



MELTING MOMENTS

A woman in love, writer Sarah Bennett goes beyond the barriers and stands on Franz Josef glacier.

Photo: KELLY LYNCH

Conquering her fear and discomfort, Sarah Bennett finds new respect for the West Coast's glaciers.

I've read *Touching the Void* and watched *North Face*, so I know mountains are cold and dangerous. Sure, I'm a trumper, but I'm into golden meadows and modest peaks in perfect summer conditions.

The icy stuff, requiring crampons and an ice axe, is as alien to me as the Moon. This year, however, I took a couple of wee walks on the ice.

The Franz Josef and Fox glaciers are places I've visited many times. My survey of the glaciers has been limited to the view behind the rope barriers at the end of the popular walkways.

To go beyond the rope, you have to be guided on a glacier hike. I took a half-day hike with Franz Josef Glacier Guides, which begins with a walk through the rainforest before

FRANZ JOSEF & FOX GLACIERS

Forming part of the South Westland World Heritage Area, the Fox and Franz Josef are the longest of the West Coast glaciers, at 13 and 12 kilometres, respectively. Often touted as the most accessible glaciers in the world, they terminate among temperate rainforest just 250 metres above sea level. These mighty moving rivers of ice drop almost 3000 metres, or a little under 10,000 feet, on their journey from the Main Divide to the Tasman Sea, about 30km away. Glacial advance and retreat are held in delicate balance by the accumulation of snow gained in the upper slopes and ice melting lower down. Since the mid-1960s, both glaciers have been advancing, and at 10 times the speed of other valley glaciers around the world.

entering the no-go zone of the moraine-strewn valley.

Booted and suited, our 20-strong group clunks along with our guide. The closer we get to the terminal face, the bigger the glacier appears. As we reach the ice and strap on crampons, I feel a frisson of excitement at exploring this new terrain.

Our guide whips out his ice axe and chips steps for us to ascend. Surely with tens of thousands of tourists traipsing around here each year, including the groups we can see ahead of us, the track would be reusable? Not so. The glacier is highly dynamic. Although two track-cutters are sent up each morning, ad-hoc chipping is still required to help us with our foothall.

These skillful efforts allow an easy clamber on the ice, as we take in a fairly small circuit among crevasses.

I feel more at ease with each crunching step, and frequent pauses allow plenty of time to marvel at the surrounds. It calls to mind an old fellow I met on the Southern Crossing, with whom I was discussing the merits of skiing. "It's not about the skiing," he said. "It's about being on the mountain." I feel the same sense of Zen here.

I'll never climb Mt Cook. The only way I'm getting to the tops is by air. Fortunately, my favourite flying omen is in evidence at Fox: blue skies and no wind. I take my seat in the helicopter and breathe deeply.

In the air, I find myself distracted from the mechanical vibrations knacker my chakras. We climb the glacier, which appears bigger and bigger the higher we go. Little people are dotted below, hiking around the ice maze. That was me, but now I'm flying.

At the top of the glacier, we

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soar over Frenchay Col to the Malte Brun range, carved out by the Tasman and Murchison glaciers that appear beneath us. The view is filled with rivers of ice between countless snowy peaks against a backdrop of bright blue. As the whole scene struggles to fit in my brain, it squeezes out a few tears of joy.

I pull myself together to disembark on the perma-snow of the Liebig Ice Dome. We are at 2300 metres and Mt Cook and Mt Tasman seem so close, although their pinnacles are almost 1000m higher. Back in the helicopter, we swoop close by them, before heading back over the ridge and down the glacier again. It's a whole different view. The icy white glacier gives way to the rocky river valley, before it spills on to the lush plains around Fox township. We land, and I think I'm in love. I'll never be able to look at the mountains the same way again.

GETTING THERE

- Franz Josef Glacier Guides' half-day guided glacier walk (four to five hours) costs \$123. franzjosefglacier.com
- Fox Glacier Guiding's half-day guided glacier walk (four to five hours) costs \$99. foxguides.co.nz
- Mountain Helicopters' 30-minute Mt Cook & Fox Glacier flight (with snow landing) costs \$260. mountainhelicopters.co.nz
- DOC glacier walkways: doc.govt.nz