

# THE UNLIKELY MOUNTAINEER

BUILDING FITNESS FROM THE GROUND UP

By Mariana (Maki) Shaw

The rock shifted under my boot.

It was May 2024. I was suspended on my first ever abseil, halfway down a cliff in the Southern Alps, somewhere between Ball Glacier and Caroline Hut. I was exhausted from the previous day's hike up to the hut and already sore in places I didn't know could hurt. As I felt the rock move, my whole body froze up (even if I wasn't technically standing on it). My mind split in two: one voice screaming in panic, the other whispering logically: I'm safe, the rope will hold, the anchors are secured, everything is good.

Logic was losing ground by the second.

Elke, my guide, waited calmly at the anchors, watching the panic take over me. I can't remember if I managed to speak or if she simply read the terror in my body, but she began explaining the safety systems, talking me through each piece of gear and how it would hold. I could barely respond. I couldn't breathe, my legs were shaking, and tears began running down my face. I simply couldn't move. I was the last person descending and everyone else was waiting below.

Once she realised I was truly stuck, Elke prepared to come down to me, still speaking softly. She explained that she could perform a rescus manoeuvre and get us both safely to the bottom. That helped, and I could breathe again, but once the fear eased, embarrassment took its place. Hanging helplessly in a harness is not where you want your body to shut down.

We finally reached the ground, but I felt completely deflated.

By the time we made it back to the valley a couple of days later, something

else had taken root: fury. Not at the mountains, not at the situation, but at the fact that my body wasn't ready to let me enjoy this world I had just discovered. Because the truth was, I loved it. Even through the pain, the fear, and the awkward footing up Ball Pass, I was hooked.

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That anger became fuel.

I'm originally from a small town in the middle of vast (and flat) agricultural land. That means: no national parks, no hiking, no mountain-related outdoor activities. I first started hiking when I moved to New Zealand back in 2016, but only on well-formed tracks. Let's just say that my outdoor (and fitness) experience was... limited. I literally didn't know what was out there.



Short stop to get our breath back once on Pinnacle Ridge.

*Te Heu Heu in the background. - Photo by Felipe Aguirre*



*Mt Tasman peak from Caroline Hut. My new definition of visual privilege! Photo by Maki Shaw*



The whole crew staring at the goal for the day: Ringatoto Peak, with Girdlestone Peak standing in the back. Image by Maki

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A few months in, I realised I still had no idea how to structure proper gym training, so I booked a personal trainer who sorted me for a decent workout. I started going to the gym three times a week - me! Someone who had never dared walk through those doors!

When you want something this bad, life has its own way of taking you there (hint: it's never straightforward). I was on the lookout for anything that would keep motivation high and take me back to the mountains, and I applied to join an all women expedition in the Peruvian Andes as a photographer. The trip was starting less than 6 months from the time I applied - and I'd only know for sure if my application had been successful 4 months in advance.

I knew the chances of getting the job were slim, but that pushed me to a whole different level of commitment. If I got it, I had to be more than ready, and there was no time to lose. I started working closely with Savanna Ashley, a climber and trail runner herself. With Sav's guidance, training became extremely targeted rather than... well, chaotic. I had a clear goal: be ready for the expedition. Life knows better, and I didn't get chosen for this round (I'll have to persevere for next year).

One year after that first terrifying abseil, I finally found myself in the mountains again. I joined the NZ Alpine Club, met a few people online and signed up for a winter mission to Ringatoto summit via East Ridge (Ruapehu), a Grade I route. My partner and I had to turn back halfway and let the rest of the group go ahead. My engine wasn't ready yet, and I was mentally beating myself up for trying to match people with years more experience (read: fitness experience).

I turned that setback into fuel as well. Sav refocused my programme on cardio and endurance, and I slowly started feeling stronger, not just physically but mentally.

A couple of months later, I returned to Ruapehu, this time via Pinnacle Ridge toward Te Heu Heu. It was brutally hard and pushed every limit I had, but I reached the summit. That trip taught me a lot about snow conditions, terrain, decision-making, and patience, but most importantly it showed me all the progress I had made.

I came home realising that, while there was still a long way to go, my body was finally capable of handling a full mountain day. And that was only the beginning. I didn't become mountain-fit overnight. It

took heaps of consistent sessions, learning how to move better, and accepting that strength and confidence in the outdoors had to be earned. But coming back and finally feeling capable changed everything.

Not everyone starting out in mountaineering needs to be an elite athlete (I'm definitely not), but a minimum level of fitness gives you freedom, especially if you didn't grow up outdoors and scrambling over rocks doesn't quite come naturally (yes, I'm jealous of those people). Fitness buys you time, safety margins, clearer decision-making and the chance to enjoy where you are instead of just trying to wing it, one struggling breath at a time.

I'm still learning. I'm still awkward with ropes, and abseiling is something I'm working hard to make peace with. But change takes time and I've learnt to love the journey to get there.

My next mission is coming up, heading to Arthur's Pass. I know the mountains will push me again, but now I am ready for that. With fitness no longer holding me back, I have the mental space to face the real challenges of mountaineering, and to do it as safely and joyfully as I can, as it's meant to be.

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