

Snowshoeing

Snow shoeing? What's that? Shoeing in your boots across mud, tussocks and snow, both hard and soft on short skis with crampons and a free moving heel to aid mobility. A relatively new recreational sport in NZ, my last effort being 50 years ago in USA.



Our new Penguin feet instinctively came into their element offering a new perspective in a winter wonderland up at 1500 metres with distant views of Lake Tekapo, the Godley River valley, Alps and Mt Cook. Awesome. Spectacular. Experienced by few NZers, let alone overseas tourists.

There were only 4 in our group after a Green MP and her party cancelled. Zaheer, an Indian born American working on a NASA project in ChCh for 2 months. Kate from Monck's Bay, myself and Stella, our guide from Alpine Recreation. It was fun company with many stories to share over these 3 days.

Having had an equipment and clothing check at HQ, Stella drove the van alongside the Lake on the access road past the modest Roundhill skifield where the American Olympic speed ski team were in summer training.

Then a slow 9km tramp carrying our backpacks, sheets, food, snowshoes & poles through flat farmland and uphill 500 metres to the Rex Simpson Hut at 1300m. This offered basic bunk-bed accommodation for 13, plus a snug for 2 emergencies, log burner, kitchen, self catering facilities, dining space, storage, access to stream and a separate long drop with open door views of the unfolding panorama. Solar lighting, CB radio & insulation added to the feeling of being safe and warm in this remote mountainscape wilderness, our home from home for these 3 days. All a tribute to the vision of Gottlieb and Anne Braun-Elwert, who opened up this wilderness area for others like us to enjoy.

Delighted to have reached the hut in four hours, had a cuppa, food and unpack. Then shoed uphill to the Snake Ridge and the Camp Stream saddle taking in views of the 27 km long lake and the surrounding Alps. Enjoyed the colour contrasts between the sparkling white



snow, clear blue skies, the lake's stunning blue rock flower from the glaciers, the dark mountains, the golden tussocks/'brown cows', the late afternoon sunset and rising moon the braided river valley and the changing cloud formations over the mountains.

The mood changed on the descent back to the hut to one of apprehension/fear. As our shoes broke through the soft snow and a leg might disappear for a moment. 'Don't walk backwards...keep your legs apart' warned Stella making us contemplate adding a Monty Python video to the Alpine Rec website. It didn't take long for the smell of the evening curry, the nips of Zaheer's whisky and the laughs from story telling around the table for us to relax again. Were we 'fit as a buck rat' as we 'wodged', 'stonkered' & 'boggled' the hours away? Finishing up with an early bed and sound sleep for our tired bodies and muscles.

Kate was up first to light the fire and boil the large urns of nearby stream water. After breakfast and a clean up, we were off uphill, a strong westerly in

our faces. Lighter day packs a joy to carry our packed lunch, water, suncream and cameras. Glad of windproof clothing, gaiters, goggles, scarf and gloves. A brief delay when Zaheer 'lost' his penknife and camera, every rock hole searched. Both miraculously found before we got back to the van the next day

Spirits lifted as the wind dropped, the sounds of crunched snow crisp under foot. Hares jumping freely over the snow, checking out their territorial boundaries Tracks from the last snowboarders and ski tourers still visible in the snow. The hardened snow cover reliably held our weight as we snaked up the ridge. Snow caves and overhanging cornices explored as the silent panorama unfolded.

We identified our Everest at the end of the ridge with our backs to the lake while Stella kept an eye out for any changing weather patterns over the 'Anteater'. The spectacular views were worthy of inclusion in any of Craig Potton's calendars. It turned out to be a perfect



\$1'000 day, more than we could ever have imagined. Shoeing ten km over six hours, firm underfoot, awesome in every way. Back in time for another tasty meal and another fun evening together.

Heavy overnight rain and poor visibility changed plans for day 3 revealing the urgent need for more snowfalls to extend the winter season here. So after a thorough clean up, we tramped back down the mountain to the van, through a thunder and lightning storm that even startled a passing wallaby. Our boots wet from wading through many small streams, feet sliding in the mud. We passed the next group of hut users, long touring skis on their backpacks. Our spirits were pleased not to have that wet uphill trek ahead of us! Instead, closer to a hot shower, change of clothing and that 3.5 hour drive back home where the landscape colours became so much sharper after the white snowmass.

So a wonderful trip leaving many happy memories of this alpine wilderness its beauty, changing moods and the privilege to spend time in its embrace. We tramped and shoed over 30 kms in those three days leaving me physically tired, but spiritually and emotionally inspired from seeing, learning and being in this special wild part of Godzone. I fully recommend snowshoeing to anyone wanting to free their spirits and experience life as a penguin, walking over snow in their own boots.



© Michael Earle
Personal 2015/23 Snowshoeing
20 August 2015

Taka (sleeping mat) Po (night): Tekapo = 'leave in haste at night'
Alpine Recreation: www.alpinerecreation.com