

RED CRATER and OTURERE in winter

260 Series Maps: 1:50,000 Tongariro T19 and Ruapehu T20
Topo50 Maps: BH34 Raurimu, BH35 Turangi & BJ35 Waiouru
Topo250 Map: Sheet 09

NZ Grid GPS: Geodetic Datum 1949
NZTM GPS: NZTM on WGS84

How to get to START: Exit Taupo on SH1 down the lake to Turangi (47km in 45 minutes) then:

- Turn right off **SH1** to **SH41** towards Tokaanu
- Turn off left to **SH47** for National Park
- Continue on **SH47** and at 90km (1:15 min) turn left on to gravel road for Mangatepopo & Tongariro Alpine Crossing – speed limit 40kph
- Park and off-load at car park (1130metres) with toilets at 96km and about 1 hour 30 minutes driving from Taupo.

Rough Description: A walk which is hard enough in summer time and which can be a real challenge in winter conditions. The first day is virtually the Tongariro Alpine Crossing but going to Oturere Hut instead of via the Ketetahi Hut. Day 2 comprises a relatively easy walk out via Waihohonu to the Desert Road. Careful preparation has to be made for this tramp and a very close study made of the weather forecast. Equipment required does include extra layers, heavyweight gloves, crampons and ice axe. Inexperienced walkers should consider long and hard before setting out as conditions can be vicious, but once there with clear skies the views are spectacular.

Day 1: Mangatepopo to Oturere Hut

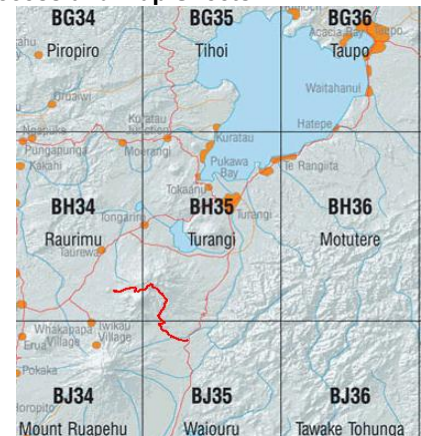
This section is virtually the Tongariro Alpine Crossing but after descending from Red Crater turn off the crossing track on to the one that heads south eastwards to the Oturere Hut. In total the day covers about 13km, has an altitude gain of 925m and a loss of 681m and requires just less than 6 hours. The Oturere Hut is one of the Great Walk Huts with gas heating, good water supply and can sleep 26 people. In the summertime there is a hut warden on duty, gas cooking facilities are supplied and booking is necessary.

The path exits the car park (1130metres) in an ESE direction and starts on a very short section of boardwalk with a shelter near the toilets and heads off up-valley on a track which does get a bit rough in places. Within 20 minutes the sign indicating the path from Whakapapa entering from the right is reached then 5 minutes later there is a branch off left to the Mangatepopo Hut – this is intentional to stop all the day trippers going to the hut.

After 30 minutes a small valley is crossed and the track becomes undulating as the first gentle ascent of the day is made and there are good views of Pukekaikioe to the right and Hardman's Ridge to the left. There is a level area with boardwalk after about 55 minutes, then the valley of the Mangatepopo Stream becomes narrower and there are intermittent sections of boardwalk and short steep rough sections through scoria. The path remains first class all the way to the DOC toilets (1370metres) at Soda Springs which are reached in a total time of just over an hour; as with the toilets in the car park there can be queues because of the hundreds of day-walkers that set off on this tramp. Before starting the ascent of the "staircase" it is worth taking a morning tea stop just past the toilets. The old route of the Devil's Staircase is now not obvious but that was rough and did require some skill plus determination to get up through the scoria and rock.

The new route really is a staircase and the view of the ascent can be quite daunting, especially with all the ant-like figures following each other up in an endless chain but, in fact, ascending the "staircase" is not too taxing and one requires 45 minutes to an hour. The views back over the route already traversed are great, especially to see how far above the toilets one climbs so quickly and a feeling of achievement is felt on reaching the plateau area at the top (1662masl). Minutes later the notice (1667masl) indicating the route to climb Ngauruhoe is passed. If the wind is really blowing at this point then seriously consider turning back as there is still a lot more height to gain and the slopes ahead are very exposed. The pleasure of stretching the stride can now possibly be enjoyed for 15 minutes or so as progress is made through South Crater where the track is billiard-table smooth and as wide as a motorway but can be covered with up to about 2metres of snow. At the eastern edge of South Crater the next "grunt" section begins and if it has not been icy to date this area will soon indicate if crampons are needed with a steep, rough and often slippery slope of almost 200m to ascend to get to the crest at Red Crater passing parts of a ridge or rock-wall (1736masl) on the way up. The turn-off (1854masl) for the ascent of Tongariro is found just before the crest of Red Crater (1882masl). If visibility is bad anywhere in this section safety can be improved by staying off the edge of Red Crater and sidling around to the left (NE) – this is the route that many of the guided parties use in winter-time and they "slide or glissade" down the relatively safe slopes into Central Crater before getting over to Blue Lake.

Access and Map Sheets



The tramp route is the red line.



Ready to go up from Soda Springs



Crampons on

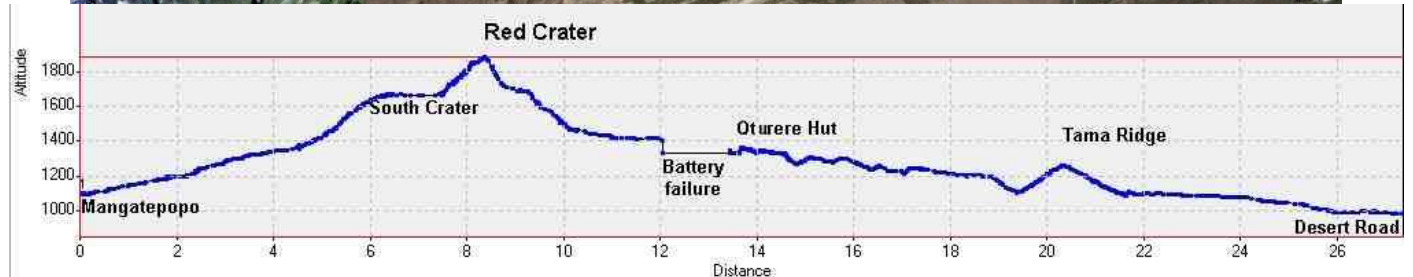
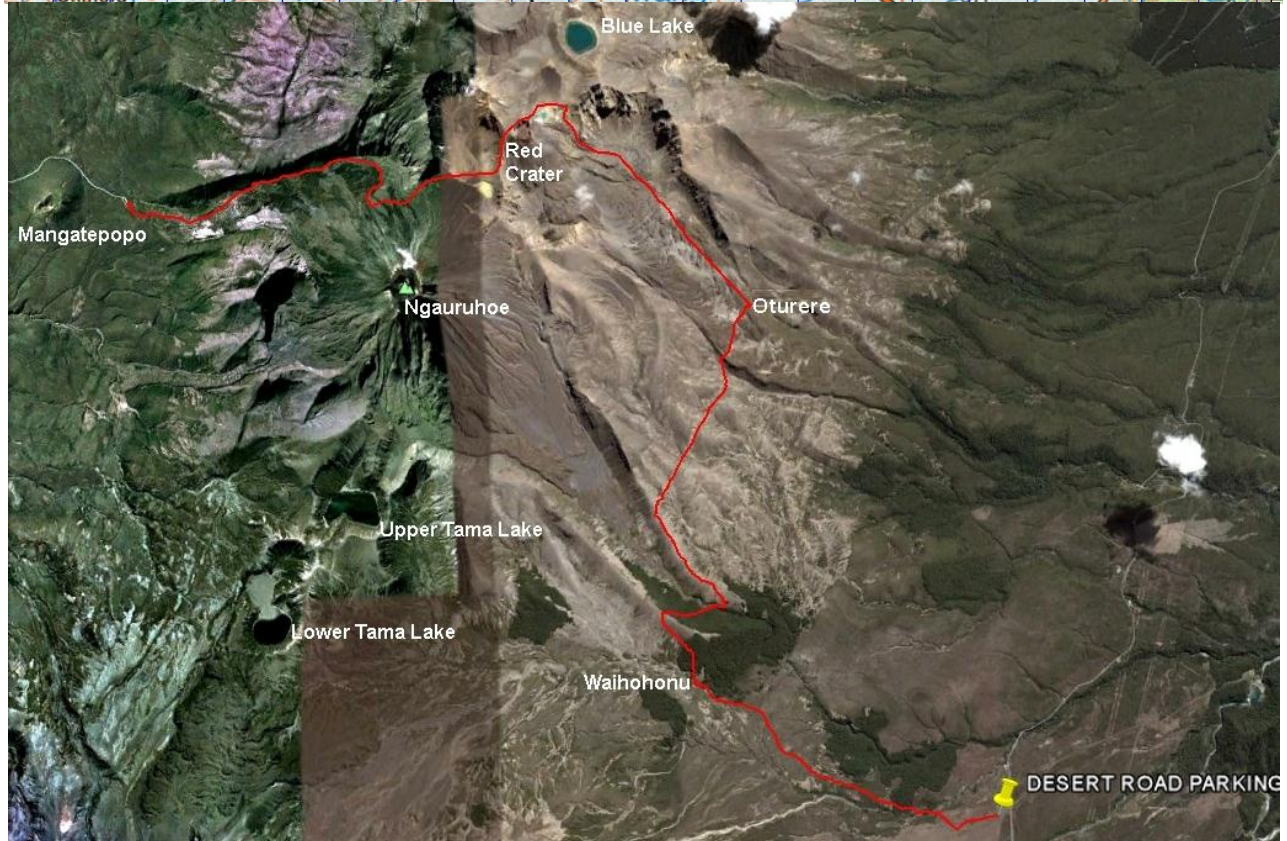
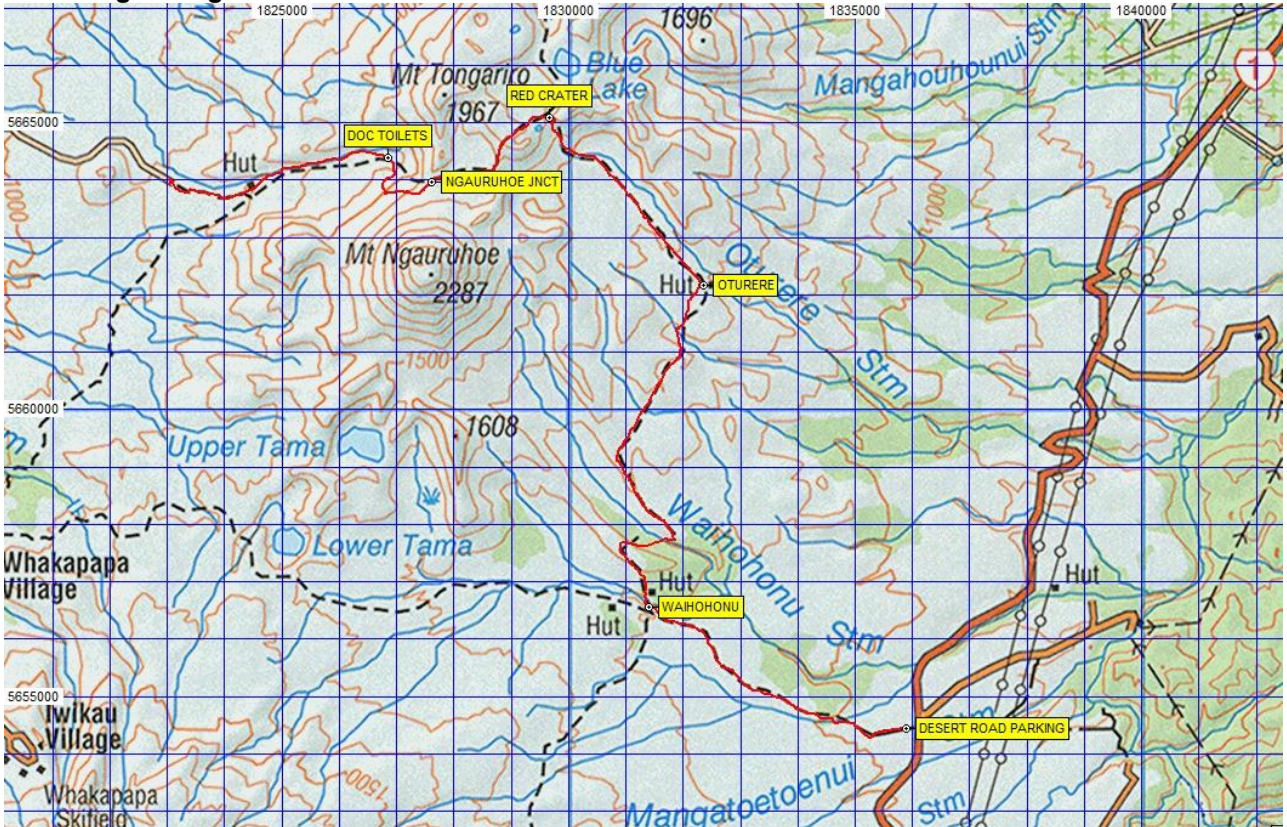


Cold, wild & exposed



Looking back at Red Crater

Map and Google Image



From the crest of Red Crater there can be spectacular views of the next target – the Emerald Lakes. However care must be taken on the descent as it is entirely on loose ash and pumice and the descent can be easier if there is snow covering but beware if it is icy – the fit and agile can “skate” down this in a matter of minutes but the less agile take considerably longer and the use of walking poles can be essential for some. The Emerald Lakes can make a good lunch spot but can be badly blasted if the winds are high. On leaving the Emerald Lakes the route sets off NNE across the eastern side of the Central Crater and within minutes the signposted track (1703masl) off right to the Oturere Hut is reached and the descent begins.

The going is quite slow on the descent as the track is steep and gravelly and again care is required but again snow covering can speed up progress. An amazing scoria landscape - or is it moonscape? – soon comes into view with the “Dragon’s Teeth or Crocodile’s Tail” (1534masl) best describing what is being passed through on the seemingly endless descent parallel to the Oturere Stream.

As the descent proceeds the slope lessens and the going gets easier to arrive at the Oturere Hut (1366masl) where recent upgrades to the water supply and decking have improved accommodation standards.



Telltale footprints on Crocodile’s Tail

Day 2: Oturere Hut to Waihohonu Huts and Desert Road

For most local trampers this section comprises walks they will most probably have done since many people have walked from the Desert Road in to Oturere via Waihohonu (1107metres) but perhaps not in winter. Waihohonu is reached in less than 3 hours and a further hour to an hour and a half is required to reach the car park (982metres) just off the Desert Road.



Scoria Landscape



Oturere Hut



Start of Day 2 - Ngauruhoe

Most of this section is easy walking with several loose gravelly fans to cross – there is the odd minor gully but nothing too taxing – with views of Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu dominating the skyline. The route is well poled and basically heads SW until the ridge above the Waihohonu Valley is reached where it follows the ridge to the SE before the track then heads into the beech forest. In the forest the track heads downslope to reach the bridge over the fast flowing stream line before starting the one grunt of the day following a long sidle up to the WSW to get on top of the Tama Ridge only a few kilometres from Waihohonu.

On the way down the tricky, non-manicured track off the Tama Ridge it is worth taking the minute’s detour to have a look at what remains of the old Waihohonu Hut, this was the new hut and should not be confused with the Historical Waihohonu Hut which still exists in all its glory. The Waihohonu campsite with DoC toilets is then passed through before arriving at the palatial new Waihohonu Hut. This recent construction might be better described as the Waihohonu Hilton with the extreme level of comfort that it offers with double glazing, solar lighting and even hot water for washing up supplied via the wet-back wood-burner and solar panels – the mattresses supplied even have hard and soft sides!



Mirror reflection on door



Waihohonu Hut



Double glazed views

Detail is not given for the 90 minute walk out from the Waihohonu Hut (1107metres) to the car park (982metres) near the Desert Road since much of the route is fully described more fully elsewhere in the various Taupo Tramping Club publications:

- Tongariro Alpine Crossing: in “Longer Day Tramps on the Central Plateau accessible from Taupo”
- Three Huts: in “Selection of Overnight Tramps in the North Island”

Notes:

- **GPS** = Garmin GPSmap 60CSx on NZTM / WGS84
- **WP** = Waypoint as taken by GPS unit
- **masl** = metres above sea level as recorded by GPS unit