

# ON A HIGH

Hikers dwarfed by the immense size of Franz Josef Glacier.



*Justine Tyerman gets up close and very personal as she explores the chilly intestines of the Franz Josef Glacier/Ka Roim*

**S**huffling along inside a deep crevasse on a glacier moving at the rate of one to two metres a day is not for the faint-hearted . . . so I wondered what the heck I was doing there. The crevasse was so narrow our booted, cramponed feet had to do the pinstep — taking tiny steps, moving one foot forward and then bringing the other one up behind it, not ahead of it while rotating the upper body 180 degrees to be slim enough to squeeze along the gash in the glacier.

It was a surreal and slightly unnerving experience, exploring Franz Josef's chilly blue-white marble intestines.

The occasional distant cracking sound did nothing to allay my fears of becoming a human sandwich inside two enormous slices of ice.

But our guide Tim Bluett was a safety fanatic who constantly checked our crampons, redrilled ice screws, tested fixed lines and kept us strictly to the track, so he inspired our confidence.

And as we climbed higher, I was so mesmerised by the maze of crevasses,

bizarre ice sculptures and sharp peaks like stiffly-beaten egg whites, I completely forgot to be nervous.

At the highest point of our climb, "the Pinnacles", we could see into the most dramatic, active zone of the millions-of-years-old mighty river of ice as it strained and fractured, grinding its way down the valley.

Apart from his impressive prowess at wielding a hefty ice axe and shovel, Tim was also a veritable font of knowledge. As we gazed at the dazzling landscape, he told us all about the Franz Josef, the world's steepest and fastest-flowing commercially-guided glacier.

It descends from a height of 3000m above sea level to 350m in as little as 11km, moving at a rate of one to two metres a day in the winter and three to four metres a day in the summer.

The Franz Josef is New Zealand's fourth largest glacier. It's also one of the most accessible glaciers on the planet, terminating in lush rainforest at 350m above sea level, just 18km from the sea.

Despite advances in 1983 and 1999, overall, the glacier has retreated about

three kilometres since the late 1880s. Since 2008, it has been in major retreat mode, losing 800 metres in length.

In 2012, a dramatic change occurred. A hole in the ice resulted in the loss of over 250m from the terminal face in just over 12 months leaving it unstable and unsafe for hiking. Helicopters are now the safest way to explore this awe-inspiring natural phenomenon.

After a spectacular afternoon on the ice, the choppers returned and whisked us back to Glacier Guides' Base facility where we soaked in hot pools surrounded by rainforest and birdsong, the perfect finale to an unforgettable day.

**FACTBOX:**

- Justine Tyerman did the four-hour Franz Josef Glacier Explorer heli-hike expedition and visited Glacier Hot Pools and Spa courtesy of Ngai Tahu Tourism [www.ngaitahutourism.co.nz](http://www.ngaitahutourism.co.nz) who own Franz Josef Glacier Guides NZ [www.franzjosefglacier.com](http://www.franzjosefglacier.com)
- JUCY Rentals provided land transport. [www.jucy.co.nz](http://www.jucy.co.nz)
- Air New Zealand flies direct from Auckland to Queenstown [www.airnewzealand.co.nz](http://www.airnewzealand.co.nz)

