

# The Off Season

by Cliff Ellery

Mid winter and the shortest days are upon us, rock-climbers up and down the country are retreating to the climbing gyms. Snow showers are battering the lower south island, a freezing cold southerly howls through Wellington, while in the Waikato the Kaimai's and Central plateau shelter the area ensuring a cold but dry forecast. The barrage of txt messages that proceed a days climbing are in full swing. A plan is hatched, a first ground up ascent of all 4 pitch's of "Anzac Parade", on the main face of Castle Rock Coromandel.

5.45 am the alarm goes off, but unlike a work day, I have been up for 10 minutes dressed and eating breakfast. Switching off the alarm I throw a few muesli bars into my bag, grab my climbing gear, chuck the mountain bike in the back and hit the road.

7.30 am, coffee at Thames then up state highway 25 towards Coromandel. As long as you are not in a rush there is no such thing as a bad drive up the Thames Coast Road, this is a truly stunning part of the country.

8.30 am I turn onto the 309 road and the western cliffs of Castle Rock come into view. The size and untouched potential of this crag means to date no climbers have yet to venture to the base of this wall. Today we were heading for the main cliff the "Quite Earth wall" on the other side of Castle Rock so development of the western wall will have to wait for another day or year.



Up the 309 road past the chickens and pigs that call this road their home. I arrive at the base of the Castle Rock road. They are logging today so the road is closed to cars. I unload the bike and then put on another layer of clothing to keep out the cold. Rachael turns up 5 minutes later, now based in Whitanga this is her local crag. We sort the gear out, light and fast is the motto of the day.

One 60m rope, drink bottle and jacket between us plus 15 quick-draws. We jump on the bikes and start the 3km ride up the hill to the Castle Rock buttresses. 1 km up I stop and strip off a layer of clothing, Rachael's back tyre is looking sick and after trying in vane to pump it up we give in and decide to change the tube. Rachael proceeds to pulls out of her bag a patch-riddled tube, I raise my eyebrows in disbelief but she ensures me it'll be Ok. 5 minutes later we are back on the bikes slogging our way up the hill. Arriving at



the top Car Park we stash the bikes in the bush and head off on foot. For 10 minutes we follow an old road long reclaimed by the bush, before taking a rough and steep climbers trail to the base of the main cliff.

3 months earlier I'd dropped over the top of this cliff to scope out any potential lines. Dangling at the end of my rope with another 60 metres of air below me I couldn't believe my eyes. I was in the middle of a 120m high 800m long vertical cliff with clean featured rock, unclimbed from top to bottom. Hidden away and remote? No not really - at the top you can see the Sky Tower! I'd returned 3 times in the following months starting at the top and bolting a pitch at a time working my way towards the base of the cliff. On 25<sup>th</sup> of April the line was 3 pitch's and 100m high, Rachael, Richard, Brian and I climbed all 3 pitch's, celebrating a fantastic ANZAC day with good mates at this most special of crags. In May I added the last pitch and climbed it in fading light, leaving the ground up ascent of all 4 pitch's yet to be bagged.

So here we were, 125m of climbing to go, I lift my foot off the ground push up then fall back, I laugh it off, joking about beginners. Up past the first 2 bolts and the climbing is now coming smoothly. The line offers up a slab to start with, the rocks is cold the hands warm and the friction is good.

1st Pitch done and Rachael joins me, we swap the jacket and she leads on through. I try and snap off a few shots only to find the batteries going flat. Rachael struggles at the beginning then settles into her stride and soon I get the call "safe", 2 pitch's down. I join Rachael at the hanging belay in

the middle of the wall, we swap gear then I head up the crux pitch. The crux section is an overhanging groove, bridging the groove forces you to keep you arms low and head down making it impossible to ignore the 70m of air below you. An exciting run out gets you to the top of the groove and a lovely bolt. Moving right then one last steep section before easy ground plants you on a huge ledge 30m below the top.



Clipping into the belay I lean back and take in the surrounds, what a view! Castle Rock sits high on a ridge, stretching out below native bush rolls into pine forests and farmland then out to the estuary of Matarangi, Mercury Island and Kennedy Bay can be seen in the distance. Even through the sun was losing the battle and couldn't punch through the gray, it was hard to ignore the fact that this is a beautiful piece of NZ.

A good 20 minutes later Rachael comes into site, I have been warming the camera battery down my shirt so I rattle off a couple of pictures. She joins me on the ledge, apologising for the delay, she had swung off at the crux and then had difficulty getting back in to the overhanging groove. We take a 5 minute break chat and eat a muesli bar. Rachael states she loves this last pitch and she is going to dance up it, so off she goes, no salsa or tango more like something you would see in a mosh pit, soon the music stops and she yells out "safe". At the top we coil the ropes and head down the track getting to the bikes at little after 2.00pm. Great rock, great location and a great days climbing with a good friend all made even sweeter by the fact it's a Friday and most of the population are at work. And there you have it the North Island two biggest secrets, Winter rock climbing and Castle Rock Coromandel.

**ANZAC Parade (20) 125 m**

*Pitch 1 (20) 25m (10 bolts).*

*Pitch 2 (17) 30m (8 bolts).*

*Pitch 3 (20) 40m. (12 bolts.)*

*Pitch 4. (17) 30m (10 bolts).*

Rachael Writes

*A few years ago I rappelled down a cliff, to go exploring. At that time I found myself wanting to go quietly away and hide due to my suddenly returned fear of heights: Only the imagined jeering of my climbing partner kept me going. Now, this very same cliff is my favourite part of Castle rock for the same reason - it's HUGE. This is where bolted climbing is still a BIG adventure. Unlike me Cliff saw this part of the Castle Rock and was totally inspired and he obsessively made the drive from Hamilton establishing a few new lines. At Castle Rock there are about 8 or so different cliffs ranging from 30 metres to 120 metres most of them totally untouched. A handful of cliffs have been developed and there is great variety among them. It's also great climbing all year round - especially when you are supposed to be at work.*