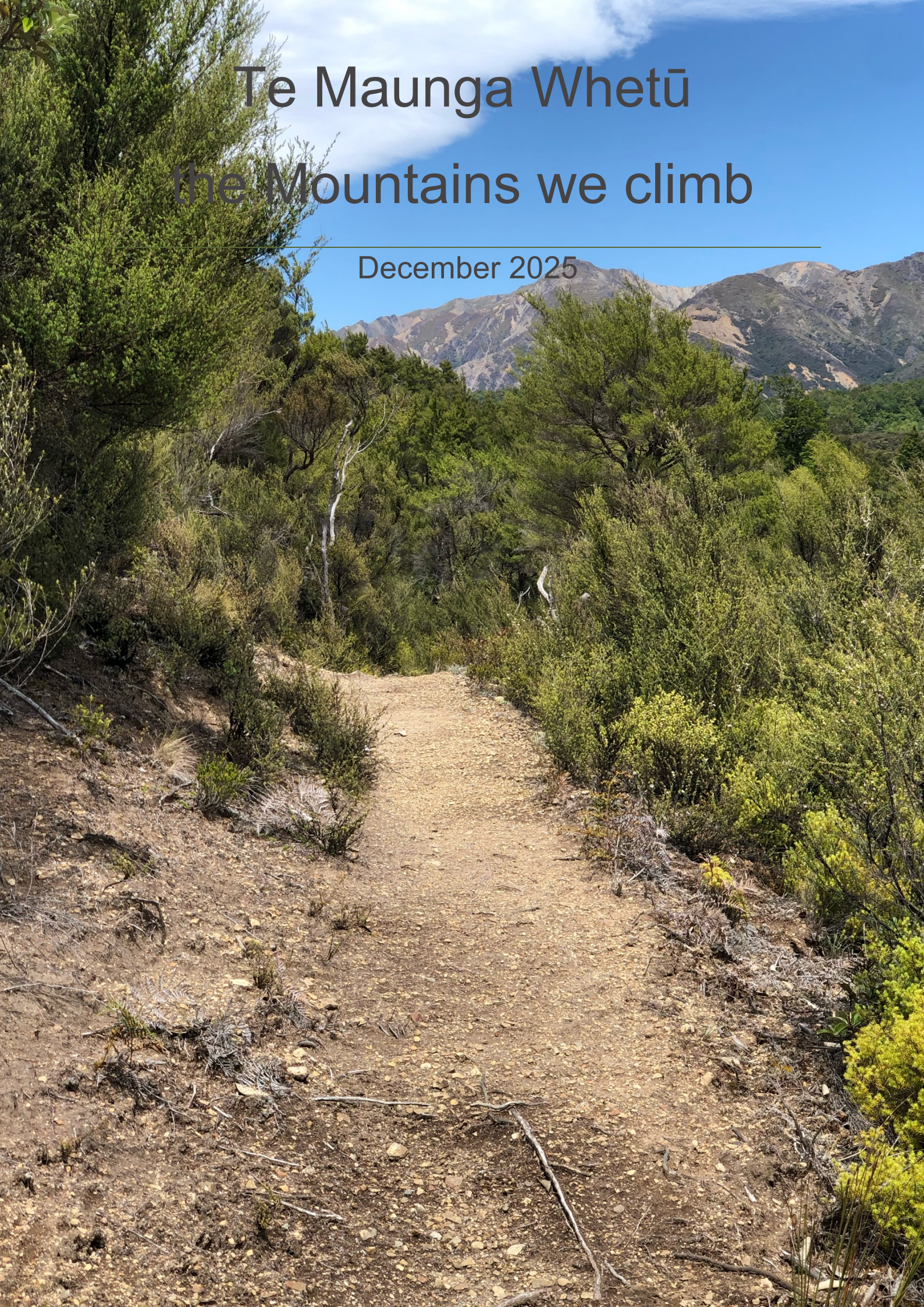


Te Maunga Whetū

the Mountains we climb

December 2025



Te Maunga Whetū, the Mountains we climb

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Rāmere</i>	7
<i>Rāhoroi</i>	11
<i>Rātapu</i>	19
<i>Rāhina</i>	29
<i>Rātū</i>	37

Text by Benoit Pette
Published in July 2026

Te Maunga Whetū, the Mountains we climb

Te Maunga Whetū, the Mountains we climb



BOB'S MOWS
LAWNMOWING & WEED EATING
GARDENING, SPRAYING,
TREE & HEDGE TRIMMING
FULL SECTION CLEAN-UP
GREENWASTE REMOVAL

14 0000 000000
0710 120211
170000

LF G635

Te Maunga Whetū, the Mountains we climb

RĀMERE



THERE IS NO WIN IN THE JUNGLE
BUT YOU WILL FIND A BETTER
CONVICTION

That call for Nature will never fade. In early 2024, we had succeeded to squeeze the Whanganui River, with my good ol' Friend Mat, his son Lucas and Adan. This had been fantastic, although a bit scripted. And crowded. Not between the huts, but it had been hard, at times, to feel completely alone. Plus, we hadn't done much walking, as we meandered down the river on our canoes.

Since then, life had thrown us a few curve balls, and I had had to pause my wanderings in the pristine forests and mountains of Aotearoa. The job situation, my health and helping our friends and family negotiate curly bumps meant I had spent most of the year hibernating when I wasn't busy with staying afloat. 2025 had passed and we were getting dangerously close to the end of the year without having bagged any hike. Term four arrived, however, and I sat one day to put a date in my calendar, in red ink, for a tramp. The timing worked for Mat, Lucas and Adan, and I was determined to make it happen.

It had to reconnect with these multi-days adventures, it had to be a loop (for easier logistics), and not too hard: Harman Pass was still a sore memory for Mat, and frankly, I didn't know if I was still physically capable of carrying heavy backpacks up the hills. It was a lot of boxes to tick and for the first time, I tried my luck with ChatGPT. It came back with a few options, most impractical or already accomplished, but one caught my attention: a four-day loop in the Kaweka range, climbing up above the bush line, and a couple of easy days at the end. It was a new area for me, I'd never walked it and cherry on the cake: we would get to pitch our tent near natural hot springs, far in the bush.

It was hard not to be excited and to not come across already committed when I presented the idea to Mat. Yes, the first day would be the hard one, I explained, but then it would be cruisier, and the rewards were extremely enticing. But it didn't take long to convince Mat: the hike was varied, and the long stretches in the bush and by a river meant it wouldn't be too hot, something Mat was worried about. Like me, he wasn't sure about his fitness, and the tramp looked challenging just enough to test ourselves. And so, on Friday the 5th of December 2025, only a few hours after the boys had brilliantly completed their first year at College, we drove off to Napier. Along the way, french patisseries and burgers were shared before we got to bed in a motel, tired but ready to hit the trail.



Te Maunga Whetū, the Mountains we climb

RĀHOROI



We left Napier at 7AM but didn't get to the start of the track before 8:30AM: the road was windy, slow, and towards the end, metal. I dropped my crew, their packs and drove the car further to the road end, at the Gums carpark. There lied a campground where it felt overall safer for the car, but it meant I would have to walk back the gravel road for 35 minutes. I did so lightly, happy to finally be back in one of my happy places, on a track. The surroundings looked beautiful, with rolling hills covered in bush as far as the eyes could see. A layer of clouds covered the Pacific flank of the range, preventing temperatures already high to become uncomfortable: everything felt very promising.

At 10AM, we were all reunited, our packs loaded, and ready to go. Six to seven hours of climbing awaited us to Ballard Hut, up the ridge, and 1100 meters higher than our starting point. We knew the first day would be testing and we were resolute to take it slow. We leisurely walked the first few hundred meters, mostly flat and through a manuka forest in full bloom. White flowers were everywhere as if a thin layer of snow had just dusted the valley. Already, my senses heightened. I could see more, smell more, hear more. As we stepped in this ecosystem separate from the civilised world, I kept noticing more of the details around me. I caressed a cluster of leaves hanging by, it felt like feathers weaving between my fingers.

We followed a creek up to a bridge, unbeknown to us it would be the starting point of our misery. The climb was steep, the track bare, a succession of clay and rocks. As my sweat started to build up on my forehead, I was grateful for the clouds. We were approaching the 30 degrees and only a light breeze rendered it manageable. Adan was hopping ahead, as if he wasn't carrying any load, and yet, for the first time, he was charged with normal gears, and a lot of water: we knew we would be walking a ridge with seldom access to freshwater. For Mat and Lucas, it looked as if their warm-up was taking longer: Adan would wait for me, and we would wait for them to catchup. Lucas would then drop his bag on the track and collapse to catch his breath and the view: « can we make a pause? », he would ask. Despite feeling slow, we had already gained enough height to see the creek as a mere crack below us. Looking up, however, was daunting: the ridge laid far in the distance, and the idea we would ever reached it seemed impossible. Up there, along that range line, I could already identify two summits, Kaweka J and Whetū. We would miss the former, but would eventually touch the latter.

In our climb, I tried to apply a technique I had developed with Adan during his very first ascent, at barely six years old. At the time, we were climbing to Powell Hut in the Tararuas and we had a break each time we would ascent by 100 meters. This required about 15 minutes and the motivation was a snack or a lolly.



Here, however, lollies weren't enough to entice our troops, but the simple idea of dropping the bag. And so slowly, we reached 900 meters altitude, having started at 500 meters. There, the track eased significantly, which was very welcome. The view of the valley was breathtaking and for all our efforts, made it worthwhile. Ahead of us was a wide clearing giving us a glimpse of the vegetation, a mix of moss and dry bark, with colours and texture reminiscent of the higher temperatures in the area. We were miles away from the lush forest of Taranaki, and I couldn't help to be reminded of the scents of Provence and my childhood memories.

Around 1PM, we reached Middle Hill Hut. We had harvested water along the way from minuscule streams, having been convinced by a zealous DOC officer a few days back that the rainwater at the hut was not drinkable. Granted it was probably safer to boil it, but in my previous experience, I had most times drank directly from the water tank and never suffered any problem. But the anguish of being short of water had been stronger this time, and it's fully loaded we arrived at the hut. There were a lady and a Dutch man having their lunch. Both were passing through, but the man had come back from Ballard Hut. He said he'd left early to pass before the wind would become too strong. As we had gained altitude, the wind had indeed picked up and I wasn't sure if our fitness or dangerous gusts would be responsible for postponing our ascent. The man made it clear, however: if it was him, he wouldn't attempt it in these conditions. Then, he came with an idea: we could stay put for the day, climb the day after when the wind was meant to drop, and head straight to Makino Hut, our original destination for day two. We would skip Ballard, be safe, and still see the tops. It didn't take much to convince us: Middle hut was pretty, its surrounding as much, and our legs were already begging for mercy. Cutting this day in two seemed the most reasonable thing to do, so we stayed.

Shortly after, the man left, and then the lady. She was so talkative that I stopped listening! Mat did most of the conversation as I had tuned out pretty quickly. Even later, when a young hunter passed by, I barely engaged and stayed in my zone, made of the mountains, my friends and my son. Eventually, we ate lunch, then a group passed by and the hunter left. Only us remained, the hut and the mountains. With nothing planned, we had the whole afternoon to ourselves. Adan and Lucas went on exploring, laughing, putting short performances up.



Mat and I, on the other hand, went on a little grass area in front of the hut. I was bare feet and I could feel the cushion of the moss espousing my soles, and then later my back when I lied to look at the clouds. We chatted casually, on and off, taking the moment in. Then we moved back to the hut veranda where we pulled some mattresses out. Apart from the wind, ever so strong, conditions were really balmy and nothing really mattered more than the moment. Mat got sucked in watching two spiders, up the roof, having an argument: it ended badly for one as she got devoured by the other. Lucas saw some spiders too, coming out of the long drop, and promised he would never do his business there: later, the two boys took us in the bush where they had dug a big hole as a response to the situation!

The evening came, and nobody had turned up. This game of luck had worked for us this time, giving us the gift of a tranquille, unimpeded connection with Nature. We took the table from inside the hut to the veranda where we ate ‘al fresco’ dinner, as simple and as delicious as ever. Candles were lit and some Monopoly deals were played. Mat smashed us which didn’t reconcile me with card games! Then we headed to our sleeping bags: it had been a long day, but not in the way we had anticipated, and yet a gentle return to the hills.



Te Maunga Whetū, the Mountains we climb

RĀTAPU



I emerged from slumber around 6AM. The light filled Middle Hill Hut and the calm outside struck me. We knew we had to hit the trail early: many walking hours awaited us, and we didn't want to add the stress of reaching the hut in the dark, as we had experienced it in Arthur's Pass. After dragging myself out of my sleeping bag, I prepared a coffee for my friend Mat: the rich scents of the roasted beans filled the hut and awaken my senses. When we packed our bags, at around 8AM, there wasn't a single cloud in the sky.

The first twenty minutes offered a gentle warm-up: the ground was mostly flat, heading to a ridge. We knew, however, that when the climb would start, it would be steep and uninterrupted, all the way to the top. Spirits were high for a while, surrounded by a beautiful forest. Massive trunk trees shot upwards, their feet carpeted with soft, bright moss. Sun rays lashed the canopy and illuminated a painting of greens.

Then we started climbing the Camp Spur Track. Once again, Adan almost ran ahead, hopping from one root to a rock, effortlessly. For me, I was glad I was wearing my now traditional bandana to absorb my sweat. The shade offered by the ancient guardians of the forest helped in my efforts to escape gravity but I couldn't start projecting myself in what this effort would be once above the bushline. My mind was racing, as mimicking the panic my legs had fell in. So I recessed inwards, and invoked my loved ones, those who're gone, but from my sight only. I spent time with Mamie Nadette, granny, who loved mountains: here I was, climbing one, with her by my side. I could see her walking near me, in her beige long dress, proud and happy. It filled my heart with so much lightness, tears of joy starting to flow. She smiled at me, there, in that moment, as I was returning to the bush.

Mat and Lucas seemed to be struggling as much as I did and we had frequent breaks, content in knowing the ascent we had planned for the day before had been split in two. Our legs were begging for mercy, but as we suffered, we knew we would reach the upper ridge with patience. Just before the bushline, we stopped one last time, knowing we would not access shade before long. We drank from our bottles and pierced through the last row of trees. In an instant, the view opened up: above us, the ridge, and to its left, Whetū; below us, the creases and ridges we had hiked: the track we'd left early the day before was in a far distance, and it was hard to believe we had covered that much ground; further away, beyond the green pastures of Hawkes Bay, Napier was recognisable, sitting on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. It was magnificent. On our feet, sturdy red shrubs survived between brown rocks and flat stones. But as beautiful the view was, we knew our time in direct sunlight had to be managed so we resumed climbing.



The track traversed a scree and navigated narrow paths to open, exposed flats. The final landing was looming. It rested between Whetū, further South, and a knob on the right. My bag was as heavy as in the morning, and the heat scorching, but nearing the end, I felt lifted, and in 20 minutes, shortly after Adan, we reached the saddle. The view on the Western side of the range appeared instantly. It was a blanket of hills and mountains covered by native bush, and in the distance, standing proudly, Mount Ruapehu and Mount Ngauruhoe covered in snow. When Mat and Lucas joined us shortly after, they were as speechless as I was: no words were necessary nor could describe the awe and pride that filled us at that very moment.

We dropped our bags, sweating and exhausted, near the cairn at the crossing of the tracks: we had climbed 1,200 meters since we left the carpark. As I contemplated what we'd accomplished, it occurred to me that in climbing the range, we had mostly climbed ourselves. Mat, remembering an act of pure freedom and complete meditation I had at Cobb Valley, went on and relinquished the last remnants of what attach us to living in a human community. It didn't take long for me to accompany him. As we peacefully faced the old volcanoes, I felt one with the place, my friends and my son.

We hadn't seen a soul that day so we were surprised when we spotted two trail runners coming in our direction. We quickly dressed back up, and while Adan and Lucas decided to stay for an extended break, Mat and I went on to climb the extra hundred meters to reach Whetū, the "celestial body" of the range. To the South, we could see Kaweka J, the highest peak. To the West, we could see Ballard Hut, our planned stop for the night before: the wind blocking our progression had been a blessing, as it felt reaching the hut in one day would have been a big stretch for our party. I wanted to return to the moment that the trail runners had interrupted and shed my clothes again. We sat and watched all that was beneath and all around us, together and at peace.

We walked back to our kids. Walking the ridge unashamedly free in a giant, unobstructed setting gave me a raw feeling of total liberty. But when we got back to the crossing where Adan and Lucas were waiting, time for contemplation had elapsed and it was time to consider our next move. Since we hadn't reached Ballard, it felt important to me that we tried to reach the Bivvy, slightly further North of the knob next to us. It was only noon, and while we considered spending the night there, we knew we could potentially push to Makino Hut, our original destination for this second day, if we had to.



We were now travelling down and so it felt easier at first. The bivvy was off the track, diving to its right, and we knew it was within a kilometre. But the rocks and the scorching heat made progress arduous. I was nervous we would run out of water and I was really counting on the bibby to have a rainwater tank. Minutes passed, then tens of minutes. At times, rocks were formed as if they'd been raked by the wind, giving a glimpse of the terror of a place it would be if caught in a storm. In what felt like hours, we reached the bivvy, and its shade, in thirty minutes, but no one bothered looking into the small shelter and we all reached for a place under the nearby trees. We all took our boots off: this comparatively short time of hiking got us exhausted and stressed.

Wraps were taken out of the bags, with the veggies and sauce, while we considered our options. Clearly, the terrain had been unforgiving and it had become clear that staying at the bivvy for the night would seriously compromise our ability to reach another highlight of the hike tomorrow: Mangatainoka hot springs. Consequently, the hike for today was far from over, as we set our minds to Makino Hut. We were not pressed for time though, and so we made sure we had fully replenished and recovered when we finally left our hiding.

None of us wanted to climb back to the ridge to reconnect with the track. Instead, we counted on following contour line, across a crease, and back to the trail. This meant returning shortly on our footsteps and then veer to the right, down to the bushline. We tried to remain at the same height, but it was hard not to feel attracted to the furrow. There lied a stream: we might have refilled our bottles at the bivvy, but this felt like an oasis. I noticed, however, Mat's worried face: somehow, he was concerned about big rocks he'd seen earlier, hanging above our heads. I knew "bush bashing" could be unsettling so I tried to cheer us up. As we continued our progress, we had to climb the other side of the crease. I went ahead to find paths easier to navigate, ones that wouldn't block our exit. Since my childhood, I had loved, from the bottom of my heart, Nature and respected it. At times, it felt as if it was, in fact, my higher being, my Goddess, and that it looked after me: as long as I kept respecting it, it would ensure nothing bad happened to me. And so, cautious but confident, slowly, negotiating gnarly passages and high trees, we surfaced out of the bush again, and shortly after, reached back the track. It was 3:20PM: while the day had been filled with memorable moments, we were now physically tired and I could tell this crease crossing had had an emotional toll on Mat too. Thankfully, the terrain would now be easy, in descent, and soon, we would be back below the bushline.



We reached Makino Hutt three hours later. What looked like a straight, simple line to gently glide down had been a succession of excruciating, long ups and downs. Mat's feet had long given up and reaching the hut had been a painful slog for him. I wasn't much better and so the first thing I did was to remove my boots and to peel off my clothes. The small orange hut was empty, and so I started with washing at the rainwater tank. The cold water tensed my worn body in a soothing way. Rid of the dirt and sweat, I moved in my dry outfit: we had left Middle Hill ten hours earlier, and now the day weighted on all of us.

The hut was sitting in a small clearing and had six bunks. Rewarded for the second night in a row by a hut to ourselves, we spread on the tables and empty beds. Things flowed much easier when on our own, without judgement or need to socialise: we were there for each other's, relaxed and free. Dinner was expedited with the little energy we had left. As the dusk arrived, finally settled, Mat took a mattress on the front deck and lied there, cuddling with Lucas while Adan and I sat on the mossy grass. I sipped on my flask of whisky as we shared jokes and stories. By 9PM, all of us had retreated to our bunks.



Te Maunga Whetū, the Mountains we climb

RĀHINA



The night was dark and no sound could be heard when a high screech pierced through the silence: a kiwi was roaming by! Of course I would never see it, but I loved the idea I had heard one in the wild. Later, as I was gliding through layered dreams, trees were ruffled right on the other side of the wall: Was it a deer? A boar? Sadly that night, these were not the only noises that were made: at 2AM, I couldn't continue ignoring the soft scratching that was happening a couple of meters away from me, and I knew Mat had had enough too. Eventually, he stood up, turning his head lamp on, only to see a mouse fleeing out of our table down through a hole in the ground! The following couple of hours were spent trying to catch it or block the holes where the walls met the floor, both miserably failing: the mouse (or mice?) was at home, and knew each and every holes she could use to come in, hunt for food, and come out.

Thankfully, our day was meant to be significantly easier and shorter than the day before, and so we could indulge in sleeping in. We took our time to leave the soft warmth of our sleeping bag, to find yet a fantastic blue sky outside. We enjoyed the simplicity of being together, alone in Nature. At 9AM, breakfast had barely started. Our feet, including Mat's, had recovered enough to look ahead with appetite, and by 10, the hut was packed and our bags ready to go.

The trail started gently, meandering between ferns and other trees. Some were absolutely enormous and wore the scars of their long life, longer than all of us combined. Passing by these wise living creatures filled us with humility and admiration. Twenty minutes had passed when we reached an opening. In the distance, beyond vast stretches of forests covered hills, Whetū looked upon us. The sky shone a unique, uninterrupted blue. Above us, a kāka screamed a salute: we couldn't see it but we waved in reply.

We knew from the map we were done with our white bread for some time: we'd reached the end of the ridge and the trail was now diving to the valley. The descent was demanding for our already bruised legs. Progress was slow and I could feel the burn on my feet. After more than an hour of slow slog, we reached the valley floor. Without discussing it, the four of us ran for the river and plunged our tired boots in the cold flow. The pain instantly recessed as we let the water heal our bodies.



The trail split in two. To the South, the road end, a mere eight kilometres away. Opposite, at the trail end, our destination for the day: Mangatainoka Hot Springs. We crossed the bridge sitting over the river and headed North. The forest was bathing in beautiful sun rays piercing through the canopy. Green was everywhere, delicate shapes intertwined, curled with one another. In a distance, the sweet melody of the waters travelling their way to the ocean. The path sat mostly flat, challenging us occasionally to climb a little more, only to go down again. At 1PM, it opened up widely: we had arrived to the hot springs.

In front of us, a deck had been built, slightly elevated, in which three big tubs were enshrined, each with a tap. A bench ran along the edge of the deck. I opened a tap: hot water started flowing. Some tubs already had cooler water: it'd be easy to reach an ideal temperature. Resisting the desire to dip in immediately, we continued our exploration: beyond the deck, sparse, low trees dressed a sandy camping area. We quickly identified where our tents would be pitched and dropped our bags at a nearby table located in an open area. We then headed to the river, climbing a very gentle sand dune. Beyond, a giant swimming hole, deep and dark, echoed the greens surrounding the gorge. Its shore licked a soft beach: some granite boulders emerged from the sand and trees launched their branches to create beautiful shades on the clear floor. We were alone and had this paradise to ourselves.

We quickly expedited our lunch, eager to soak our tired bodies in warm water. We chose a tub already filled and started increasing the temperature by opening the tap. Leaves and dirt were floating and muddied the water when we slid our feet in a perfectly adjusted warmth. After days of carrying our packs, I felt a relief to be gently lifted by the elements, like in apesanteur in this beautiful Nature. There was no disturbance. My son and my friends' presence heightened the beauty and the sense of connection. After fifteen minutes, I exited the tub and walked to the beach, bare feet on the soft trail. On the river, downstream, a family of whios paddled gently. I went underwater and swam against the current, occasionally tasting the water: it was sweet. I then sat on a rock, letting the sun slowly dry my body.

Rested and complete, we went on pitching our tent. Mat chose a site close to the edge of the campground, by a high wall. I picked a site closer to the river, between the trees. Adan helped me unfold the inner mesh and we both agreed we wouldn't need the fly. I unrolled the mattresses and duvets. It was 4PM and a nap couldn't feel more appropriate.



I woke up to the sound of Adan's voice: a raft had landed on the beach, he said, and a group of eight men were unloading their gears. Of course, I knew they would be respectful, kind, but still ... our bubble had busted. I looked at them in the distance: they were a group of semi-retired friends, bringing tents, chilly bins and other devices of comfort. Discussions were continuous, punctuated by bursting laughs, rural and warm. Mat lightly engaged with the group and learned descending the river was a yearly tradition for them. My interactions remained very limited, and as I left my tent, I went on preparing our dinner. Tonight, we would enjoy one of our delicious treat: a bowl of rice, some dehydrated sauce and aged salami, followed by our mythical bush crepes.

With one ear, I listened to the chats from the nearby table. They'd taken an helicopter, them and all their gears, up the river the day before, with multiple trips. While sympathetic, I wasn't impressed by their complete disdain for the carbon cost of their adventure. One of the men then remembered how a few years back, he took part in a movie shooting in this very valley: the whole team had been transported by air, and, to add insult to injury, the producer, who had a MacDonalds craving, sent the chopper to town so that he could eat his cheap burgers. This story filled me with sadness and I wondered if, with this kind of behaviours, Nature and the Climate would ever recover from human roaming the earth.

After dinner, Adan and Lucas went wandering. We hung our bags of food high, in the hope it would deter possums, then Mat wanted to show me an interesting corner of the campground. We walked between the trees, rounded the roots sprouting across the bush floor like tentacles. Mat pointed to a small excavation low on the wall, digging in the ground, where water emerged: it made me wonder how much this would overflow in heavy rains. I liked these moments when Mat and I were alone: our discussions could flow at our very chosen pace, in confidence, cuddling in the warm trust we shared for one another. It felt as if nothing existed, that no worries had to be carried or mulled over. Time floated and seemed to slow down, if only for a moment. This friendship, I was so grateful for it.

The day neared its end. I sipped on my flask, looking around me, taking everything in, the calm, the sounds, the colours, the people I loved. As dusk approached, Adan and I gently drifted to our duvets.



Te Maunga Whetū, the Mountains we climb

RĀTŪ



I felt the last wisps of slumber brush against my soul before gently taking flight into the morning's sweet air. I opened one eye: was I in paradise? Through the thin mesh of the tent, I could see the low canopy and then beyond, whispering a love song to my ears, Mohaka River. Despite being half awake, I could not believe my fortune to be in such a beautiful place, lying next to my son. His fully rested face was looking at me from the opening of his duvet: he smiled.

I wanted to see the day rising too and escaped the comforting warmth of my sleeping bag. The sun couldn't yet reach the crease of the valley where we had spent the night, yet the other group was already in motion. I knew the hot brew had to be the first thing to get me going too. Being busy preparing it also gave me a convenient excuse to not engage. I was looking forward to offer a cup to my friend too: Mat slowly came out of his tent when I extended him his coffee. We went to the sandy beach and sat. It was 6:30AM.

We then chained breakfast and packing our tents. The other group was running on a different tempo, but we knew they would descent the waters faster, and knew we would see them again. We set off at 8AM under a cloudless sky, retracing our steps from the day before.

Mat was in good spirits, despite his bruised feet. He kept singing the chorus of a song named « By the river », which seemed appropriate. At times, he talked about the idea of juicy burgers that started to creep in his mind. I wasn't sitting in the same happy place: after we left the camp, a feeling of anger and deep sadness had settled in me. If this place was so perfect, if we loved these moments so much, why would we leave, I wondered? Our tramp was nearing its end and I didn't want to accept it. We kept walking until we reached the bridge we had crossed the day before, and I struggled to keep my emotions under a lid. I let the group cross first, and for a moment, truly considered to take the trail back towards Whetū. I looked at it, a few seconds passed, and I reluctantly pushed my body in motion to the South, to the road end.

The sun was now fully in the valley. Light was setting everything alight, scents exploded under the warmth. At times, the saturated smells reminded me of these days of my childhood, in Provence, when temperatures were so high we could not go outside. Ironically, at a short distance from us, we could hear and see the river, wide and powerful. I declared I would need a swim before we'd finish the tramp: we needed to be at the car around midday and didn't have much time to spare, but Mat rapidly agreed. Better, I shared how I needed not to be rushed out, to ease my way out of the hike, which he understood. While he was eager to reclaim some level of comfort, and I was eager to make this last stretch drag, a swim in the river seemed an easy compromise.



The need for a reward became even more pressing when a chopper, which had passed at low altitude a couple of times since we'd left the camp, came back: it was clearly transporting, back and forth, some gears up the valley. For me, it was an impossible invasion of our beautiful bubble and I struggled to contain my anger. This machine, its noise, its smell was tearing apart the feeling of solitude we had experienced so far, and destroyed « our » natural shrine like a knife would tear through an invaluable painting. I fumed.

Thankfully, we needed a break to rest and recharge, and a beautiful beach presented us with the promise of a refreshing dip. The boys found some shade, but Mat and I went to shore and entered the water. I enjoyed its cool caress along my body, and watched my friend do the same. The nuisance, frustration and sadness vanished as I let myself float and drift, carried by the current. When my heart felt filled with gratitude, I put my clothes back on and returned to Adan, Lucas and Mat. Our stock of food was now depleted. While I hadn't been very hungry during the hike, I could tell we had probably a bit undershot and could have done with bigger rations. When we felt ready for the one hour walk ahead of us, we lifted our bags for the last time. Lucas, who had been struggling in the first couple of days had now a light pace. He kept cracking jokes with his best friend: how fortunate were they to have each others?

As planned, we reached the car park at noon. In the now-scorching heat, even I was grateful to pull off my boots. My skin felt unusually soft after four days of sweat and swimming. We sat in the shed and shared one last apple.



Adan looked at me and said, « Elle m’a fait du bien, cette rando », this hike had done him good. I, too, felt fulfilled. When we had entered the trail four days earlier, I hadn’t been sure I was still fit enough to complete such a hike. But those fears had proved unfounded. Despite everything I had gone through with my knees in 2025, I had made it to the other side, whole. Mat, too, after struggling at first, had made it.

The journey had challenged us just enough and rewarded us in countless ways. We had climbed a summit, lifted ourselves above the bush line, encountered hardly anyone, relatively speaking, and soaked in the finest hot pools a man could dream of. And once again, we had done it together.

It was striking to see how much the boys had grown since we first took them tramping in Nelson Lakes. It wouldn’t be long before they surpassed us in strength and endurance. I wondered which mountain had been harder to climb: Whetū, or the one within?

Mat, Lucas, Adan, and I had shared yet another wonderful adventure. In the temple of our most cherished memories, this one would find its place, engraved in granite, forever bearing our gratitude for the bush and for our friendship.



Makino Hut

NO FIRES
IN FRONT
OF HUT