

PHOTOGRAPHING AORAKI MOUNT COOK

A guide to the best walks
& photography locations

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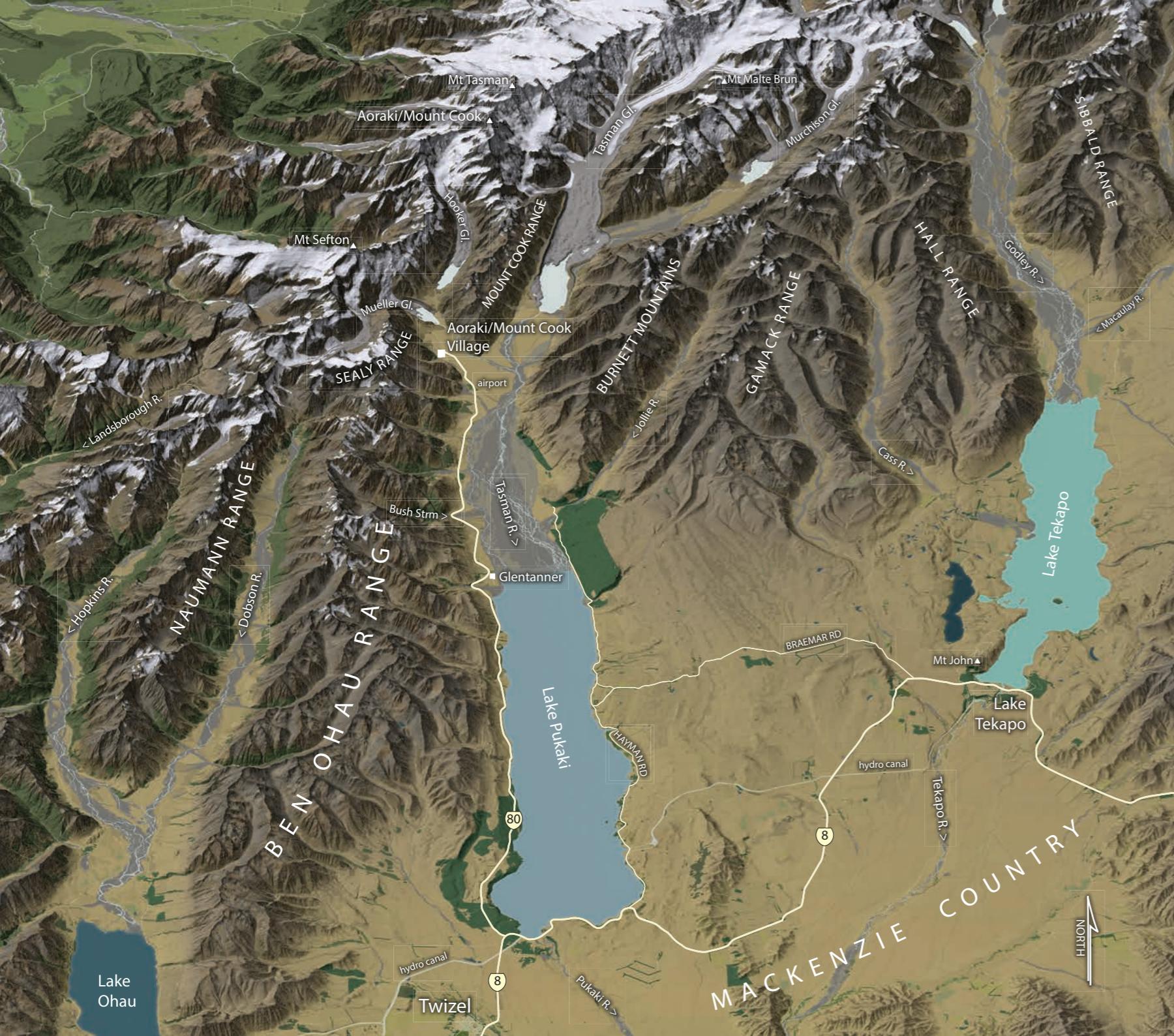
CONTENTS

Introduction	7
MOUNT COOK VILLAGE	12
MUELLER GLACIER & SEALY RANGE	32
HOOKER VALLEY	56
TASMAN VALLEY	86
LAKE PUKAKI	128
Accommodation Information	150
Acknowledgements	152

PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS	
26	Exposure Triangle & Shooting Modes
28	Exposure & Histograms
48	Light
52	Composition
54	Depth of Field & Focusing
82	Shooting Sharp Shots
84	Landscape Lenses
122	Using Tripods
124	Filters for Landscape Photography
126	Compact & Phone Photography
142	Astrophotography
146	Weather & Storms

*For the people with whom I have shared adventures,
and great light, in the hills.*





INTRODUCTION

A place of high mountains, deep valleys, turquoise lakes and big skies Aoraki Mount Cook is undoubtedly the most spectacular mountain region in New Zealand. While other ranges of Aotearoa's mountains have their highlights, Aoraki Mount Cook is singular for the sheer scale of its extensive ice-capped peaks and the dynamic forces that continue to shape them.

These mountains mark the zenith of the uplift that has formed the Southern Alps and all bar one of New Zealand's 3000 metre peaks lie in either Mount Cook National Park, or the adjacent Westland National Park which borders the Main Divide. Extensive glaciation has hewn these mountains and it is these glaciers' legacy that defines the region we see today. Ice kilometres-thick once blanketed the area. Left behind are telltale features: hanging icefalls, U-shaped valleys, glacier-fed lakes, braided rivers and moraines. Combined with a unique range of alpine plants; tussock covered foothills; sparkling tarns; and dramatic, changeable weather you have a location with extraordinary photographic opportunity.

There are few other places in New Zealand so accessible for the large variety of mountain photography available here, and none with the well developed tracks and infrastructure that makes this area suitable for many different abilities and types of visitor, whether your stay is one day or one week the information in this book is designed to help you make the best of your opportunity.

The images in *Photographing Aoraki Mount Cook* are compiled from four years of my own visits to the park. I began mountain photography here while working on a previous book, *Our Mountains* in 2012. I'd visited the park many times in previous years for mountaineering. Returning here specifically for photography sparked a new interest in the area—one requiring patience, persistence and a different eye for the landscape than the one that had been attuned to climbing here. What follows are 33 different locations, all accessible from Mount Cook Village on foot or by car, including some overnight trips. The sites are distributed through the two major glaciated valleys: the Hooker and Tasman; the Sealy and Mount Cook Ranges and alongside Lake Pukaki.

PREVIOUS PAGE (CONTENTS PAGE)

Winter on the Sealy Range—a tramp approaches Mueller Hut, with Mount Ollivier just beyond the hut.

1/500 sec / f7.1 / ISO 100
Canon EOS 5DmkII with 16-35 mm lens at 35 mm

MAP LEFT

An overview of Mount Cook National Park.

LANDSCAPE LENSES

Lens choice has a critical effect on your images, and it's well worth considering the best you can afford: the lens transmits light to your camera's sensor and the better the lens' optics, the sharper your images will be and the better the colour rendition.

Lens selection can appear a confusing myriad of choice for the aspiring landscape photographer, but there are some standard go-to lenses that appear in most wilderness and landscape shooters' kit bags.

RIGHT

Morning reflection, Hooker Lake and Aoraki Mount Cook.
1/8 sec / f20 / ISO 100
Canon EOS 5DmkII with 16–35 mm lens @ 17 mm
Ultra-wide lenses allow the inclusion of lots of foreground, or sky, and provide huge depth of field.

ULTRA-WIDE ZOOM

A single lens that covers a range of focal lengths from as low as 14 mm up to 40 mm will be many photographers' most used lens. Nikon's 14–24 mm f2.8 and Canon's 16–35 mm f2.8 are two common examples. These allow a very wide field of view and inclusion of a lot of foreground or sky. The wider focal lengths need to be used carefully as distant subjects might appear too small. Used well, lenses such as these can create complex and dramatic scenes, especially when the photograph's subjects are composed harmoniously.

STANDARD ZOOM

Generally 24–70 mm, this range fills the gap between ultra-wide and telephoto, with a lens that's wide enough for landscapes but also lets you shoot tighter angles for nature photography, details and scenes with more compression between foreground and background. If you can only afford one lens, this is the most versatile option.

TELEPHOTO

The 70–200 mm is also an important lens in the landscape photographer's stable. These focal lengths allow considerable zoom for distant features and details and can be used in many ways; from wildlife to abstracts and landscape images that isolate and give scale to singular



features, such as mountain tops, distant rivers or people and buildings in the outdoors. Image stabilisation is desirable in these lenses as camera shake is harder to control. Some photographers use prime (fixed focal length)

lenses in place of zooms. What they lack in versatility they make up for with superior optics, but are an expensive and restrictive option.



Unmatched in New Zealand for its breadth and scale, the Tasman Valley evokes a powerful sense of geological time when first viewed. This ancient valley is home to Aotearoa's longest glacier, the 27 kilometre Tasman. While its high névés are tucked out of sight, the glacier's seemingly infinite moraine-covered lower stretches are an amazing sight. From the Tasman Glacier's terminal lake, icy waters descend the valley's broad matagouri-dotted reaches to Lake Pukaki; one of New Zealand's biggest lakes, the sight of which is many visitors' first encounter with the Aoraki Mount Cook region.

TASMAN VALLEY

ACCESS

Driving distances are described from the Tasman Valley and SH80 junction, just outside Mount Cook Village.

TIMES

This chapter covers a range of walking distances from five minutes to overnight trips and there are locations to suit a variety of times-of-day and ability.

Several large streams enter the Tasman Valley between the Hooker River confluence and Lake Pukaki and their many braids stitch the floor of the valley, catching light and adding sparkle to an environment that is a stark combination of craggy ranges and tan tussock slopes. Outside of the national park itself, this is quintessential high country station land and a number of prominent sheep and cattle stations cover the ranges and foothills either side of the valley.

The locations in this chapter are described from south to north, starting at the small settlement of Glentanner, just north of Lake Pukaki and stretching up the valley to the alpine zone of Ball Ridge, adjacent to Aoraki Mount Cook itself.

PREVIOUS PAGES

Icebergs, calved from the terminal face of the Tasman Glacier collect at the outlet of the Terminal Lake, whilst the eastern aspect of Aoraki Mount Cook catches the rising sun.

8 sec / f20 / ISO 50

Canon EOS 5DmkII with 16–35 mm lens @ 16 mm

Three separate exposures at differing shutter speeds have been blended with Photoshop to faithfully capture the full range of light, another method would have been to use a ND gradient filter.

MAP RIGHT

Tasman Valley walking tracks and lookout locations 18–28.

FAR RIGHT

The starkness of the Tasman Glacier moraine is enhanced by subtle light and a moody morning at the Tasman Glacier View.

20 sec / f20 / ISO 100

Canon EOS 5DmkII with 24–70 mm lens @ 70 mm





GLENTANNER RIVER FLAT

MAP	Location 18
DISTANCE	20 kilometre drive
TIME	15 minute drive. 5-10 minute walk, one way
BEST SEASON	Year round
BEST TIME OF DAY	Sunrise, or sunset if patchy cloud is present
TRACK	Unformed, but easy walking on grass and riverbed

HOW TO GET THERE

From the junction of SH80 and Tasman Valley Road drive south for 20 kilometres to a narrow, unmarked gravel road that exits the highway to the east. The road is gated and comes approximately 300 metres after crossing a small culvert. If you arrive at Glentanner proper you have come too far. Enter the gate and follow the gravel road for 300 metres as it changes to an unformed 4WD surface (okay for 2WD cars) and park near the first small stream you see.

The Glentanner River Flat is a very accessible location with wide views of the Southern Alps and is a great site to stop at if you are driving into the valley late in the afternoon.

The land surrounding this area west of the Tasman River comprises the 45,000-acre Glentanner Station which carries merino sheep, cattle and deer. The station was established in 1858 by the Dark brothers and extends from Whale Stream to the south; up to the national park boundary near Mount Cook Airport.

A number of shallow river braids and lush, grassy surrounds allow multiple composition options as well as



LEFT

Southern Alps skyline: the Ben Ohau and Sealy Ranges at left and Aoraki Mount Cook (right of centre) from the Glentanner River Flat.

6 sec / f10 / ISO 80

Sony A7II with 24-70 mm lens @ 46 mm
A three-stop ND filter was used to allow a longer shutter speed, along with an ND gradient filter to correctly expose the brighter sky.

RIGHT

Windy November skies over the Tasman Valley.

.8 sec / f11 / ISO 50
Sony A7II with 16-35 mm lens @ 29 mm

the opportunity to shoot in any direction, depending on where the cloud or light are most interesting.

A pair of gumboots (or waders) are useful, as being able to cross stream braids will give you more photographic options. Any lens from ultra-wide to 300mm can be useful here, along with ND gradient filters. Regular ND filters (from 3- to 10-stop) will allow you to slow water or cloud movement more and a polariser is also useful to cut or enhance reflection off the water. The view of Aoraki Mount Cook, while distant, is very clear from here and interesting cloud over its summit can make a very good subject with longer focal lengths (up to 200–300 mm).

During summer the sun will enter the valley relatively soon after sunrise, providing the opportunity to shoot the grasslands and streams in strong, low sidelight.

RIGHT

A braid from the west Tasman Valley streams leads the eye to the Burnett Mountains in the distance. Captured beneath a moody morning sky.

15 sec / f14 / ISO 50

Sony A7II with 16-35 mm lens @ 19 mm

The ISO was set to its lowest and the aperture stopped down to allow a slow shutter speed. This enables the water to smooth over and the clouds to soften. An ND gradient filter darkens the sky.

