

AN ALPINE ADVENTURE at ARTHUR'S PASS

Climbing Rome Ridge and traversing to Avalanche Peak offers more challenging terrain and stunning views than the traditional summer routes up the mountain.



by PETER LAURENSEN

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Credit where it's due, the Met Service was on the money today," Joe said, as sleet surged towards us, shearing off the wall of cloud that engulfed Mt Rolleston to the north.

We'd covered about two-thirds of our 10km route, and if we'd departed an hour earlier we'd have squeezed in a nice summit view from Avalanche Peak.

In the steep country around Arthur's Pass, Avalanche Peak is the area's most popular alpine day trip. In summer, trampers use the Avalanche Peak and Scotts tracks to reach the summit. A more difficult but spectacular loop starts on Coral Track, a bit to the north of the township, traverses a knife-edge ridge to the peak and provides superb alpine views in every direction.

Climbing steep
frozen snow
and ice at about
1650m, on
Rome Ridge





Just like the tracks leading to Avalanche Peak, Coral Track is easily accessed from Arthur's Pass. But unlike well-trodden Avalanche Peak, which is the only summit route in Arthur's Pass that is poled all the way to the top, our route for the day was mostly defined by rocky ridge tops, offering more of an adventurous feel. While the route doesn't require the use of technical climbing gear, if the weather clags in then route finding can be challenging, and care is needed on several exposed sections.

With this in mind and the Met Service forecast showing deteriorating weather around midday, we chose to go anticlockwise: up the Coral Track to Rome Ridge then across to Avalanche Peak, to get the difficult sections done in calm weather.

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The route drops off Rome Ridge at 1700m, just before the next steep section

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From SH73 the track leads steeply and directly through beech forest. At about 1000m a break in the foliage provided a first glimpse back down the Bealey Valley. Soon after this we breached the bushline and Rome Ridge stretched before us as we climbed higher under a dramatically textured but ominous cloud ceiling.

I'd climbed Rome Ridge previously on the Coral Track en route to Mt Rolleston in full winter conditions, when a nice consolidated snowpack made for straightforward climbing as far as what's known as 'the gap' at 1860m. Climbing from that gap is deemed the crux of the Rome Ridge to Rolleston route, but this time we would veer off the ridge towards Avalanche Peak just after reaching the 1700m contour.



OFF the BEATEN TRACK

Access
Coral Track entrance from SH 73 (800m), Arthur's Pass Village

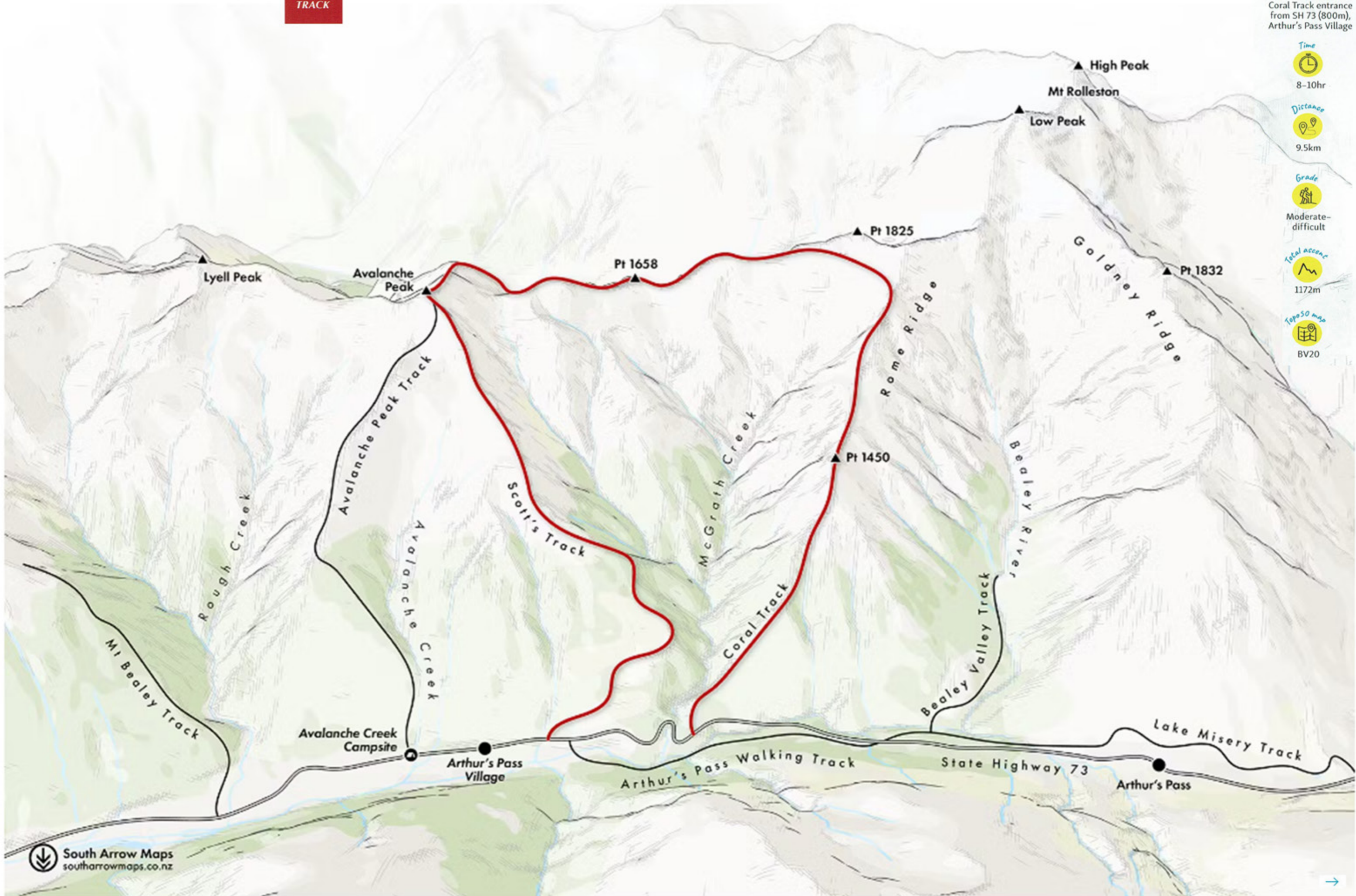
Time
8-10hr

Distance
9.5km

Grade
Moderate-difficult

Total ascent
1172m

Top50 map
BV20





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What confronted us at the end of a relatively flat, open section beyond Pt1450 came as a surprise. The route looked gnarlier than I remembered. A steep broken section of ridge, which was buried in deep snow on my last visit, was now coated in thin patches of ice. I wondered aloud if we would need ropes, but Joe said to back myself and go for it. After climbing through a puzzle of small, steep and exposed faces I was at the limit of my comfort zone before the angle eased off again, 70m higher up.

With dry rock, in summertime, it's a nice spicy scramble, but ice ensures the terrain should not be taken lightly. This was a good example of how different an alpine route can be as conditions alter.

Approaching 1700m, we searched for a weakness in the steep slope that dropped into a small snow basin above McGrath Creek. This would allow us to avoid a bluffy section obstructing the way directly off Rome Ridge onto the Rolleston-Avalanche Peak Ridge we wanted to follow south. Neither of us relished the thought of down-climbing what we'd just come up. Our urgency to keep moving increased a notch.

Once the ridge was gained, progress quickened on the open, undulating terrain. While the view behind was turning ugly, ahead Crow Valley stretched to the right (west) and Bealey Valley and SH73 to the left. Soon we passed the huge scree slope that gave access to Crow Valley, which looked like an exciting prospect for another day. Avalanche Peak was ahead but reaching it appeared to involve a climb over a high point before the base of the summit was reached. Later, we discovered that the high point can be bypassed by cutting left underneath it.

The snowy mound of Pt1658 was about halfway along, and beyond lay more front pointing to descend a steeper icy stretch, then another high point before the route to Avalanche Peak was revealed. About now, the sleet caught up with us. An easy upward traverse to the left on a snow slope ended in another surprise. I'd expected the snow to bring us onto the summit, but the way was barred by a tight-packed cluster of huge, craggy boulders coated in ice. This took care to pass through before we reached Avalanche Peak's 1833m summit. I'd been here before with Cathy, my partner, and shared the day with nine unruly kea.

The weather deteriorated steadily, and with wind gusts threatening to blow us over we headed down, one step at a time, to the shelter of the bushline 600m lower down. Despite having been in the vicinity of SH73 and Arthur's Pass Village all day, up on those rocky ridges in quickly changing weather conditions we'd still enjoyed a real taste of alpine adventure. **w**

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View south from Rolleston's ridge, with one more high point to pass before the climb to Avalanche Peak

Heading to the last high point before Avalanche Peak, hoping for the sleet to hold off a bit longer >

