**Advanced Snow School (14.07.20-19.07.20)**

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What an incredible journey!

Despite the spanner that was COVID-19, we were blessed for Advanced Snow School to go ahead. And what a learning curve that was!

For someone with limited climbing experience (and didn’t even know what an anchor was in the context of climbing) I was one of the oblivious trampers who had less than 4 weeks to get up to speed with the ways of lead climbing, abseiling, and rope management!

After equipping ourselves with the essential gear (me having never owned a harness, let alone prusiks, ATC belay devices, slings and carabiners) and having a few practice runs of lead climbing and abseiling at Stonefields, we were ready to begin our snow school adventure.

A long night’s drive jamming to good tunes and lengthy yarns saw us at the Jenkin’s bach in the heart of the National Park. Our first glimpse at the weather showed a high of -1°C, cloudy, light snowfall, fairly dry conditions and low to no wind. We headed up the ridge, heavy with our 5 days’ worth of food, rope, and gear. A quick lunch launched us straight into our lessons. We watched closely at Alex’s teaching of slab recognition, understanding snowpack conditions, and absorbing our new elements.

That night, the wind picked up, roaring a gale around us as we slept through the whirlwind of snow and ice. It was to be a theory day - yet it was productive and insightful, the knowledgeable instructors schooling us fundamental skills in the alpine environment. Here, I brushed up on my avalanche theory, understanding the factors that can impact a mission (wellness, sleep, fitness, experience…) and making use of the hut beams where we hammered in our rope work for crevasse rescue!

The next few days were just action-packed with putting theory into practice. We learned to walk roped up to avoid falling into precarious crevasses, and how to safely recover our fallen comrades. Admittedly, the instructors got quite cold lying in the snow as us students slowly figured out the process in setting up effective pulley systems - sorry! We also homed in key skills like daggering, multi-pitching, and abseiling off anchors. Anchor building was also a huge part of our lessons and I couldn’t believe something as small as a lip balm jam-packed in snow could hold an entire person's weight!

Our nights were filled with hearty laughs, games, and awesome yarns - vibrant and full of activity. I recall well the night we shared the sweet goon, playing games against strangers and having rope climbing competitions.

I’ll never forget navigation day; what was promised early morning a day of sun soon fell into white oblivion, ice crusting our jackets and our breath fogging our goggles. But here was ingrained within us the art of leadership and teamwork, always on the alert for the safety of the party. We huddled over the map like penguins, yelling over the roar of the wind: “Where is Sophie’s blob?” And then the sky cleared over and the lay of the snow-laden land stretched before us. I loved that walk back down to the hut.

Most memorable was our go at ice and mixed climbing. Rappelling ourselves down to the icy wall where we met with rock and powdered snow, our ice axes glinted as we drove it home, making use of every inch of our crampons and picks. We climbed well past nightfall, our torches beaming as bright as the grins on our faces for every climb we conquered in rock and ice.

And on the day of our descent back down the mountain, where we enjoyed practicing more climbing and crevasse rescue, the sky broke into a brilliant blue - congratulating us on the success that was Advanced Snow School 2020.







