

» OUR OWN  
BACKYARD

# Among Hine's frozen tears

LIZ LIGHT goes glacier walking in Westland.



Lilliputian feeling: Walking around razor walls and slender pinnacles of ice.

Photos: LIZ LIGHT

I'm snaking my body into a skinny fissure in a translucent blue mountain of ice. There are tonnes of the stuff above, below and all around. The light inside the ice cave is eerie blue and beautiful, but my pulse rate only returns to normal when I'm out the other side with sky above.

It's another world up there, high on a creeping creaking glacier. Squeezing through ice caves and crevasses is thrilling as is inching between just-frozen lakes and ice cliffs and climbing steps cut into near vertical walls of ice.

The West Coast glaciers, and there are two close to each other – Franz Josef and Fox – are unique in the world in that they begin high in the mountains and fall steeply 2600 metres over 13 kilometres to finish in lush rainforest. They are also unique in that they are advancing, in these times of receding glaciers and global warming. This, the guide explains, relates to intersecting weather patterns from hot, dry Australia and cold

Antarctica meeting above the West Coast and dumping an increasing amount of snow on the west side of the Southern Alps.

But the Maori explanation of their present advancement is that broken-hearted Hine Hukatere is weeping more; these glaciers are her frozen tears. Hine loved climbing these mountains and persuaded her lover Wawe to climb with her. He, less experienced, was caught in an avalanche and swept to his death and Hine still cries for him.

Maybe Hine also weeps for others who have died on these glaciers. In 2009 two brothers went behind the barrier at the face of Fox Glacier and were crushed by 100 tonnes of falling ice. And today's guides are on the look-out for Tom Christie, a guide who fell into a crevasse in 1935, and whose body was never recovered. He's due to make an appearance at the bottom of the ice flow any time soon.

The glaciers are not dangerous if those wishing to explore them wear appropriate clothing and take the recommended precautions. Franz Josef Guides and Fox Guides both offer half-day and full-day walks, and guided heli hikes for those who want to splash out. I choose the full-day hike on Franz Josef, to get high up the glacier, into the pristine blue and white ice.

A day on Franz Josef is a serious body-warming walk, and wearing boots with spiky metal



crampons attached doesn't make for sprinting, but it's worth the huff and puff. The high heart of the glacier is fabulously sculptural and I feel Lilliputian strolling through a giant fantasy of pinnacles, shimmering walls, slender crevasses, rounded caves and duck-egg lakes.

Towards the end of the day, just before the long slog down the glacier face to the carpark, the young gung-ho people in the group, egged on by each other and the guide, strip off to their undies and swim in an ice lake. It's cold enough for the guide to

break the ice with his axe and seems a gasping, breathless and shrivelling experience. It's accompanied by cheering, from the rest of us, and photos to prove they did it.

❑ **Glacier walk:** Either [franzjosefglacier.com](http://franzjosefglacier.com) or [foxguides.co.nz](http://foxguides.co.nz)

❑ **Accommodation:** Franz Josef, Te Waonui Forest Retreat, award-winning, feeling of being immersed in the West Coast rainforest while being luxuriously comfortable, [scenicotelgroup.co.nz](http://scenicotelgroup.co.nz)

**Ice-lake dip:** A breathless, gasping experience.

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