

A cloud-piercing skiing freefall

BY BRENDA WEBB | PHOTOGRAPHY PETE OSWALD

In the early hours of last November 1, while most of us were sleeping, Marlborough free-skier Pete Oswald and his old Bohally school chum Neil Williman set off on the adventure of a lifetime.

Along with mates Jeremy Lyttle from Geraldine and Simon Reeves from Canterbury, they aimed to climb Aoraki/Mt Cook with the intention of skiing down the unforgiving east face – a feat accomplished by just a handful of brave and hardy adventurers.

Such an extraordinary act of ski-mountaineering carries a high risk of failure – as the group were well aware. “You can’t afford to make any mistakes,” says Pete. “Basically, if you fall then you fall to your death. So many things have to line up for a climb/ski descent like this to work, and we suddenly had the weather window we wanted.”

The climb wasn’t straightforward – difficult icy and rocky terrain just off the saddle had the four briefly thinking they might abort. Tenacity prevailed and the team reached the summit just before 9.30am, then skied off the top for a spine-tingling seemingly vertical 1600m descent.

“Yeah it was one of the coolest things I’ve done – I guess it’s the pinnacle,” says Pete. “It was a lifetime dream for all of us.”

Growing up on a remote Marlborough farm under the shadow of Mt Tapuae-O-Uenuku with outdoors-loving parents meant Pete was always going to embrace a busy and active lifestyle.

Above: Pete Oswald and Neil Williman at Aoraki

Opposite page : From top to bottom – Jeremy Lyttle, Simon Reeves & Neil Williman at Aoraki; Pete Oswald on the slopes at Aoraki; Neil Williman and Simon Reeves; Simon Reeves & Jeremy Lyttle taking a break at Aoraki

A keen and skilled skier from an early age, he became a free-skier professionally after leaving school and has spent his adult life skiing and alpine climbing in New Zealand and internationally.

He and wife Sophie Stevens chase the snow around the world and Pete supports his lifestyle with a tandem profession of media producer, plus carries an impressive list of sponsors including Icebreaker, Torpedo7 and Planks Clothing.

Ready for the big one

In 2017 Pete and Sophie climbed Mt Tapuae-O-Uenuku, biking to the base and back from Blenheim first, following in the footsteps of Mt Everest legend Sir Edmund Hillary (*Wild Tomato*, June 2018).

Aoraki would inevitably be a target at some stage, although this was strictly for those with plenty of high-alpine skiing and mountaineering experience. His companions were carefully chosen.

“People dynamics are critical – you need a team and you need to select who you go into the mountains with,” says Pete. Between them the four have a wealth of experience. Pete and Jeremy are regular ski/alpine buddies and were the first to ski the south face of a mountain near Queenstown, Mt Aurum.

Ex-Marlborough boy Neil, who now lives in Austria where he combines engineering with professional skiing, comes with impeccable pedigree. His father Brin, who lives and works in Blenheim, climbed Aoraki three times via different routes.

Pete says a ski descent was a long-held ambition and when Neil was home late last year for two weddings (including Pete and Sophie’s), a patch of good weather compelled them to go for it. “You have to be in to win,” he says.

“Very few people have skied off the summit and done the full descent.”

PETE OSWALD

Such climbs are not done without plenty of preparation and planning, although weather is the key factor. “We do alpine trips all the time so we have our kit ready and just tweak what gear we will take,” Pete says. “Most of the planning is around the weather and avalanche risk, and while you can get information remotely, much of it can’t be done until you are standing at the bottom of the face.”

Pete says chatting with other climbers – four other groups were on the mountain at the time – is invaluable, and they also “had a poke around on the face” the day before the climb.

“While you have a bit of an idea of the avalanche risk from avalanche forecasting, weather, wind-loading and temperatures, you don’t know the face stability until you dig in on that particular area and inspect the snow layers,” he says.

Most climbers opt for the Linda Glacier route but this group preferred the east face. “It’s a good-looking face, aesthetically pleasing but technically challenging – very few people have skied off the summit and done the full descent,” says Pete. “Most ski from a bit further down due to the tricky terrain.”

As well as the risk of avalanche, there were crevasses and three different bergschrunds (deep clefts where glacier ice separates from firm ice above) to negotiate. Only when these were all determined to be traversable did the group commit to the adventure.

Roping together shunned

The climb was challenging in itself, with the group wearing high-tech alpine touring ski-boots fitted with crampons, and carrying skis on their backs plus ice axes tethered to their harnesses. They didn’t rope together due to the risk of one faller taking the rest of the group with him.

The ascent was partly in “super-deep” snow and with temperatures in the -20deg range the four were confident the snow would stay cold, soft and stable. Such conditions make it less dangerous than sheet-ice conditions, in which “you could slide to your death,” says Pete pragmatically.

Just before the saddle the group encountered “super-steep, rocky and icy conditions on an extremely exposed face”, and they weren’t sure if they would be able to pass. They were delighted when they did. “It meant the ski down was a goer as we’d checked out the route on the way up.”

Once they’d reached the summit there was no time to celebrate as the wind gusts were so strong. Pete had to lie flat and dig in his ice axes to stop being blown off. “It wasn’t a place to linger.”

Jeremy was the first to ski off, mainly because he is a qualified guide and his knowledge of avalanche stability was the best in the group. Each section was skied one by one to a place where the group could regroup safely.

Pete says the descent down the east face was done in four to five sections of a few minutes each. While the climb up took nearly nine hours, the ski down to the Grand Plateau glacier below took just 15 minutes.

The friends spent two more nights at Plateau Hut before finishing their descent down over steep, exposed rock scree to the Tasman Valley floor. Pete says that terrain was almost as difficult to negotiate as the deep snow further up.

Lifetime mission achieved but you can guarantee more adventures are on the horizon.



Photo: Neil Williman



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