

Here is a description of the Tongariro Alpine Crossing in Winter conditions



The trek begins at 1100m (3630ft) by heading into the Mangatepopo Valley, with its eroded volcanic terrain, evidence of the glacier that once carved it out, and more recently, lava flows from Mount Ngauruhoe. This gradual climb takes about one to one and a half hours, before reaching the valley headwall. That is the first 4.5km done, just 15km to go!

From the head of the valley we head up to the saddle between Mt Tongariro and Mt Ngauruhoe with a climb that takes around an hour, and is the greatest single gain of altitude for the day, but the views over the valley make it all worthwhile and the well-designed track makes this truly manageable. We might be using Ice Axes by now, so we will have trained in their use.



The walk through the very flat South Crater is easier and leads to the last significant climb for the day, a two part climb. By now we are likely wearing crampons strapped to our boots to give us traction on the ice. These take a bit of getting used to but add to the adventure.



Views out to the east of the park are breath-taking, before heading higher up to the thermally active Red Crater area. This portion of track is in a more natural state, and takes between half and three quarters of an hour if the snow and weather conditions are favourable.

This is usually considered the point at where the Mountain decides whether or not it will let us carry on or send us back, as weather conditions, snow conditions and ice conditions combine to create a situation that your Guide will interpret. We are 7km in to the hike.

Safety is paramount, and is something that is continually assessed by the guide throughout the day, and is a combination of many factors. There may be a point at which the trip must turn back to ensure the continued fun and well-being of the group. The role of the guide is to make these calls, sometimes based on what is right in front of them and sometimes what they expect conditions to be on the other side of the mountain, using their considerable local knowledge and experience.

If everything looks good and onward is the call, the prize is reaching Red Crater at 1886m (or 6224ft). The volcanic activity is so real that not only can you see it, but you can feel it and smell it too!



From the lofty heights of the Red Crater area, the spectacular Central Crater sprawls out below, and Ngauruhoe behind us. The explosion pit craters that form the Emerald Lakes may be visible, although often hide beneath a layer of snow. Likewise Blue Lake (Te Wai-whakaata-o-te-Rangihiroa) remains snow covered throughout most of winter.

The views north to Lake Taupo never cease to impress, especially in winter as we usually see even further than in warmer months. 8km done!



From Red Crater we leave the conventional track as this portion is only suited to Summer conditions. We make our way down to Central Crater and across to re-join the track beyond Blue Lake on a route well-known to the Guides.

Many a do-it-yourselfer has got themselves into all sorts of bother by ignorantly following the marked summertime trail.





Once alongside Tongariro's North Crater, we begin our descent of the northern side of the mountain, perhaps on track, perhaps not, that is the job of the Guide to decide what is best. 10km completed, 9km to go. This is the side of the volcano that re-awoke in 2012, but we stay a good distance from the vent. There is plenty of evidence of the eruption, if you know what to look for.

A change of altitude and landscape means a change in snow conditions and a change of plant life, as we descend toward the Ketetahi Hut. Snow is seldom on the track below the Hut so the last 2 hours, (6.4km to go) is back to walking on the well-formed track and down through the swaying tussock grass to the native forest at the foot of the mountain. Your Guide can fill you in on the dramatic changes in flora and fauna that you will see before you arrive at your waiting transport.

