



## RE-WRITING THE RULES

*Women in high places*

*words and photographs by OCEAN BELCHER*

Standing on the curb in Auckland wearing ripped jeans and a floral t-shirt, I wait for Jim to pick me up for the NZAC Snowcraft course. I'm like a pack mule, weighed down with way too many bags, and yet also fear I'm underdressed for the occasion. My suspicions are confirmed as Jim rolls up in his technical outdoor clothing and a Landrover Discovery, still caked in mud from the last adventure. He has a boot full of ice tools and a bunch of survival gear. I'm way out of my depth, but there's no turning back now.

We power towards Tukino, and my bones are rearranged in the backseat as we tackle the 4WD access road. Snow is falling heavy and horizontal thanks to the wild winds Ruapehu delivers. Streaming across our view, illuminated by headlights, the snow looks like white noise on an old television set. They don't call this 'the Wild Side' for nothing. Once kitted out

in full outerwear and crampons, the team unload the vehicles, a human chain ensuring no one gets blown away. I witness this hilarious battle between man and nature, and acknowledge that this mountain is the ideal training ground for alpine newbies.

More so, it's the ideal training ground for the 12 empowered ladies who joined the NZAC Snowcraft course in a bid to become autonomous in the mountains—no longer wanting to rely on their male counterparts. This is the first year in Club history that female participation in this course has outnumbered males, and the sense of camaraderie as a result is unbeatable.

We may not have looked like the amazing #ClimbingBabesofInstagram, with their sponsorships, amazing tans, and toned physiques. We might have even seemed a little unorthodox in our mismatched

The summit plateau of Mt Ruapehu, with steaming crater lake.

gear, crooked helmets, and the odd mascara streak. But there we were, filled with an abundance of stoke, enthusiasm, and pocketfuls of snacks. It couldn't have been a better learning environment.

Surrounded by new female climbing partners, I felt more willing to ask questions, admit when I didn't know everything, and let my fears be heard when stepping outside of my comfort zone. Without the limitations of being female in a male-dominant environment, we could cast aside the implication of having to 'harden up', and be free to progress in a manner that suited us best. No sense of competition, no sense of machismo, just a supportive and encouraging team of equals. I reflect on this and wonder what it must have been like, historically, learning to climb as a woman; needing to prove you could 'climb like a man' and be equally fit, strong and brave—all while wear-

ing a skirt. I prefer this modern day reality whereby we don't have to be something we're not, where we're free to express ourselves and climb in a style unique to our femininity.

We spend the weekend employing our newfound skills for moving safely in the mountains—practicing self-arrest, pretending we're meat anchors, telling bad jokes and generally being taken on a journey. At Whangaehu Hut I enquire as to the names of the peaks around me, and then commit to climbing each one in the future. I may still be a rookie mountaineer, but this was where I wanted to be. I'm almost kicking myself that I hadn't explored mountaineering earlier.

From an outsider's perspective, especially that of a teenage girl, alpinism seemed totally unachievable as an enterprise—hence I hadn't explored earlier. I'd been up to my eyeballs in mountaineering books,



*The summit mushroom on Tahurangi*

hearing the tales of Rob Hall and Sir Ed; watching movies like *Touching the Void* and *Into Thin Air*, but it was a man's world—where only the toughest and bravest survived. This was a perception fuelled by the media, which only glorifies the extremes and horrors of mountaineering, failing to celebrate the successful summits. This glorification only heightens the sense of elitism associated with the sport, while isolating our future climbers.

Why hadn't I heard of the badass ladies that had been paving the way before me? The likes of Freda Du Faur, the first woman to summit Aoraki Mount Cook in 1910 (whilst wearing a skirt); or Pat Deavoll, who made the first ascent of Xiashe (5833m), Karim Sar (6180m) and Miandi Peak (6,400m) among others; or Lydia Bradey, who was the first women

to summit Everest without supplemental oxygen; and Mayan Gobat-Smith, who currently holds the women's speed record on The Nose, El Capitan. These trailblazers had been pushing the boundaries for years, yet their achievements were lost to me on the breeze like spindrift. So why was the media only glorifying the exploits of men?

As a Club, I feel we can play a big role in the paradigm shift towards equally celebrating the achievements of both our men and women. Progress is being made, and when I sit down at the Auckland Club nights once a month, I'm presented with an epic selection of female speakers who share their alpine achievements. The most recent of these was Penny Webster, who spoke in October about her life as a climber, and the journey taken to complete



*The Tukino Alpine Sports Club lodge*

the 3000m Peak Challenge. Her enormous energy and enthusiasm for the sport left me motivated as I walked out of the Dominion, rearing to follow in her footsteps. I also look up to our female leaders in the Club like Penny Brothers—only the third woman to hold the presidency in the Club's 126-year history. Women have played a massive part in the Club's governance over the years, but there's still room for improvement. Penny acknowledges this, saying, 'We have some great female role models in the Club who are at the forefront for climbing, however, we just need more of them.'

Having more female leaders would do wonders for encouraging a new generation of alpinists. Think about your own experiences learning to climb and exploring the mountains: I have no doubt it's through mentors and leaders like these that you've got to the level you're at today. These role models are how we learn the hard skills, while gaining both inspiration and aspirational targets. They show us what to do, tell us what not to do, and, with a dose of healthy banter, help shape us

into more competent mountaineers and climbing partners.

This is not to say that female alpinists can't be coached by men—but the clarity of hindsight and experience tells me that we learn best from those with whom we share similarities—both physical and ideological. It's invigorating to learn from women in whom we can see our future climbing styles reflected, and it was great to see so many female instructors on the Snowcraft course.

For my own part, I hope to start a women's climbing night that meets weekly and encourages more newbies into the sport, while finding adventurous ladies to mission with. And that's not to say that men can't join in and contribute too. We love climbing with you and the competitiveness it provides—I wouldn't have been brave enough to try leading, or gaining my first summit, without your fierce encouragement. But for future reference, can you embrace the fact that we 'climb like girls', and encourage us to do so? It will benefit all of us, I promise.