardiner Hut site and Pudding Rock's perilous web of cables, which we follow down to where we make an over-hanging abseil to the glacier. White ice, moraine, the hours tick by, our feet are starting to feel it. Along the western edge of the Hooker lake, we

are discussing potential rockfall hazard from the moraine above us when there is a massive roar, and a large section of the cliff on the eastern flank of the lake collapses, sending a two-metre swell across the lake. Luckily we can scramble up the moraine as the surges wash up on our side. Had we been a few minutes further on we would have been at lake level, with the slope above too steep and loose to climb. The talk turns to alpine tsunami hazard.

Finally we reach the Hooker valley track—people, tussock, flowers, and smells other than those we have generated ourselves. It's a brilliant, picture-perfect day.

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Harper, Mannering and Ross founded NZAC 125 years ago, and the features that bear their names remind us of their legacy. Trepidation can become intrepid. It is possible to wake up in the morning in the highest building in New Zealand under the starlit summit of Aoraki, and go to sleep that night in my own bed at sea level amidst native bush on the shores of the Manukau harbour, home for Christmas. Such is the privilege of living in Aotearoa. Such is the privilege of the journey. ■

TOP Early-morning light on the Linda Glacier. BOTTOM LEFT AND RIGHT A guide and climbing partner's view—Gavin looking down the rope to Penny on the other end.