EREWHON AWAKENING Five Days of Ski Touring in the Heart of the Rangitata Words by Elke Braun-Elwert



Potts Range, Southern Alps

e meet in the warm, timbered lounge of Mt Potts Lodge as a southerly storm slaps against the windows. Jen brings out a tray of hot drinks and homemade snacks while the group slowly arrives — boots still damp from the walk across the car park. It's the kind of welcome that instantly sets the tone: calm, generous, and grounded in the high country spirit. We pore over maps by the fire and watch the snow fall outside. Tomorrow, if the skies clear, we fly.

We're heading into the upper reaches of the Rangitata, just below the Main Divide, to a new alpine hut that's been years in the dreaming. Erewhon Hut sits tucked into a basin below Mt Potts, perched at the head of a long winding valley that once echoed with the sound of helicopters and happy skiers during the heyday of the Erewhon Heli Park in the '80s and '90s. There was even a rope tow once, and if you look closely, you can still spot some of the pylons. The old Erewhon Ski Area and its quirky, short-lived seasons are now only stories shared between those who remember — but some of the same terrain now lies just a skin-track away from our new home.

Malcolm Prouting, our pilot, greets us with a grin and his usual dry wit. A seasoned high country aviator, Malcolm has been flying these valleys longer than most of us could ski and threads his machine through the high country like it's an extension of his own limbs. And of course, he learnt to ski on the Erewhon rope tow back in the day. "Weather's holding," he says, "but you won't want to hang around too long on that ridge."

From the air, the landscape unfolds in wide sweeps: braided rivers turned to ice, wide cirques filled with fresh snow, and spiny ridgelines linking unnamed peaks. The hut appears suddenly

beneath us — small, compact, and perfectly placed. From the outside, Erewhon Hut is humble, clad in red with a steep snow-shedding roof. But step inside, and you see the craft.

Every detail has been considered: gear drying space that actually works, boot room separated from sleeping, double-glazed windows that frame the peaks, and a stove that turns ice cold spring water to tea in minutes. The design reflects years of hutlife experience and a deep understanding of what ski tourers really need. It's the kind of place that immediately becomes a home.

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Erewhon Hut, Potts Range, Southern Alps

Over the next five days, we ski lines that feel like they've been waiting for us. Smooth, aesthetic descents roll from alpine summits into hanging valleys. South-facing bowls offer steep freeride terrain with long, clean runouts — reminiscent of the area's heli-skiing past — while mellow glades let us link turns all the way back to the hut door. There's something here for everyone: summit-to-valley descents, technical couloirs, and lazy powder laps in the late afternoon sun. We earn each one with skins and sweat.

Evenings are spent around the stove, drying and mending gear and sharing stories. The group settles into a rhythm: big climbs, long runs, hut-life, repeat. The sense of isolation is complete — we don't see another soul all week.

The walk out is no afterthought. Weather closes in again and with it, the helicopter stays grounded. So we shoulder packs and ski the upper reaches of the old Erewhon access road before the real challenge begins: navigating slips, washouts, and scree as the snow turns to rock. The final kilometers take grit and determination. But as we round the last corner and see the windbreaks of Mt Potts Lodge on the flats below, there's a quiet satisfaction in our group. We've moved through country few get to experience, slept under mountains that don't have names, and shared something rare: a taste of the old high country — unfiltered, real, and hard-earned.

About the Author: Elke Braun-Elwert

Elke Braun-Elwert grew up in the mountains—literally. Daughter of legendary mountaineer and guide Gottlieb Braun-Elwert and Kiwi adventurer Anne Braun-Elwert, she was raised in the Mackenzie Basin, where adventure was a way of life. From an early age, she was exploring the Southern Alps on skis and foot, helping carry supplies into remote huts, and soaking up the knowledge and quiet determination that defines her family's legacy.

Today, Elke is one of New Zealand's few female IFMGA-qualified mountain and ski guides—a globally recognised certification that takes years of commitment and serious time in the backcountry. She guides ski traverses, alpine climbs and trekking trips across Aotearoa, and plays a key role in running Alpine Recreation, the Tekapo-based guiding company her parents founded in 1981

Elke has led numerous trips along the Symphony on Skis route—an iconic alpine traverse her father pioneered, across the Southern Alps from the headwaters of Lake Tekapo to the West Coast—and is passionate about making the mountains more accessible for women. She runs women's-only courses such as She's on Skis and She's on Spikes, designed to give women the skills and confidence to get into the backcountry in a supportive environment.

When she's not guiding or running Alpine Recreation, Elke is often out exploring with her young family or helping with her husband's custom bike-packing gear business (Robo-Kiwi Bikepacking Bags). With a calm, practical style and deep roots in the high country, she's helping shape the future of mountain guiding in Aotearoa—just like her parents did before her.

If you're keen to go on a trip with Elke, check out the great adventures on the Alpine Recreation website: https://alpinerecreation.com or book a ski tour in the Cass Valley: https://alpinerecreation.com/new-zealand-backcountry-skiing-and-split-boarding/the-best-freeride-ski-touring-and-split-boarding-adventures-in-new-zealand/cass-valley-ski-touring-and-split-boarding





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