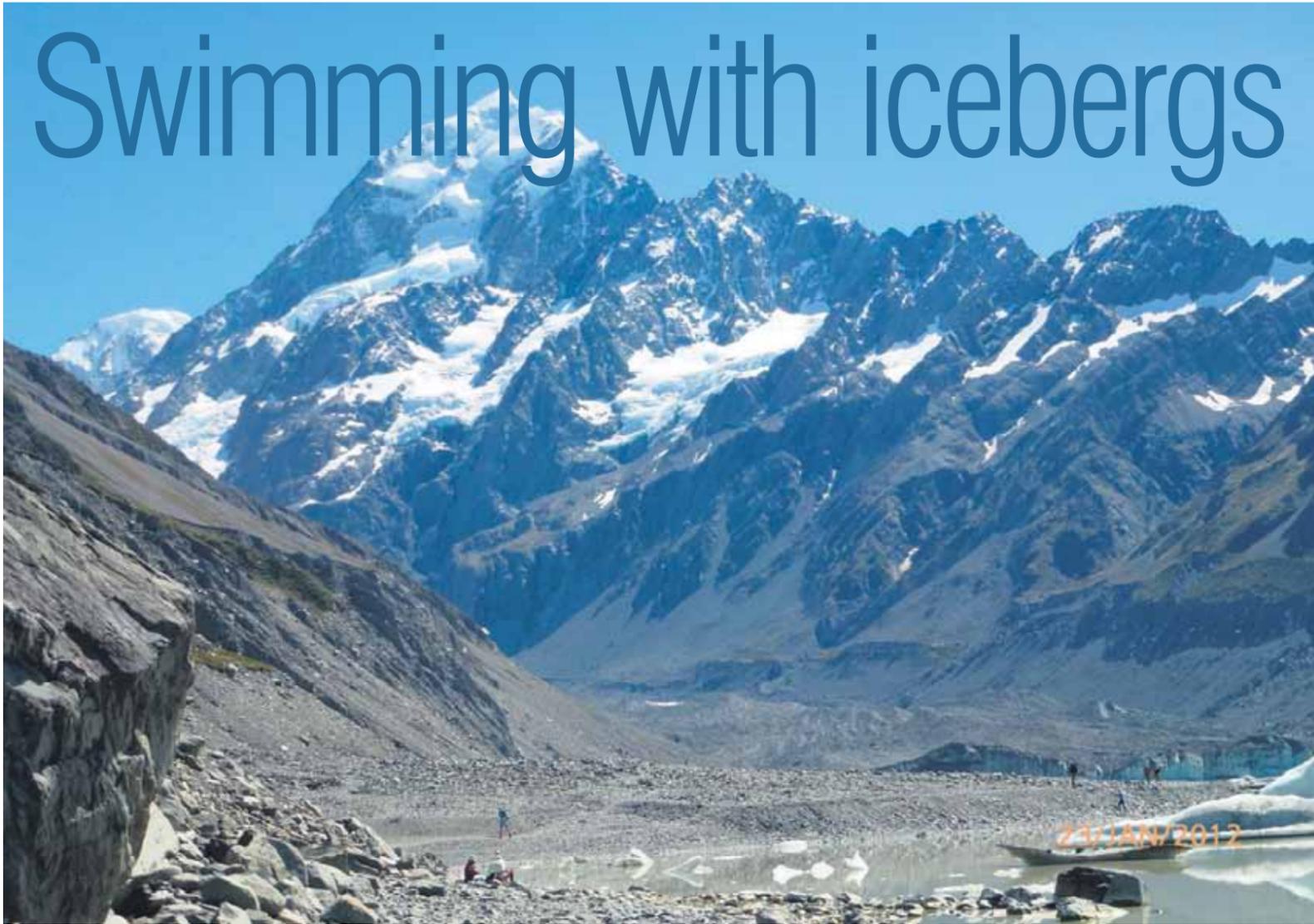


TRAVEL

Swimming with icebergs



Even Japanese ladies in high heels and Aussies in jandals can manage this alpine trek . . . Chris and Justine Tyerman find one of the only flattish walks in the Mt Cook National Park.

Aoraki-Mt Cook — the Cloud Piercer — with the Hooker Glacier and lake full of icebergs at the foot of the mountain.



Chris with Mt Cook in the background and Hooker Glacier lake on the right. Pictures by Justine Tyerman



Our mountain-view "suite" at Glentanner Camping Ground.



A "poodleberg" in the Hooker Glacier lake.

The DoC man at the information centre gave me a peculiar look when I asked about flat walks in the area.

"I don't really do hills," I said to the impossibly fit young fellow who looked as though he could sprint up Mt Cook before morning tea.

Without displaying too much overt disdain at having to tear himself away from a real McCoy mountaineering pair with crampons and ice-axes who were seeking advice before setting off to tackle Caroline Face, he indicated that inferior species such as ourselves might like to attempt the hike up the Hooker Valley — apart from the walk from the carpark to the Hermitage, this was one of the few flattish walks in Mt Cook National Park, which was, by definition, rather more full of mountains than flat places.

Ignoring his scorn, we laced up our tramping boots, took up our day packs, grasped our walking sticks and headed for the track. We might have been mere day hikers but we were keen to look the part in this hearty alpine environment . . . as opposed to the Japanese ladies with their parasols and high heels and the Aussies in their jandals.

We passed a sobering memorial to all those who had died climbing the peaks in the park, crossed a couple of swing bridges, skirted around a cliff face on a well-formed track with safety rails, ambled up a valley with a profusion of wild flowers and along a board walk to protect the delicate eco-system, over a rise . . . and then quite suddenly, we were in the presence of the almighty, Aoraki, the Cloud Piercer — although there were no clouds to pierce that day.

No matter how often you view her and from what angle, Mt Cook is a stunner. I had an overwhelming sense of spiritual ownership that

Maori talk of when they refer to their maunga, their mountain, in whakapapa.

There are few places in the world where you can walk right to the bottom of the country's highest peaks in an hour or so without guides, oxygen and a team of sherpas or yaks carrying your life's necessities for the next month.

Sitting at the foot of our mountain, eating lunch in T-shirts and shorts on a clear summer day, we watched a group of elderly German hikers peel off, fold and carefully place every item of their clothing on a rock before donning swimsuits for a dip in the Hooker Glacier lake, complete with icebergs.

Hmmm . . . swimming with the icebergs. Not likely to catch on in a big way, but a fascinating spectator sport all the same. Pretending the water was not ridiculously cold seemed to be part of the ritual which they had evidently performed many times before around the world.

As the only non-German, non-swimmers in the immediate vicinity, we were asked to be official photographers of the event.

Sadly we never thought to record the surreal sight on our own camera.

We couldn't drag ourselves away from the national park that day and decided to pitch our wee tent just down the road at Glentanner camping ground where we watched the sun drop behind Aoraki's massive bulk turning the snow-capped peak from gold to pink and crimson.

The view from our tent awning was far superior to even the best suite at the Hermitage which gave us a smug sense of satisfaction . . . along with the exhilaration of having climbed to the dizzy height of at least 150 metres on our eight-kilometre flattish walk.



Aoraki-Mt Cook at sunset.

Pictures by Justine Tyerman