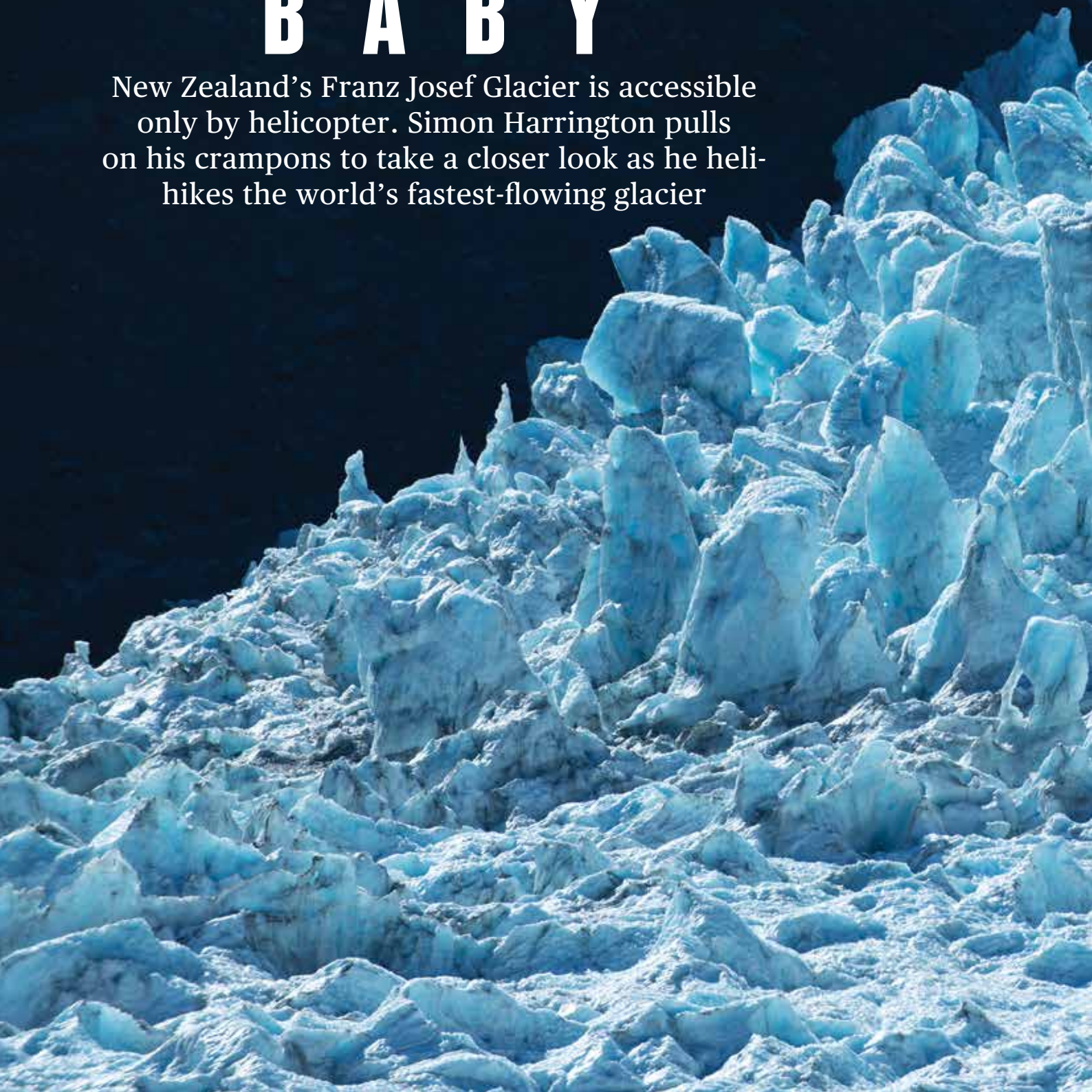


TRAVEL

ICE ICE BABY

New Zealand's Franz Josef Glacier is accessible only by helicopter. Simon Harrington pulls on his crampons to take a closer look as he heli-hikes the world's fastest-flowing glacier





The kea is actually the world's only alpine parrot, so it was a bit of a shame," recounts our tour guide, Steven, as he nervously scans the distant horizon with darting eyes. "As you can imagine, the group up there wasn't all too happy. But that's the first time it ever happened." He shakes his head and lets out a resigned sigh. Our helicopter is running late and I'm shifting from foot to foot with seven other strangers on the helipad. In a bid to keep conversation flowing, Steven is describing an incident from the previous week in which a large mountain parrot flew into the spinning blades of a chopper on top of the glacier. The story is met with a grimace, before being interrupted by the loud, pulsating judder of a low-flying helicopter. Not a moment too soon, our ride has arrived.

An hour earlier, I checked into my heli-hike tour in the small town of Franz Josef, which sits at the foot of the glacier in the sprawling Westland Tai Poutini National Park on New Zealand's South Island. I collected my sharpened crampons, heavy boots and thermal jacket, before being briefed on the dangers of hiking on the ice.

The main issues are unpredictable icefalls, avalanches and hidden crevasses, for which Franz Josef is renowned. While these risks are common in ice fields around the world, they are particularly relevant to the glaciers of New Zealand's South Island because of their speedy advance and retreat rates. In fact, for the Franz Josef Glacier alone, the flow rate is approximately 10 times that of a typical glacier, shifting up to 70cms per day. In geological terms, that's a sprint. This also makes for some incredibly changeable terrain. The rapid movement of the land mass means that fresh crevasses, ice caves and ridges appear on a near daily basis making it one of the most diverse hiking environments in the world.

Boarding the chopper with an exaggerated crouch, I pull on ear protectors that double as a one-way intercom with the pilot. "Welcome aboard. Our flight today will be around five minutes," he explains, with a pilot's reassuring tone. "Conditions are good. We'll be passing through the valley and dropping you off at around 2,000 metres to start your hike." We ascend with a jolt, see-sawing left and right before stabilising and flying effortlessly into the crystal clear sky.



Left: A guide hacks into the ice to create a path for the group

Right: Franz Josef Glacier moves 70cms per day, 10 times the speed of a typical glacier



Floating high above the valley, the views are spectacular. Beneath us flows the roaring Waiho River; beyond the glacier, mountains peak and jut eternally, while the icescape exudes a brilliant bluish hue, glistening in the midday sun. It's in stolen moments like these that I better understand the romantic, ancient Maori affinity with nature. The local name for the glacier is Ka Roimata o Hine Hukatere, which translates as 'the tears of Hine Hukatere.' The legend says that Maori princess Hine Hukatere was a mountaineer and would often bring her lover, a less experienced climber named Wawe, with her on excursions. One day, Wawe was swept to his death in an avalanche. Grief-stricken, Hukatere scaled the peak and cried for years. In a demonstration of solidarity, the gods froze her tears into a hulking river of ice, which is the glacier we see today.

Landing smoothly, the guide Steven jumps out of the helicopter and grabs a pickaxe. Bending down to tighten my crampons, I spot a kea bird. Thankfully, this one's intact. It's an impressive looking parrot - bigger than expected and green in colour. Pecking confidently at one of our group's backpacks, it seems curious. I later





learn that it's one of the most intelligent birds on the planet, able to solve logical puzzles and craft basic tools.

Following each swing of Steven's pickaxe, we take to a makeshift path and begin ascending the glacier, digging the spikes of our boots into the dense ice and steadying ourselves with walking poles. Looking up to the peak, the ice field no longer looks white or smooth, as it does from the town.

Maori legend says that the glacier was formed by the tears of a heartbroken princess

It's much closer to blue, with a slightly dirty appearance, peaking aggressively in places.

Entering a crevasse, I run the tips of my gloved fingers along the slick, translucent surface. We drop deeper into the glacier, and the smooth, icy walls rise nearly 20 metres above our heads on each side. Tentatively traversing the narrow walkway at the deepest point of chasm, the group is suddenly stopped in its tracks by a thunderous boom. We freeze. Looking up through the elongated gap high above us, we watch ice and rock tumble in the distance, crashing to the glacier floor. We stand in silence until the echoes die out. As we soon discover, this is a common occurrence, demonstrated by Steven's nonchalance. The ice cave is beautiful. We have just

enough time on our two-hour hike to rappel into the pristine cavern, listen to the echo of our own voices and attempt to scale the slippery walls, before making our way back down the glacier at pace.

When we arrive, the pilot is waiting on the helipad. Spotting us, he starts up the engine and the rotors spin as we board in single file. Apart from Steven, I'm the last of the group to jump aboard. With one hand on the door, I turn to take a final look at the majestic glacier. In this moment, a kea swoops from a nearby ridge, missing the pulsing blades by inches. Mouths agape, Steven and I exchange a relieved glance - thankful that neither of us will have to tell the tale of the suicidal kea and the rotor blades for a second time.



PHOTOS: NGAI TAHU TOURISM