



## KAHURANGI SPICE

### Traversing the Twins

words and images by PETER LAURENSEN

The shelf we needed to reach in order to continue towards South Twin was only metres away, but the void between us and it left me in no doubt 'Yep, lets rap this one Jim'. My companion Jim Davidson, one of fewer than thirty people to have ever climbed all of Aotearoa's 3000 metre peaks, could no doubt have free climbed it, but he patiently threaded the rope through the bolt fixed at the top of the drop. Adding to his climbing prowess, Jim also knew our route, having recently soloed it. So, even when the going got a bit spicy, being with him allowed me to fully enjoy unabashed 'type-one-fun' scrambling on an iconic Kahurangi route, in perfect autumn conditions.

We'd set off from Flora car park just after 8am, making quick progress up the Mt Arthur Track. Just beyond the junction with the Ellis Basin route a worn path headed beckoningly to the little saddle between Mt Arthur's imposing south face and the northern cliffs of Winter Peak. We both suspected that this led to a shortcut into the head of Ellis Basin, negating the need to climb over Mt Arthur. Up in the gap a stiff southerly blew. While Jim put on another layer, I dropped down scree to see if the route would go. 'Looking good, Jim.' Not long after, we emerged on sun-drenched tussock to the west of Mt Arthur. 'A couple of nice little moves there. I enjoyed that,' reflected Jim.

Ahead reared up the near vertical south face of Pt 1753. A sparsely cairned route passed beneath this on a narrow, sloping face of tussock and scree that dropped away steeply to the Ellis Basin. Beyond Pt 1753 the terrain broadened out a bit, providing a home to several beautiful tarns at about 1600m, offering a great camp site. As we proceeded, with North Twin now clearly in view, I pondered where the route to the top actually began.

The traverse above Ellis Basin from beneath Mt Arthur to the base of the North Twin summit route required some undulating to get around spurs and past bluffs, taking us about 2.5 hours. Upon reaching a point at 1600m directly beneath

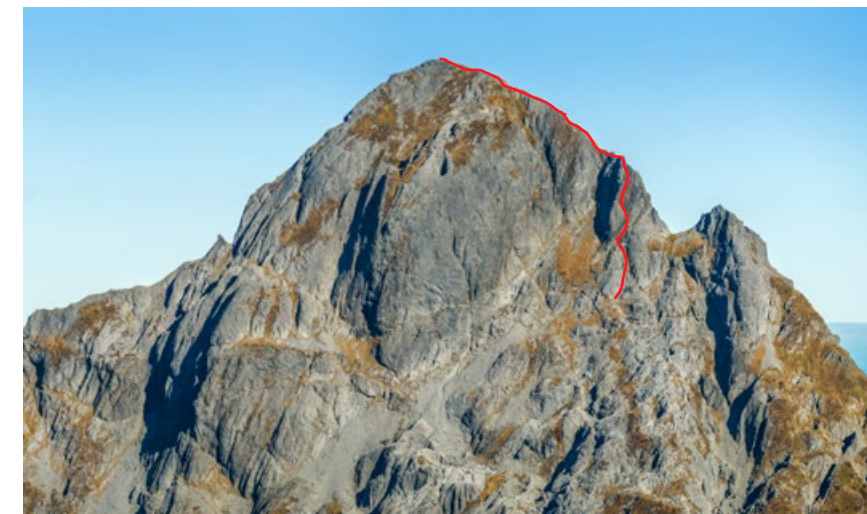
*Jim Davidson dropping west/right off North Twin to access a descent chute with a bolt at the top.*

North Twin I asked Jim to indicate our route of ascent. 'Straight up the base of that karst fan, then pretty much up the centre to the partly tussock-covered top. In there are the first bolts.'

The closer we got, the more comfortable I felt, although once into the climb I felt the exposure building at my back, though not enough to take up Jim's offer to get out the rope. Soon we reached the top of what had appeared to be a small subsidiary peak from below, but in reality was just a bump in the north ridge at about 1780m. This flattened out briefly, before the ridge broadened slightly but also steepened again as bald karst. Reflecting the lack of many positive holds, a gleaming silver chain lay invitingly on the karst, fixed to a bolt some 15 metres higher, where the gradient relented again below the summit.

Standing on top of North Twin six hours after leaving the car park, the simple joy of reaching our objective was intensified by the panoramas stretching out in every direction, sharpened by the crystal clear autumn air. Also, since shifting to Richmond in December 2022, I have gazed west almost daily at Wharepapa / the Arthur Range. Inevitably, my eye is drawn to the Twins, seemingly to challenge me at every glance. In contrast to my euphoria, I also felt deep sadness. Back in March 2023, Shaun Barnett and I had climbed South Twin and, hunkered down behind a boulder while sharing lunch and banter in swirling cloud, we'd vowed then to return to climb North Twin. Now, as I stood there on North Twin my dear friend, only 55 years old, lovingly supported by his family, courageously fought an inoperable brain tumour. I dedicate this account to Shaun.

Perhaps mercifully, the terrain between Jim and I and South Twin is not straight forward, demanding that my focus came back to the immediate challenge ahead. With only about four hours of daylight remaining, our plan was to bivvy in a cave between the Twins, accessed from the east side at about 1750m. About a decade ago a local climber, Tapawera-based electrician Tony Stephens, ingeniously set up a plumbing system in this cave. By collecting water draining from the cave's ceiling in a ceiling-suspended stainless-steel pan, feeding a hose, connected to a plastic container, he solved the water supply problem on the traverse. We set off, intrigued to see this setup.



ABOVE North Twin viewed from Pt 1732.



BELOW Jim Davidson traversing back towards South Twin after the second abseil.

Walking west from the summit, the ridge quickly narrowed again as it rolled off down towards a series of pinnacles between the Twins. It was extremely helpful to have Jim confidently picking the route because initially it dropped, somewhat counter-intuitively, down the north side. 'Ah, there's the bolt,' Jim reported, which was fixed at the top of a steep chute dropping about 20 metres to a cliff. This chute is free-climbable, but we had a rope and a bolt, so using them removed any prospect of a plunge over the cliff and was a pleasant mode of descent.

At the end of the chute, we turned sharp-right to find a bald and bulging section of karst, thankfully protected by another shiny silver chain, angling down to a small shelf above another ten or so metre drop with void-like exposure, hence my request of Jim to get the rope back out. This was the last time we'd need it on the traverse.

Now, finally, we changed course, back in the direction of South Twin—this time crossing another exposed karst face protected not only by a chain, but also a cable. For a climber of my humble abilities and ambitions, these forms of protection made the traverse entirely enjoyable. Without them I would surely have needed plastic undies. It's important to note though, that most of the protection along the traverse has been installed 'unofficially', so it can't be assumed that it will all remain in place.

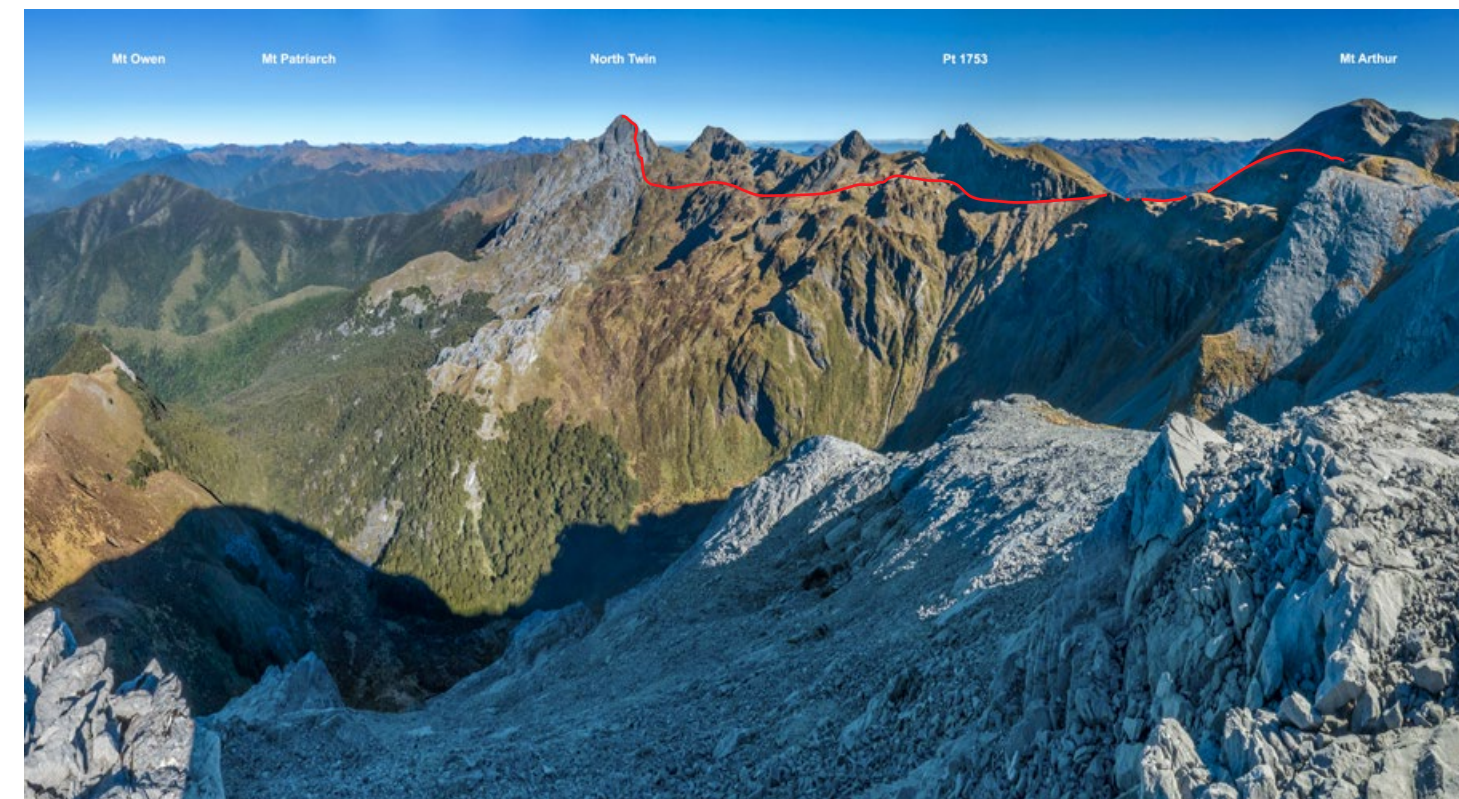
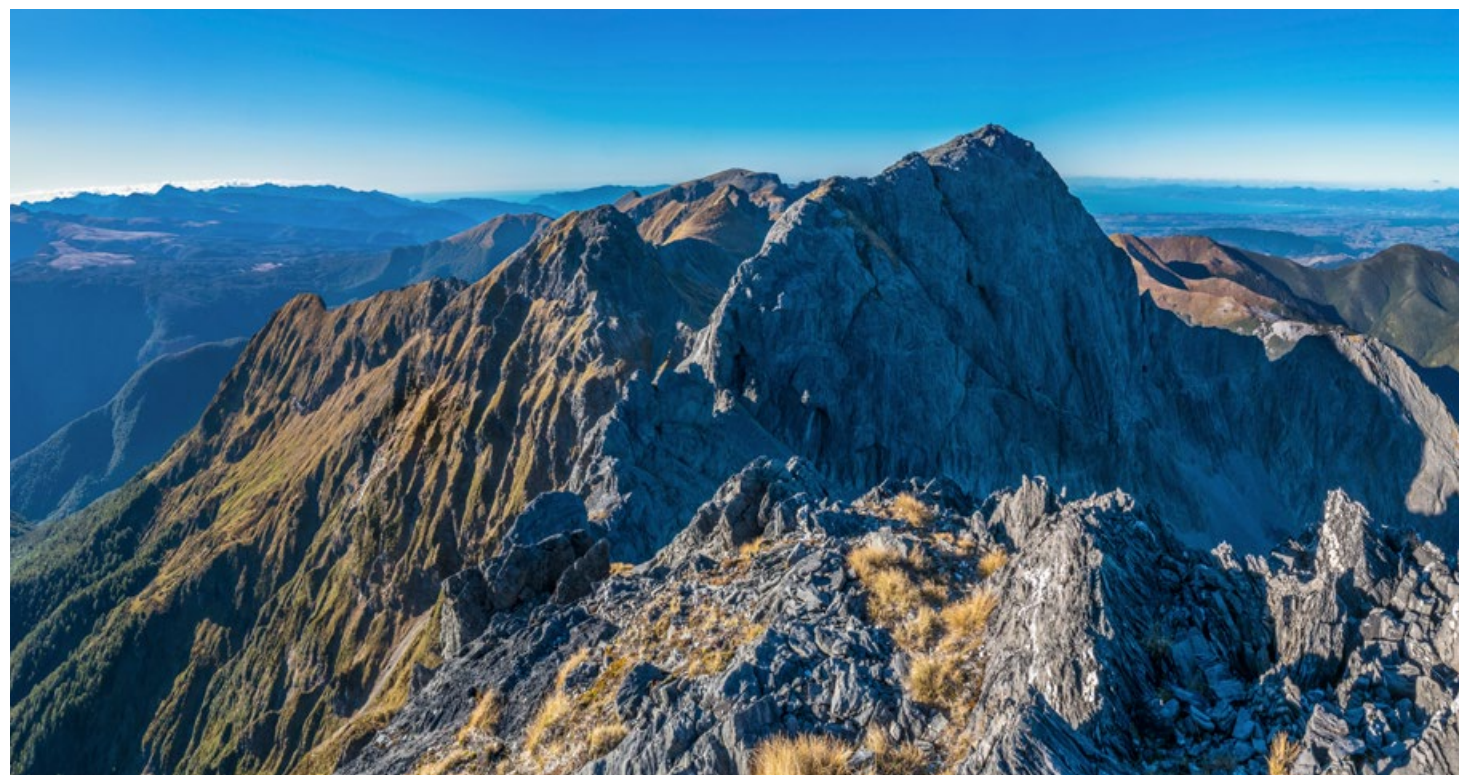
Beyond the chain and cable stretch, a notch of blue sky came into view, indicating where we had to cross from the west to the east. A small, slightly off-balance move got us up to the notch, where a shaded, chilly, but less formidable scree basin unfolded before us. We descended into this and traversed towards South Twin, which reared up as cliffs ahead. Before them Jim suddenly turned up and right, soon dropping his pack in the bivvy cave's vestibule.

What a great spot! Sure enough, Tony Stephens' plumbing system was in place, along with various fixed lines for hanging gear and so forth. The floor was remarkably flat, and roomy enough to accommodate perhaps three visitors, with another in the vestibule. And the view south-east from the cave was a pleasure to behold. I gave Tony a call following our return and his hot tip is to bivvy between November and February, because this is when the rising sun shines directly into the cave. As we gazed out, Jim verbalised what I had also been thinking. 'We could stay here and enjoy this spot, or perhaps we ought to push on and get South Twin done in these dry afternoon conditions.' I agreed. We still had a good three hours of daylight to play with and in several shaded spots along the route lay unthawed frost and ice. Encountering more of this next morning after a freeze, on the reputedly most treacherous section of the traverse, didn't appeal.

Shouldering our packs, we continued across the scree until the cliffs forced us up towards the 'Key Hole'. A short, steep scramble saw us in this memorable perforation in the karst ridge through which, down a steep groove, it led back to the western side. The groove was protected by another chain to prevent a fall off the cliff at the bottom of it.

Back in sunlight on spicy exposed terrain again, our route turned sharp-left into a very steep tussock and snowgrass basin. This was the stretch we preferred to cross now rather than the following morning. Even in the dry afternoon conditions, care was essential to avoid slipping. To exit the basin a rope had been fixed at a particularly steep spot. Beyond that, just around a spur, the final climb to South Twin appeared.

A summit view from South Twin (1796m) back northeast to North Twin (1809m).



A chute, of similar gradient to the one we'd rapped down on North Twin, led up about 30 metres to near the top of South Twin's north ridge. Climbing it was straightforward, apart from passing over a choke stone about halfway up. This had a bolt fixed in place providing a nice reassuring hand hold. Tony Stephens explained that there is an alternative more direct route from the Key Hole, straight up the east side of South Twin, that avoids the basin.

A view west from Pt 1732, across to Wharepapa / the Arthur Range and the route to and up North Twin.

We reached the summit of South Twin at 4pm. It had taken us two hours to get from one summit to the other. Now the autumn light was compromising me. With just two hours of daylight remaining, we needed to get down and through the karst labyrinth surrounding the base of the Twins before dark; but the photographic opportunities were tantalising.

Two hours later we found ourselves in pitch darkness on an excellent trail in the beech forest, about 15 minutes west of Ellis Hut. The blue marker poles expertly dotted along the route had allowed us to move quickly through the karst, but now in the forest it was time to get out our head torches. Instantly the forest lit up with tiny but unmissable light reflectors, also installed by the same people responsible for the blue marker poles. After a solid ten-hour day it was very pleasant to finish in such a civilised manner, with the prospect of a warm hut rather than a freezing cold bivvy.

That evening we mulled over our day's events and, now with more time on hand than expected, pondered a new plan for the next day. 'That hole in the ridge between the Twins was cool eh, Jim? How about we check out the other hole that you mentioned in the north-east ridge of Mt Arthur on our way out?' Jim was keen.

Next morning was another bluebird. As we climbed out of Ellis Basin, we enjoyed the sun lighting up the section of ridge between Mt Arthur and North Twin we'd traversed the day before. At about 1550m, as we were about to climb the scree towards Winter Peak, to our right Pt 1732 gleamed in the sunshine. I suggested that we go directly up there to check it out. 'I was just thinking the same thing,' replied Jim.

After enjoying more wonderful vistas we headed north along the ridge top towards Winter Peak and Mt Arthur. At a couple of points the hole we planned to visit, that is normally impossible to see from a distance, actually became visible. Soon after, Jim led me up a short steep cleft of scree on the east side of the ridge into the hole. Inside it was narrow, not much more than a metre wide, dropping first to an ominous black sink hole, before climbing back up to the western exit. Emerging back into the sunshine with a view to Gordons Pyramid and many peaks beyond seemed an ideal way to complete two days of Kahurangi spice.

North Twin is one of about 50 climbs Paul and Shelly Hersey are researching and testing out for inclusion in a new guidebook for new and emerging alpine climbers, and those who love to climb but aren't able to devote the time to building or maintaining the fitness and skills to safely undertake hard climbing; which describes many NZAC members. Look out for this much anticipated new guide's launch in 2025.