

Travel



Mountain HIGH



Richard Moore

With climate change wreaking havoc on the frozen gems of our planet – the polar circles and mountain glaciers – a trip to New Zealand's South Island would not be complete without making a visit to the retreating glaciers at Franz Josef and Fox.

Both glaciers are internationally known and are big tourist drawcards, which is hardly surprising as they are very impressive and very accessible.

The glacier at Franz Josef is within easy reach by car (only a few kilometres drive from the township) and then on foot, with a 1½-hour return walk to the glacier face. Only 10 years ago the angled wall of ice was 200 metres closer than it is now and its retreat is both marked and sad.

You cannot climb on to Franz Josef glacier face itself, as it is too dangerous due to potential rock slides, but it is an impressive formation to look at as you reach the viewing area across from its base.

For a closer look you can fly over it – and



A snow landing (above) gives you the chance for some great photos and on many trips you are able to land on Franz Josef glacier for a view like no other (inset left) while ice formations known as seracs (inset right) will also grab your eye.

Pictures / Richard Moore

on to it – from both Franz Josef town and Fox Glacier.

I can thoroughly recommend taking a helicopter flight on to the glistening snows of the Southern Alps if you have the opportunity.

The scenic flights will have your bottom jaw dropping at the astounding landscape below you with the promise of setting your feet upon some beautiful and unspoiled glacial terrain.

One of the major alpine helicopter businesses is HeliServices NZ, which has been operating scenic trips for more than 25 years and has a fleet of turbine helicopters. They are powerful aircraft and not long after takeoff from Franz Josef we were zooming up the side of mountains heading for the experience of a lifetime.

There are a range of flights on offer and the one I picked was the Twin Glacier excursion during which you fly over both Franz Josef and Fox glaciers and, in the right weather, fly over the ridge between the two before landing for photo opportunities on the snow. HeliServices NZ stresses that these landings are subject to good weather conditions and will be made only at the pilot's discretion.

We were fortunate because the day was perfect for flying. Cool with blue skies and clear visibility.

The experience of zooming over such snow and ice giants is awesome, but actually landing and being able to walk about at 2000 metres is pinch-yourself stuff.

My fellow passengers were beside themselves with excitement and even for an experienced traveller the occasion gets the eyes, heart and mind racing.

Back in the chopper we fly over ice so thick it looks like massive dollops of uncooked meringue, wonder at the seracs – blocks or columns of ice – and the blue colours of the glacial ice.

It is truly amazing and if you have forgotten just how astounding the untamed beauty of nature is then it will be an instant and long-remembered reminder.

Richard Moore is the owner of online travel magazine TikiTouring (www.tikitouring.com) and went on his alpine flight courtesy of HeliServices NZ (<https://www.heliservices.nz>) in Franz Josef.

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