



AAC Publications

The Southern Alps Enchained

New Zealand, Southern Alps

Hamish Fleming traversing over Malaspina (3,042m) at sunset. Photo by Alastair McDowell

The concept of linking multiple summits in an “enchainment,” birthed in the European Alps, has become increasingly popular. In 2015, Ueli Steck completed a 62-day enchainment of the 82 4,000m peaks in the European Alps, traveling between mountain ranges by bike and descending from some summits by paraglider. More recently, Nirmal Purja’s fast enchainment of the world’s 8,000m peaks in a little over six months—albeit with extensive use of air transportation—has refreshed the idea in the public consciousness.

This style of mountaineering is well suited to New Zealand’s Southern Alps, where individual peaks require only a few days of effort at a moderate altitude, but they can be linked to create a much longer expedition. New Zealand has 24 named peaks above 3,000m, the majority clustered around Aoraki/Mt. Cook, with access to Tititea/Mt. Aspiring 175 miles by road to the southwest. For most New Zealand mountaineers, completing the 24-peak list is a lifetime goal. Only two parties have completed all 24 peaks within a single climbing season, with multiple trips in and out of the mountains: Russell Brice and Paddy Freaney in summer 1976–77, and Erica Beuzenberg and Gottlieb Braun Elwert in the winter of 1989.

My hope was to link all 24 summits in a continuous human-powered effort. For the attempt, I teamed up with Hamish Fleming, a Queenstown-based adventure racer who had only moderate mountaineering experience but exceptional fitness and stamina.

Enchainments like this first require an interesting problem-solving stage, searching for an efficient route to link up all the peaks. Our approach was to start the expedition in the Copland Valley, nearly at sea level to the west of Aoraki/Mt. Cook, cross onto the upper Hooker Glacier, traverse over to the Fox and Franz Josef glaciers, before weaving back via the Tasman Glacier and Grand Plateau, bagging peaks all along the way. We’d then cycle to Mt. Aspiring National Park to finish. We divided the route into seven phases, caching food at five alpine huts around the park, which would also provide shelter from the regular storms that batter the Southern Alps. Some peaks were climbed in long day trips from huts; others involved multi-day ridgeline traverses (the Hicks-Haast traverse entailed 11 peaks over two days).

We started the enchainment on November 13 and emerged from the Aoraki/Mt. Cook National Park after climbing the first 23 peaks on December 10. This was a moment we had visualized for months, and the three-day bike ride toward Mt. Aspiring (3,033m) gave us time to reflect on what we’d experienced.

What attracted Hamish and me to this adventure was much more than ticking off a list of summits—it was the transalpine nature of the journey through beautiful, isolated places. We were committed to completing the trip in a continuous push, embracing all of the mountain’s moods. Although there were four major storms during the month, each lasting several days, weather windows always seemed to work in our favour. We experienced magical moments, like gazing up at the huge bulk of La Perouse (3,078m) from the remote Strauchon Valley and falling off the edge of the map into the Times Glacier, with Mt. Elie De Beaumont (3,109m) looming above. Deep physical and mental fatigue, sleep deprivation, and dubious weather challenged us as we sought to complete the final peaks with our days running out.

On December 12, 30 days after starting, we summited Tititea/Mt. Aspiring. We felt very fortunate to succeed at our goal of climbing all 24 peaks by human power. Over the course of the month, a total of 160 miles of mountaineering and 175 miles of cycling were covered, with 67,000' of elevation gain.

In a time when travel opportunities for overseas expeditions are complicated by the pandemic, enchainments can provide the mountaineer with interesting expeditions in their local mountain ranges, where the journey through the landscape is equally as important as the summits themselves.

– **Alastair McDowell, New Zealand**

Images



Hamish Fleming makes a committing leap over the Copland River on day six of the 30-day enchainment. Five preplaced caches and use of huts lightened the climbers' loads, but only so much.



McDowell (left) and Fleming setting out on their 30-day journey—in the rain, naturally.



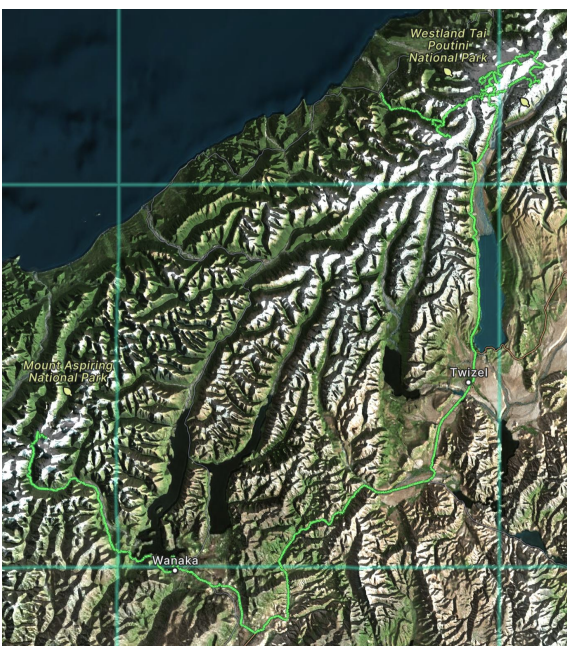
Fleming and McDowell on the summit of Tititea/Mt. Aspiring, the final summit.



On the summit of La Perouse (3,078m).



Hamish Fleming traversing over Malaspina (3,042m) at sunset on the Hicks-Haast segment of the enchainment, during which 11 peaks were summited in two days.



Overview map of the 30-day enchainment of the high Southern Alps, with 23 of the peaks in the north

and Tititea/Mt. Aspiring three days away by bike to the southwest.

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