

M T R U A P E H U O V E R N I G H T

Alexandre Gendron is a French outdoor enthusiast and photographer who will be writing regularly for Adventure Magazine. English is his second language and we have chosen not to edit this too much for fear of losing the texture of his story, so don't be too hard on the grammar.

Words and Images by Alexandre Gendron

- First part: the night before, high winds and strong showers

It was 2 months since I landed in Aotearoa, New Zealand and visited every highest summit of the North Island except the highest one, Mount Ruapehu. Two days before I was to start this ascent, I was on Mount Taranaki's summit by night and enjoyed an incredible sunrise right behind Mount Ruapehu over a sea of clouds. I knew already that two days later I was going to hike on this majestic mountain and was so excited about it! Mount Ruapehu is the highest mountain and volcano on the North Island at 2797m high. At the summit there are a few glaciers and a lake right in the crater and the volcano is still active. For this adventure I was with a friend from Auckland and she had never climbed this mountain either. The night before this adventure it was really windy, foggy and rainy and we were hoping that the day after would be better.

- Second part: The way up until sunset

Wake up, no more fog so I'm going away to drink my tea on a rock in the middle of volcanic rocks. Unreal scenery! I like to spend some time with myself after waking up and feel the first sun rays of the day warming up my skin. No rush to be ready as the walk is supposed to be 3 hours. So we gonna start the walk around noon to be at the summit before nightfall. I don't really like to arrive too early at the summit. We pack our bags and check everything and at noon we start the hike from the base of the ski station. There are chairlifts working but I prefer to start walking as the walk is quite short.





strong winds can appear in a second. We decide to go sleeping in the hut. It looks like a long way to go but now we are at the summit, everything should be easier and quicker. Maybe not... We plan to reach the hut by walking along the ridge around the summit plateau. The sun is setting in few minutes and I decide to take a break to enjoy it. I boil some water to drink a tea while watching this stunning sunset over this sea of clouds with the top of mount Taranaki popping out of it.

As soon as the sun disappears behind the horizon, the air is getting instantly colder. It's time to put the jacket back on and as it is getting dark the headlights. This plateau is attracting me. As we walked on the ridge since the pinnacles, I want to try to cross the plateau instead to keep going on the edge. It was maybe not the best idea I've had.

• **Third part: The crater crossing and cliff climbing to rich the hut :** We start by sliding down a 100 meters slope covered by volcanic sand. It's like if you are skiing in virgin powder. We land on a glacier where a lot of small circular cracks are shaped by the winds. It's still bright enough to not turn on the headlights. And just when it started to become dark, a huge red full moon rose on the opposite side of the sunset. It's as if 15 minutes after the sunset we are experiencing a new sunrise. We keep walking and going from a glacier to volcanic sand, to a swampy river to cross then again volcanic sands. It's crazy how everything as close as that are so different. As we keep walking on the dark sand, I'm surprised by not falling down straight into a hole in the middle of the sand. I start to not feel very safe in this area

anymore and decide to walk quicker to reach the other side of the plateau as fast as possible.

What was looking like an easy cliff to climb from far away, looks really impressive as soon as we are at the base. There is not really any other options now we are here and I don't want to cross the plateau again. We start to climb this huge cliff. The slope is covered by volcanic sand and the angle is more than 45 degrees. Really difficult and we must zigzag to can climb it. We reach a point where it becomes impossible to keep going unless we find a rock to hold on to and walk very slowly to not slip on the sand. The progression is really slow but we are going to reach the last part made of big rocks that looks easy to climb so we keep hope. As soon as we reach the big rocks we feel relieved but those big rocks are all loose and it's even more dangerous than just the sand. 10 more meters to reach the hut. In the middle of the rocks where we have to try each of them before to use it as a handle, my friend is losing hope. She starts to freak out. That's comprehensible as if we make a mistake now, we can be seriously injured. I'm trying to help her to calm down and telling her to focus on her hands and avoiding everything else, just the hands. I realised that when you climb or explore and you don't feel comfortable anymore, if you focus on your breath and on your close area, instead of the big picture, every one of your fears just disappear. She calmed down and we finally reach the hut. What an alleviation.

The hut is finally not a hut but an equipment shed where is recorded the volcano's activity. There is a lot of black wires going from the shed and

disappearing under the ground. It looks serious. Luckily there is a small part of this shed we can access as an emergency overnight shelter.

• **Fourth part: The night next to the crater :** It's a really small shelter but we can fit 2 people. It's perfect to be sheltered from the wind and cook some noodles. After dinner I'm going out to take some photographs. The sky is almost clear. Just by the shed, there is the crater lake and I realise that I can hear bubbles popping. Here I can feel that the volcano is truly alive. The night is quiet and cold and my phone turned off during the night. The alarm didn't ring to be ready for the sunrise. Luckily I woke up by myself just on time to get a very colourful sunrise over the crater lake.

• **Fifth part: the way down :** For the way down, we chose to take the straight way. I don't know if we missed the track at some stages but we had to climb down some huge rocks to finally arrive on a very slippery icy snow area. We finally come back to the Whakapapa ski station after 3 hours.

It was a really cool trip and my friend made it really good even if she was really scary the hour before to start the hike and by night climbing the loose rocks but at the end she was feeling different and found herself more confident than before. That's the best effect of hiking!

Conclusion: Fear will make you create obstacles in your mind as there are not obstacles in the present moments. Instead of going forward you'll stay stuck in the present because of the possible obstacles you might meet.



After 1 hour we reach the top of the chairlifts and we saved \$30 each. Now the real adventure starts. We are facing two options. A straight walk to the summit or the pinnacles walk. I love pinnacles, it's often a really good place to take photos. The choice is easy to make. Even if the walk is easy and I'm used to carrying my 22Kg backpack and camera bag, I can feel my legs and butt burning at each step. We zig zag to reach the summit of the pinnacles. I go exploring the pinnacles and don't feel the void because of the clouds but I think that with clear weather there must be really impressive cliffs. We must keep going because the time is flying and this detour through the pinnacles is 2 hours longer than the straight way.

The track after the pinnacles starts to be more climbing than hiking. The rocks are impressive. They are big lava rocks really smooth and linear like big cubes tainted in blue and red. They look really solid. We reach the cloud line and that's funny to climb up and feels that it's warmer than at the base. We stop to take some photographs. I want to make a self-portrait on a rock a hundred meters from where we stopped. Just at the clouds line. I set my camera and start running without carrying any pack. I'm feeling very light and can jump easily from a rock to another despite the void all around me. I'm too far from the camera to use my wireless remote so I ask to my friend to click on the shutter. She pushes the shutter around 20 times because she was not sure if it was taking the photographs or not. Later on my computer, I realised that a timelapse would have been great to do as even with the 15 photographs, I can see the sea of clouds moving really fast and the effect looks awesome.

The final line to reach the summit is a nice climbing, with some very narrow parts. We meet two Germans going back down this way, they must have taken the easy and quick way to get up. It's a really nice loop and I don't regret a second my choice of the pinnacles detour. I am feeling very small walking and climbing this huge majestic volcano. We finally arrive at the summit before nightfall. From Tukino Peak (2720m) the clouds are lower than the summit plateau and the view is just breathless. So many things to see. Glaciers, a frozen lake, Volcano rocks everywhere... Just have a look at the photo. From here we can spot a hut on the opposite side of the summit plateau. If I have the choice between my tent or a hut, even if I love to sleep in my tent, I choose the hut. Especially at a summit of a mountain where



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