

Mist, Scrub and Ultramafic Boulders
-an epic in the Olivines

Written up by Penzy Dinsdale



Approaching Forgotten River Col – Penzy Dinsdale

This trip was planned to be a challenge. The planning was a challenge, the organisation a challenge, finding keen people a challenge and of course the planned route was too. In fact when the three of us girls set off for our girl's only traverse of the Olivine Range, we all but knew we were unlikely to be completing our set route. What remained to be seen was how much we would have completed when we rolled out of the scrub, scratched and bleeding, fifteen days later.

So Katherine quit the job she hadn't yet started. Lydia negotiated getting leave in advance, and far faster than anticipated the 16th of January rolled around and we were on our way to the West Coast with an ok, but not outstanding weather forecast.



Penzy Dinsdale on the Olivine Cableway – Lydia McLean

We arrived at Greenstone Helicopters mid afternoon to the great news we'd be flying in straight away, so after a quick weigh in (we just slipped in under the fly threshold) we were on our way. First doing a car shuttle by helicopter. We landed near Olivine Hut, our first and last planned sign of civilization and relaxed for an evening of good food and much anticipation. The first day walking was great, awesome cableway across the river, fantastic weather but way too hot! Difficult, but passable bushbashing into the Diorite, made harder by running out of water part way up and resorting to squeezing moss. So we were of course very excited by the paradise that was the upper diorite, and a very welcome swim. The next day also started well, the rocks up to Four Brothers Pass were considerably more stable and easier than described.

It started raining an hour after we left camp. It didn't stop. By the time we got to Forgotten River Rock Biv, we were wet through, and retrospectively that was 'light' rain. The rock biv was such a palace we vowed we wouldn't leave the next day unless it wasn't raining, so we had a bit of relaxed morning until the sun came out. Then it was time to put on yesterday's wet clothing - I can assure you that no matter how bad you think wet socks are, there is nothing worse than a wet bra! All was going well, until we stopped for lunch, at which point it started raining again. This became somewhat of a trip theme. The great view we had had of Forgotten River Col vanished and we ended up climbing in in clag and thus called it a bit of an early night in the hopes it would be better in the morning. Made dinner, it started raining.



Forgotton River Col – Penzy Dinsdale

People talk about what a spectacular place the Olivine Ice Plateau is, and you'd better ask them about it. Because I really only have my imagination of what it might have looked like outside the cloud we were in. In good news though the GPS app I had downloaded for the trip worked really well and we found our way up Little Ark. And we found yet more clag. This was a defining point of the trip, as we'd heard earlier report of crevasses on the Gyrae Ledge, our planned route, and had hinged our decision to proceed with seeing the ledge from Little Ark to evaluate if we wanted to have a crack at it or not. Hmmm, going well. We decided that while you can GPS your way across a glacier, you can't really GPS your way out of a crevasse that you can't see, so we picked our bail-out option, which had the added bonus of a rock biv in two days time when the really bad weather was supposed to hit. As if to corroborate our decision the cloud lifted locally so we could see the crevasses between us and the bail-out route, but still not the Gyrae Ledge. So we roped up and headed off towards col 1925 below Darkness Peak, which proved to offer highly entertaining options for getting down.



Getting onto the snow below col 1925 – Penzy Dinsdale

The information I had for this section of the trip contained the words 'you can always abseil'. I would now like to contest this information. Because what we found ourselves on was ever steepening bare slab - not an abseil point in sight. Eventually we got to the point of not being able to continue on the slab and began making our way across to a steep, somewhat broken up gully of snow, which looked a lot like heaven, even though at any other time I probably would have tried to stay away from it. Getting onto it was another challenge. Lydia tried to dig a platform in the hard snow to get her crampons on one at a time while not dropping anything. Eventually we gave up on this, and finally managed to sort it out by bracing ourselves against the snow edge while trying not to slide under it. But then we were on our way. Straight down didn't go because of the cut up mess of snow, but we found another less cut up gully further over with a waterfall running under thin snow, so set up a quick snow bollard abseil and we finally on easier ground in time for lunch. In the rain. At 3pm.



Katherine abseils off the snow bollard – Penzy Dinsdale

It was straightforward and very enjoyable going from here up onto the Barrier Ledge; despite the very tempting valley campsite we passed. And the ledge was the highway we'd been promised. We set up camp, cooked dinner; it rained. Who actually wants to sit down and enjoy dinner anyway? We rang out for our first forecast of the trip, and not much had changed. The big front was coming slightly later and it would shower before that and a bit a bit after that, all good, would be too hot if it were sunny any way right?

The next day was a long one and it was supposed to shower a bit. But we woke to steady rain, packed up and I told the others they were in charge of stops today. I can't be trusted to stop regularly in the rain! We headed along the ledge and round to Stag Pass, which involved bushbashing off a ledged bluff system, just inside the trees. Sure beat the scrub though! On top of Stag Pass was miserable weather, so no view, no thoughts of climbing Little Red Mountain, just keep walking. Just above Rata Stream, we had a pause and Katherine had some lunch. Then we found a green rock, which then broke apart to reveal fibres. We had found asbestos! Getting on to the spur of decent between Rata Stream and Kea Stream was a good time - asbestos makes great scree and the rain was keeping the fibres on the ground.

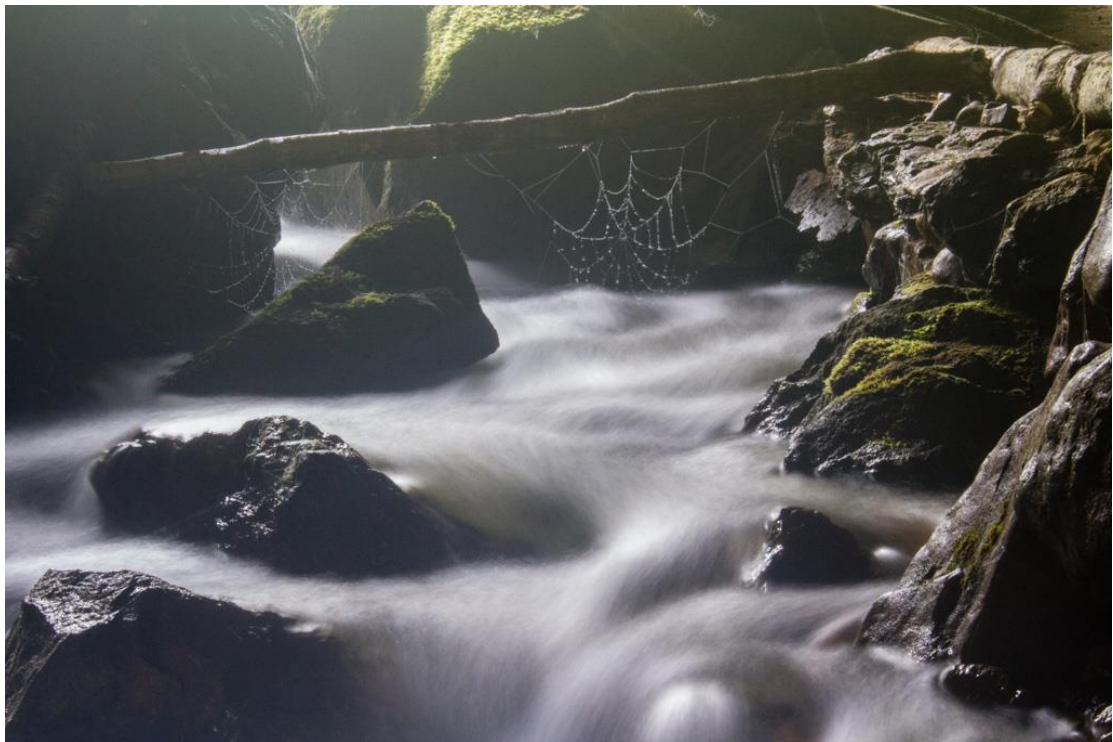


The Pyke River Valley in rain – Penzy Dinsdale

Soon we were at the Pyke, and predictably it was running high, so we set off bushbashing, hoping it wouldn't take too long to find a decent crossing spot. About 20 mins later we spotted a swimming hole. Maybe we could swim the river? We found our way around and down the edge of the bluff to it and began sorting out how we would keep everything dry while swimming. I wasn't too keen on getting any more wet than I was so I bushbashed a further 20m and found an ok crossing right where the swimming hole ended. Wet shorts. That's ok can deal with those! Finally on the correct (and right) side of the river, but the going didn't get much easier. We eventually found a small piece of tape which we assumed to be marking the start of the route up to Simonin Pass, so plunged into the bush only to lose it immediately and pop out of the bush into the wonderful boulders some distance from the intended route. Maybe you've been there before, or maybe you've just heard of the legendary ultramafic boulders. Fantastic red boulders with an outstanding grip profile, but also a high propensity towards damaging skin 'it's like tramping between cheese graters'. But for whatever reason, I don't know, maybe the damp atmosphere the boulders were also extraordinarily slippery. This made for careful progress of about 600m per hour and some unintentional blood loss, including chaffage. So there we were, scrub, mist and ultramafic boulders. Then it got dark. Out came the head torch, and the GPS. Eventually around 11pm we found ourselves on top of the rock bivouac symbol on the map, but no rock bivvy. Just as we were about to give up we found a massive cairn in the middle of a clearing. That had to be it right?! It is surprising how big a small boulder can look by the light of a head torch and just how much a tree can resemble a boulder. We had so many eureka moments spotting boulders around that clearing only to be crushed as we approached closer. By 11.30 we were truly disheartened and set about finding the dry patch of said swampy clearing to camp on. At 11.35 we crawled into the tent and had lunch. 11.35pm that was.



Penzy on an island in Simonin Stream calling Max to find out when its going to stop raining – Lydia McLean



Simonin Rock Biv water supply – Penzy Dinsdale

We woke to rain. Forecast rain, but rain nonetheless. I got up and went on a long enough search for the bivvy to get the others worried about me before heading back towards camp in the glum realisation we would need to head for the camping just below Simonin pass, hoping it was less swampy, and sit out the storm in our tent. On a wild whim I checked out a patch of bushes on my way

back and found an uninviting overhang, which clearly flooded from time to time. However, there was a dry end to this where we could maybe light a fire and have a dry-ish spot to hang out outside the tent in the glorious weather. So we packed up camp and headed the 5 minutes back there and then thoroughly disappointed ourselves with just how average it was and how this must be the 'rock biv' marked. Lydia went for one final circumnavigation of the boulder and came back positively beaming. Around the corner, between our first boulder and the next was a positive cathedral! Complete with fireplace, running water, table and chairs, as well as various historic artefacts. We had found the fabled bivvy of Simonin Stream a good 150m upstream of where it is marked, at CA10 286 795.



Katherine, Lydia and Penzy reading Memoirs of a Geisha – Penzy Dinsdale

And it rained. And rained. Then rained some more. And then it rained a bit harder and I lost track of time. On about day 3, when it was most certainly meant to have stopped raining the day before, yet the river was somehow higher than it had been on the day it was supposed to rain hard, I put on my wet weather gear. Pulled a plastic bag over the sat phone and climbed over a couple of drowned tussock bushes to stand on what was a now a shrinking island in the flooded river (a few days earlier it had been a lovely terrace) and rang Max. Because I knew he'd be near a computer. The conversation went something like 'Hi Max, It's Penzy, I'm standing on an island in a flooded river and I would like to know when it's going to stop raining?!' I did also reassure him that I was actually safe and at Simonin rock biv, so he wasn't too worried when I cut out a minute or so later. The answer I got? 'Not for another 48 hours'. That was the day the fireplace became a prow of land, the river nearly reached the table, some cave weta became stranded on a rock and a plank from a previously deceased stool started its journey to the ocean. Time becomes somewhat surreal in such settings, as do many things. You begin to seriously wonder if it ever will stop raining again. You become amazed by just how heavily it is raining and then enthralled when it starts to rain yet heavier still. You sleep, you get up, you eat, you worry about the dwindling food supply, you make plans to leave tomorrow, or later that day and then realise you get no say in the matter, and wondering if it is ever going to stop raining. Logic tells me we sat in the same spot around the

table for 5 days, feebly trying to dry our gear by a poor fire in a damp, cold, draughty and noisy biv. Mostly I'd say that was the point where I lost track of how many days our trip was. We amused ourselves taking photos and filming, fiddling with the fire, carving in the table, making rock art on the walls and by having Lydia read all 449 pages of *Memoirs of a Geisha* aloud to us.



Katherine and Lydia approach Simonin Pass – Penzy Dinsdale

When we finally left the biv we had been short on food for several days, I also felt profoundly deaf for the first half day, but relished the silence as a welcome change from the undying roar of the river. Halfway up to Simonin Pass I started to have doubts. We had left in high optimism that morning that in two days time we would be opening up our food drop on Arcade Saddle. It pretty quickly became clear that several days of short rations was not to be argued with, we were making slow progress with Katherine and I feeling particularly sorry for ourselves. While lunch was a welcome break, condiments, of which our lunch mostly consisted, are not in themselves really enough for a meal and it was from about this point on that we felt our chances of success were really going down hill and we were perhaps just postponing the inevitable call for help.



Lydia and Katherine contend with flooded streams from the Red Hills as we approach the Cascade – Penzy Dinsdale

There was also the Cascade River to be contended with. The route we had taken sidling around Red Mountain, was described in Moir's as a particularly dry route. This was, however, not our experience. We found water cascading suddenly out of the sides of Red Mountain in high volumes and clearing taking the course not often taken, judging by the drowned looking vegetation in the streambeds. This did not bode well for our crossing off the Cascade and sure enough upon arriving at its banks it was clear the Cascade was still running well above normal, despite Steve's rule that it took only 12-18 hours after it stopped raining to return to normal flows. (I guess 700mm of rain will do that for you). When we failed to cross the river that day, we pretty much knew it was all over. Even if we had been able to cross the river there's no guarantee we would have been able to haul our hungry selves up to Arcade Saddle the next day, and splitting the group would have been a poor idea in such tiger country, despite its appeal to our hungry brains at the time. By the time we set up camp, in another swamp at 8pm, surrounded by more apparently quite flooded creeks flowing off the Red Hills we were fairly hysterical. And of course as we cooked our remaining fraction of a meal it started raining. Good by to any final hopes of crossing the river tomorrow.

The next day was worse. Well the weather was great. But the combination of hunger and disappointment in ourselves made the bush/scrub/boulderbashing all the more unpleasant. It took us until lunchtime to go just a few kms to the river flats where we threw ourselves at the ground and walked no further. We had reached the end point and while we could go on into utter misery, the risk of doing something dumb or dangerous in our current states wasn't worth it and that chance of getting out on time was gone along with

pretty much all hope of getting there without assistance, so we called the helicopter.



Drying our gear and enjoying the weather while we wait for the helicopter – Penzy Dinsdale

The chopper couldn't make it until the following morning, so we dried our gear and had a swim, both of which were very novel as the last time we'd had either was day 1. Finished our condiments and *Memoirs of a Geisha*, worked on our tans, searched for greenstone and were visited by some Blue Duck. We dissected the trip and came to the conclusion that there was virtually nothing we could have done differently to change the outcome. By the time we were picked up, all the food we had left was tea, salt, pepper and olive oil!



A final dinner; Hummus with peanut (yes just the one) and smelly old cheese – Penzy Dinsdale

But of course it wasn't over just yet. Upon arrival at the car we stuffed our faces with Doritos which had been thoughtfully stowed there before the trip and got on our way. Dream of the amazing lunch we were going to have in Wanaka. Only to break down just above the Gates of Haast! If we learnt nothing else on the trip it was to laugh instead of cry, so that's what we did. Katherine and I are forever grateful to the lovely Nelson couple who stopped and shared their lunch with us on the side of the road while Lydia was off getting help.

A few months on I'm still not really sure if I am truly laughing or crying about this trip. But as planned it was a challenge, just not the one we expected and an epic, like I've never had before. I've put back on the 5kgs I've lost and just about eaten every food I dreamed of while in that bivvy. The food drop on the other hand is still on Arcade Saddle and it will be highly amusing to see what state it is in when it finally makes it back! A massive thanks to FMC for funding what was simultaneously an incredible trip and an unmitigated disaster! And lastly the only thing left to be said is that I will be back in the Olivines, perhaps with a slightly less outrageous plan, just as soon as I have enough holidays (and friends) saved up to deal with such epic disasters again!