



PENNY JONES

Charlie Brown and the remarkable view from the top

Shadow Basin Chair and Lake Alta tracks, Remarkables Range / easy

My friend Charlie Brown and I picked a fine day in late summer to venture into the Remarkables, near Queenstown. Hidden behind the fortress of the range are a couple of high altitude walks that are only suitable during the summer months and have amazing views, unique alpine vegetation and, as we were about to find out, one hell of an echo.

Our plan was to tackle the Shadow Basin Lookout Track, then cut across country to Lake Alta and return via the Lake Alta Track. Both tracks start and finish at the Remarkables ski field base which is reached by a gravel road from the valley below. Just getting there was the first challenge, and with the hairpin corners and deadly drop-offs, I was awash with adrenalin before I set foot on the mountain.

The temperature at the ski field base soon took my mind off the road. At 1650m, it's much colder than in Queenstown, and the clouds puffing from our mouths as we prepared to leave were a strong reminder to take extra clothing.

A trail map in front of the main doors of the ski field base identified the chair lift names, but proper signage for the track was somewhat lacking. The Shadow Basin Chair Lift is an obvious landmark so using it as a rough guide we followed our noses until we were on the right track. It was sharp, rocky and steep terrain but the track zigzagged up the mountain to the left of the chair lift and was relatively easy going. As we climbed, we met a few fellow climbers on their way down who all looked dressed for the Antarctic so we had an inkling that it would be even colder at the top.

At the top of the chair lift we followed the sign and well trodden path to the lookout. It was only a further 10-minutes but as we expected, the temperature plummeted as an enthusiastic westerly threw itself over the Remarkables and howled our way. The weather had rolled in slightly but the view was still incredible and extended all the way over the Wakatipu Basin to the Fiordland, Mt Aspiring and Aoraki/Mt Cook national parks. Mt Aspiring was especially vivid and looked all dressed up for a cold night out with a glacier curving around its neck like a fur muff. The wind played rough as we clambered from the fenced-in lookout to a weather station on the next peak along, but with the help of

chocolate and a huddle behind a strategic boulder we managed to enjoy the view and work out our next move.

We set off in the rough direction of a saddle above Lake Alta, which would keep us to the high ground. It was an ankle twisting 45-minute scramble over loose and sharp rocks so I was glad for my sturdy boots. On the saddle we were a couple of hundred metres above the lake. It was dark green, wonderfully transparent and cupped in an almost perfect natural bowl with the twin peaks of Double Cone (2319m) rising steeply on one side.

It was another tricky scramble down and about half way I stopped to shout something across to Charlie, but it was the mountain that shouted back. An echo! Feeling like a pair of kids we played with our echoes until we were hoarse.

It was hard to tear ourselves away but buoyed by more chocolate and the rediscovered joy of echoes, we set off along the Lake Alta Track. It was a good footpath and downhill all the way back past information panels, short and tall tussocks, alpine flowers and wetlands. Soon we were pulling our boots off and preparing to negotiate the hair-raising road back with a well-earned, satisfied glow.

- Penny Jones

WILD FILE

Access The Remarkables ski field access road is off SH6 between Frankton and Kingston. It's a 30-minute drive to the base buildings from the turnoff on an unsealed road

Grade Easy – Medium

Time Two to three hours return for the Shadow Basin Lookout Track or one-and-a-half hour return for the Lake Alta Track; about four hours return for a combination of the two tracks

Map Track descriptions and a map are available in the Department of Conservation brochure, *Remarkables and Doolands Walks*

Further information DoC Queenstown, ph (03) 442 7933, www.doc.govt.nz