



I'm Alexandre Gendron, Photographer and adventurer from France. I've been travelling two years in Australia and New Zealand. My favourite spot is definitely in the mountains to set up my tent and make the best photos I can. In March 2016 I will start a 1 year journey on my bicycle avoiding planes and any kind of engine use to get from Wanaka in NZ to Paris in France.

M a g e s t i c E a r n s l a w G l a c i e r

Since I arrived in Wanaka, I had heard about this place. People were saying that you needed serious skills to go there; that it's lost in the wild, far away from everything, kind of a secret spot where people go more by helicopter rather than by foot.

They were right! This 12 hours return walk is difficult, especially when you add pouring rain into the equation.

A real adventure starts when you get lost, or so the saying goes ... and I seem to make sure that I'm lost from the first one hundred meters of almost any hikes... don't laugh at me, it's just like that. For most people who come with me it can be annoying and they start to have serious doubts about the trusting me for the rest of the adventure. This time I was with Iva and when after 30 minutes of walking, on a really slippery and a bit too dangerous track, I had to admit we were lost. She just laughed and accepted it saying that it was a good exercise to start again. We came back to the car and I double checked on my computer to find the NZ Topo Map webpage still open and realised that the hike was starting on the other side of the river!

We have a river to cross! And what a river, we both almost slipped on rocks due to the strong current but everything went well and my photographic gear was still dry (for now). Then, we finally started to hike on the good track marked with orange triangles. It seemed you don't need specific skills to find your way as soon as you start on the right track.

While we were walking, battered by the rain and the wind, I've had a lot of thoughts going through my mind during this 6 hours walk. After two hours, I've asked myself if I could find a dry part on my body. Negative answer. Impossible to notify a dry part on all of my body even with my "waterproof" jacket on. We were both totally soaked! In this kind of situation, your mind can be really impressive and I find the best way to disconnect from the bad feeling of the body.

One of those thoughts was about Mike Horn's adventure around the world on the equator, latitude 0. While he was crossing the Amazonian forest for a few weeks he was wet all the time. I felt instantly good as I knew that in our case it was going to be like that just for a couple of days. Then, my mind jumped on his choice to allow the water

to come in his shoes by creating holes in them, instead of trying to keep his feet dry. At least the water didn't stay in his shoes when he was out of the water. It's really nice to have dry feet when you hike but if your shoes are going to be wet you should prefer something that can release the water. The choice can be tricky.

A bit after that, I thought about my body and the feelings. I realized that our body is just a tool given to us to emit and receive information. Nothing less, nothing more. What if you can disconnect the unpleasant information to just keep the pleasant ones? It's maybe in what Tibetan monks excel at! If you have any ideas or info for this, please, send me an email! (alex@ag-photo.fr)

So, I tried to disconnect my mind from the feelings of my body. Not so easy. I guess the best way to do that is to focus on your breath. Thinking about the infinity of possibilities to accept the moment even if it's not a pleasant one.

After few hours, we finally reached the alcove under a mountain where we set the camp for the night.

When you are in this kind of situation, totally wet, cold and in a remote area, you must set up the quickest possible the following points:

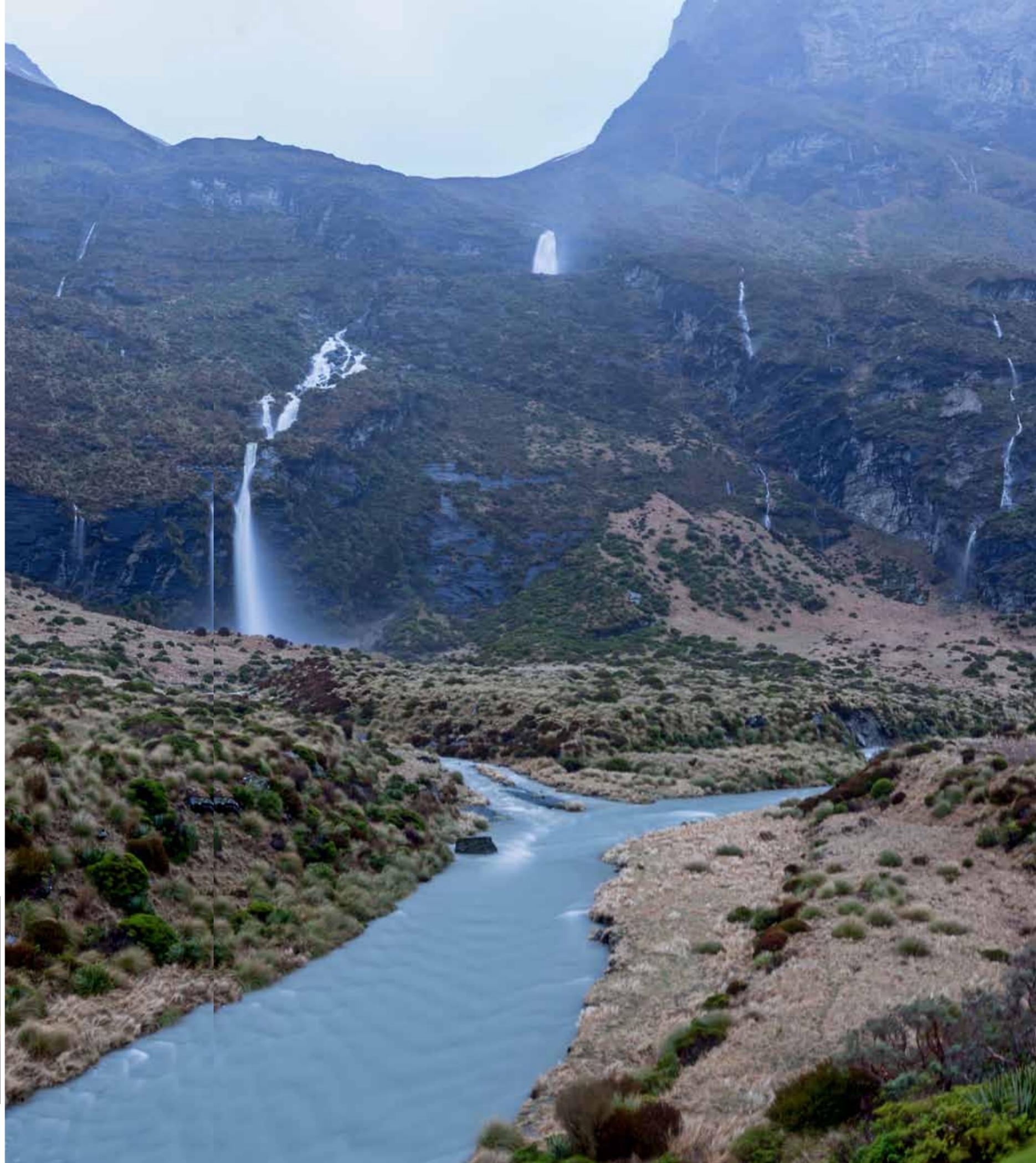
- A shelter to be protected
- A fire to stay warm

Iva started to build a stone wall to protect the fire place from the wind while I set up the tent under the alcove. Luckily there was some "dry" wood underneath the big alcove. Definitely not enough to stay warm all the night but enough to start a fire and dry some of our clothes, especially Iva's sleeping bag. To keep the fire going all night long we went for a mission to find some wood, obviously wet, that we cut into small pieces to make it dry faster. We finally ended up with much more wood than we needed but it will be for the next ones who adventure here.

There is maybe a specific technique to make a fire under an alcove or in a cave to avoid the smoke but we definitely didn't know it and we had some bad times coughing with burning red eyes due to the smoke. The wind was turning quite often and it was difficult to define where to put the tent and where to put the fire.



L-R: Earnslaw burn strong river crossing after huge rains / Fire is the best after 7 hours of rain to dry everything
RIGHT: Elements are getting crazy! 120km wind and heavy rain.





ABOVE: Surprise, the second day... blue sky!

The night was cold - very cold, and Iva's sleeping bag was still wet after a few hours of drying... We organised a bed to keep us warm with my dry sleeping bag and covered us with the wet one. In the morning, I saw some orange colouring on the roof of the tent and could not believe it was the sun reflecting on the mountain. I opened the tent and it was the total opposite than the day before. Blue sky, not a single cloud. Hard to believe in Aotearoa, land of the long white cloud. I jumped out of the tent, grabbed my wet camera bag, and start to walk barefoot to the end of the valley. It's a long walk. The temperature was certainly below zero as some parts of the waterfalls and rivers were frozen. It was really nice at the beginning to walk barefoot and feel the land. Ok, at some stages I didn't feel some of my toes anymore but as soon as the sun touched them, they came back to life. What was impossible to see last night was finally here in front of me or it was maybe me in front of it, the majestic giant Earnslaw Glacier with all his waterfalls. Majestic is the perfect word to describe it. I was feeling so small. It's in these kind of moments that you can feel the beauty and the strength of the nature, so much stronger than every one of us. We must stay aware that we are a part of this nature, we are not over or under it. We are it and every one of our actions should be aligned in a way to respect it. It's really difficult today to live in harmony with the

nature but every effort, as small as it is, counts. I'm trying to be more responsible every day and I realise how difficult it is. Going to the end of valley barefoot was maybe not the best idea as the bush started to be really dense and spiky. What a great challenge in the way to disconnect the brain from the body. But as soon as I wasn't focused anymore on taking photographs and running in the bush it started to be very painful. Unfortunately, a lot of my photographs were blurry due to the fog into my lenses created by the heavy rain and the humidity of my camera bag. Luckily the 70-200mm was not that foggy so I created few panoramic to recreate the wide effect of the 24-70mm to keep a souvenir of this majestic mountain. Iva was supposed to meet me on the way to the end of the valley but I didn't see her. I know she wasn't going to stay at the camp and will join me but I guessed we might have missed each other on the way. We finally realised back at the camp that we crossed each other on the way without noticing it. The valley is really wide at some parts and from the alcove there are no proper tracks anymore. The way back to the carpark seemed infinitely longer than the first way. This is when I realised that the brain can sometime shut off some unpleasant parts unconsciously.



IF YOU WANT TO DO THIS HIKE YOU SHOULD:

- download Back Country Navigator App. It allows you to save some maps to access it offline with your gps. Of course, it's always better to use a paper map as on this kind of temperatures, the battery of your smartphone will drop significantly.
- Allow two days, three must be the best to enjoy fully the end of the valley.
- Be ready to be wet and face some strong winds.
- Don't be afraid of crossing rivers, as you will need to.

As this issue is about water, I think this hike is definitely the best to link to it because in this valley, even if the weather is nice, water is everywhere and comes from everywhere. Thank you for reading this adventure, I hope you liked it! If you want to ask any questions, don't hesitate to contact me, I'll be happy to help you. You can find more photographs on my Instagram: @agphotofr

LEFT: River jumping and a long exposure shot
RIGHT: Reflection on Earnslaw Glacier

