



PLACES. Words & Images by Pete Oswald

# MT AURUM

A KIWI BLOKE'S CLASSIC

Jeremy Lyttle is your classic, raw Kiwi bloke. A rare breed these days. He uses his hands for making things. Useful things. Things that are actual things, not a social following, an image or a sponsor contract. Real things, like a throne made of old skis, a pro level mountain bike jump track in his backyard and a bungee jumping bridge in Russia. He resides in his beautifully converted old ski shack caravan while he builds a permanent house. His dog is called Summit and he married his wife, Sarah, high on Tasman Glacier dressed in a Gortex bowtie under a solid ice archway he built with an ice saw. Positive and understated with a modest gentleman-like manner, Jeremy's glass is always "half-full". Rarely will you ever find him staring at a phone screen or tapping at a keyboard, unless he's scoping for ski lines. He stands about 5' 11", with a stocky statue, girthy calves and Popeye-like forearms that are befittingly hairy. He's been places and done things that would be the envy of many professional free sport athletes. Because seeking glory and recognition are not in Jeremy's nature, you have to ask his close mates to learn tales about Jeremy Lyttle; like the time he spent 3 days secretly building a ramp out of fallen trees in B.C, Canada, so he could jump over the Rocky Mountaineer Passenger Train on his mountain bike – and jump it he did, spanning a canyon in the process.

Once in a while during the NZ winter I get a purposeful phone call from Jeremy. It always starts with a bit of small talk of "what you been up to?" Then, after covering the current weather and snow conditions, without fail Jeremy will segway into some ambitious ski mission idea that he needs a partner for. Of the three backcountry ski missions Jeremy has called me up for, six hours is the longest notice I have ever had to prepare. I don't get days to sort my gear or mentally get my head around the journey, the skills required and the risks involved. I get a few hours if I'm lucky. Even so, I can't resist, I think that's why I'm "lucky" enough to get his calls.

Now, when I see Jeremy's name flash up on my phone screen, a realisation instantly hits me. Like one of Pavlov's conditioned dogs, I associate Jeremy's calls with one hell of a time ahead of me. Instead of salivating, pre-emptive adrenaline sweeps through my body. I know all my immediate plans are off for the next few days. I know it's going to be tough, I know it's going to hurt, I know I'll be pushed to my limit and I know the unexpected will happen. But I also know, with success or failure, it's going to be epic and unforgettable.

On the 3rd of September at 12.30pm in Queenstown, I was working at home on our company, Little Difference, an environment focused design business that my partner Sophie and I had started 2 years previously. It was a pivotal time for our fast growing business and we could not spare a waking hour away from it. My phone vibrated on the desk and Jeremy's name flashed up. My heart sank and I let out a deep breath. "Hey Jezza, how you doing mate?" When Soph heard Jeremy's name she flashed me a look from across the desk of realisation that I'd be away and unreachable for a few days, doing stuff more dangerous than she would like to know about and I definitely wouldn't be getting any work done.

After covering the weather and snow conditions Jeremy's chat switched, "I've been looking north and I think Mt Aurum needs two tracks down it, can you be ready by 4? There is a front coming in 2 days so we need to be in and out before then".

I hung up, cleared away my work and told Soph apologetically that I'd be away for a few days. While preparing my kit, Jeremy called back explaining that his trusty short wheel based Land Cruiser had just broken a cam belt and asked what car I had. Soph and I were borrowing my sister's 1991 Toyota Corolla sedan front wheel drive, which she'd inherited from our great Aunt who had used it solely for ferrying groceries within flat suburban Christchurch. Not your typical high clearance, all-terrain machine for going into the notorious Skippers Canyon in mid winter conditions. With the only other option being abandoning the mission I said "yeah, lets give the 'Rolla' a crack".

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## PLACES. New Zealand

By the time Jeremy and I had both sorted food, kit and tied off our loose ends, it was 6.30pm and dark. Off we drove in the sacked out 91' Corolla (aka the Rolla) deep into Skippers Canyon with our high beams on. Our shelter, if reached that evening, was supposed to be the Dynamo Hut, 5 kilometres from the base of Mt Aurum. Was it physically possible to get the Rolla within a walkable distance of our shelter? After tackling what we thought were dicey bits of the Skippers Canyon road we met some real challenging terrain – slippery sinking mud and a labyrinth of massive deep wheel ruts up to 60cm's deep – a little deeper than the 20cm clearance of the Rolla.

Under head lamps and car lights we used our aluminium snow shovels to carve flat the top ridges of the ruts in the hope that we could drive the Rolla along the tops without the wheels slipping into the trenches. After 30 minutes of digging in the mud, we successfully crawled the Rolla across the fifty-metre section of hideously thin, slippery flat top ridges. We were ecstatic with our innovative success, assumed that was the worst, and that it would be plain sailing from there. Not to be, we repeated that process of digging in the mud and precision snail-pace driving another 4 or 5 times.

About 1.5 kilometres from the Skippers bridge, and about 6 kilometres short of the point we had planned to reach with Jeremy's broken down Land Cruiser, we finally hit a piece of road we deemed impossible to pass in the poor Rolla. At 9.30pm in the pitch black, with head lamps beaming, we saddled up with our big packs laden with ski gear and left the Rolla nudged on the side of the road. Any keen 4WD junkies who passed must have wondered how the hell my great Auntie's old grocery cart had got all the way in there.

Jeremy, who had only been in here in summer, estimated 2 hours walk from where we were supposed to drive the Land Cruiser to. So how long would this take now take? And what does "a few river crossings mean"?

4 hours later, after 12 kilometres over undulating terrain and over 60 river crossings I was done. Battling the Rolla through mud seemed like a week ago. I was badly blistered and simultaneously sweating and cold. What little speech I attempted was slurred. My head-lamp flashed red and turned off intermittently due to low battery. The simple task of changing batteries could not compute in my exhausted mind. I was incapable of doing anything but placing one foot in front of the other. Jeremy's determined pace was constant but the positive chatter had slowed. There was just no sign that we were anywhere near Dynamo Hut.

When we arrived at 2.30 am the feeling was not excited or happy. It was like finally getting something you were promised a long time ago, something you had earned many times over, but still not received. Even though our refuge had gaps in the walls and looked like it had not been altered since its construction 130 years ago, to us the Dynamo Hut was a palace. We ate quick and slept hard till 8.30am. We woke to light streaming in through the many holes in the rusty iron roof.

With the pending storm we had seen forecasted, we needed to make a decision. Our bodies felt exhausted. We were eager to ski, but had pretty much given up on the summit. We were completely out of contact from the outside world and our intended return time was that evening. But we were not going to lug our bulky ski kit this far and not even get to the snowline. A compromise was made to get to the East Ridge Saddle and ski back down the same way. This would at least mean we had not just taken our skis on a big muddy piggy-back.

We made good time to the snowline and began to skin. The South East Face that I had drooled over on Google Earth came into view. The original objective was to ski the North East aspect, but from the comfort of our homes I had ambitiously suggested the South East Face. It looked burly but maybe possible to ski.

The access to the saddle took us right underneath the South East Face, and it just kept looking better the closer we got. A possible line down became visible. We were touring across the very same aspect and the snowpack felt good. It was not discussed, but the pre-emptive adrenaline of potentially summiting and skiing down drove us fast to the saddle. The first words to one another were "we can make it from here". There was no question. We had come this far, we could see the summit, there was daylight, and we had food for another night. We were not gonna not summit when we were this close! The pending storm, the walk out in the rain, the rising river and the impossibility of getting the Rolla out of Skippers canyon after more wet weather were left to be dealt with the next day.

Skins were swapped for crampons and ice axes and we summited at 3.20pm. It was a hard-earned but very sweet feeling. At 2,245 metres, Mt Aurum is not a massive peak, but the access was an extremely worthy challenge. We were now standing on top of the South East face with the question of whether we could ski it. We'd seen a possible line from the bottom, but didn't really know if it would go. Nor if anyone had ever skied it before.

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Avalanche.net had advised of a stable snow pack on the shady southern aspects. When we tested the surface layers, we found soft, dry old powder. Light, down to heavy, well bonded and no deeper than 15cm – perfect for steep skiing. Conditions were on. Now it was up to us and whether we backed ourselves.

Looking down the face was super intimidating. 500 vertical metres to the valley floor, no easy access, fifty degree pitch and the top edges of rocky cliffs protruding everywhere, with no clear route down visible. But we’d seen from the bottom that it did go!

Jeremy is more skilled on the technical ascents, I am more skilled on the technical ski descents, so I dropped in first. It was the stuff of dreams! Grippable, rippable soft snow, turn after turn. I didn’t want to stop, but the sluff was building. I pulled up on a small rock just before the first cliff band. “It’s sweet bro! Just beware of the sluff,” I called back up. We were pumped, stoked, excited but intensely focused. All memory of how we got there was gone. All that mattered was skiing this face without a fall or sluff dragging us off one of the many deadly cliffs. We skied two more pitches one by one, confirming the route down with each other when we stopped. From our third safe zone we could finally see a clear line out. With the worst of the face done and our confidence peaking we shredded the last

pitch hard and fast, around the last exposed cliff band and out off the face.

High-fives gave way to elated hugs. It was done! Just that morning, we had given up on the summit and now we had just skied its most gnarly face, in unexpectedly soft, stable snow! We cruised back down to the hut in good daylight. The sense of contentment washed away any worry of the impending storm, 60 river crossings, a 12 kilometre walk out to the stranded Rolla and the tardiness on our expected return time. We gathered some firewood, made a dinner from what little food we had left and stayed another night in the palace that is the drafty Dynamo Hut.

The next morning we arose late enough for the storm to have already arrived and trudged in the pissing rain all the way back to the stranded Rolla. With the assistance and attention of co-driver Jezza, our shovel work 2 evenings prior, a bit of belly scraping and a few axle taps, the Rolla, against all expectation, carried us all the way out to a steaming hot spa and the best beers I have ever tasted.

After telling our tale to experienced skiers and mountaineers in the region from different generations it dawned on us that maybe we were the first people ever to ski the South East Face of Mt Aurum. If you know otherwise, then please let me or the modest, self-effacing gentleman known as Jeremy Lyttle, know. Till then I’m gonna claim it, because I know Jeremy won’t.



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