

SOUTH ISLAND SAFARI

A full-page background image showing a vast, rugged mountain landscape. In the foreground, there are dark, rocky slopes. In the middle ground, a wide valley with green fields and small settlements is visible. In the background, a large, blue lake is nestled between the mountains. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

*A mountain-hunting adventure
amid the soaring peaks of
New Zealand's Southern Alps.*

by Diana Rupp



The bull tahr struck a royal pose atop a tall outcropping, surveying his cliffy kingdom. He had a big, blocky body; a long, goatlike face; thick, black horns; and a heavy blond mane that glowed golden in the autumn sunlight. As he gazed impassively from his pinnacle, the breeze stirred and puffed his mane, accentuating his size and impressiveness. When a younger bull approached from below, he lowered his head threateningly, sending the youngster packing.

I don't know if the female tahr were admiring the bull, but I certainly was. Lying across a scattering of sharp, loose rocks less than two hundred yards away, glued to my bin-

ocular, I had a fine view of the bull as well as half a dozen small, drab-looking young males and females (called nannies) that ringed him like planets around a sun.

But the bull's big-man-on-campus act hadn't worked on John Totty, my twenty-two-year-old Kiwi guide. "He's mature, but still on the young side," he said in a low voice. "Probably about six years old. It's only midday, and there are plenty of good bulls on this mountain. I think we can do better."

It was a shame, because we were well within range, I had a solid shooting platform, and we had climbed for hours to get up here. "He has a really pretty mane, though," I remarked hopefully.

John agreed. "There are better bulls here, though," he said. "Let's just pop on over that ridge and have a look at the other side."

His remark made me smile. Whenever our New Zealand mountain guides suggested we "just pop over" something, it usually meant we were heading up a steep cliff that would take at least an hour to climb. But experienced guides know just how to provide the right motivation; John was cheerful and encouraging, and best of all, from the tops of these hard-won ridges, we saw plentiful numbers of tahr.

I'm used to hunting guides being in much better shape than I am, but the New Zealanders were especially amazing. Outfitters Stu Marr and Ben Smith of New Zealand Safaris have been trotting up and down near-vertical mountains since boyhood, as has their protégé, John, and none of them seem to think anything of it. Their mountains, the Southern Alps of New Zealand, are some of the most magnificent on Earth. While they are not as high as many of the world's mountains (the highest peak, Mount Cook, tops out at 12,316 feet), these are steep, rugged ranges known for ascents that challenge the fittest climbers and mountain hunters. Many outfitters in New Zealand use helicopters to lift hunters to the peaks, but our hunt with Stu and Ben was hike-in only; the only fuel we burned was boot leather,

and plenty of it. John and I had started our assault on this mountain well before dawn and we were just now, around 11 A.M., topping out on the high point of the ridgeline.

It was a beautiful day, cold but sunny. Late May in the southern hemisphere is something like late November in the northern; muted fall colors gild the mountaintops, serious snowfall is only a couple of weeks away, and the tahr are in the rut.

Himalayan tahr, native to Nepal, were brought to this South Pacific paradise in 1904, along with a Noah's Ark of other wildlife the early settlers thought might thrive here. The species that became well established include the European imports: chamois, red stag, and fallow deer, in addition to the tahr. In today's enlightened world, we appreciate the uniqueness and beauty of the native flora and incredible bird life that thrives on this isolated archipelago, but the early settlers must have looked around at the snowcapped mountains and lush forests, devoid of any mammals, and thought: *We need to fix this!* As a hunter, I can understand the urge; this beautiful land would, even today, seem less without its regal stags and magnificent tahr and chamois.

New Zealand hunters are currently leading the push to convince the government to manage the country's introduced wildlife as game animals instead of as pests to be



DIANA RUPP

Diana Rupp with a nice bull tahr on New Zealand's South Island. The rifle is a Kilimanjaro Tigercat Artemis .30-06.

eradicated, which has been the approach on government-owned land for decades. Because of this history, the hunting here is often best on private holdings, where landowners recognize the value of their game and manage it accordingly. Some of these private lands are fenced, but on many more, as on the vast landscape we were hunting today, tahr and other wildlife range free.

The Black Hole Bull

The view down the west side of the ridge John and I topped out on was spectacular, a panorama of the vast Southern Alps marching off to the horizon without a sign of civilization except the narrow dirt track we had driven in on that morning, now far below us and twisting out of sight through the valley. This cattle ranch, or station, on the eastern slope of the Alps covered a sweep of wild, rugged country. The ridge we were on dropped off steeply on the west side into a basin cut by a steep-walled, forbidding canyon that looked like it could have been a location for the filming of *Lord of the Rings*. This canyon drained the deepest part of the basin, which John said was known as the Black Hole. The reason for the moniker was obvious: Even at noon on this bright, sunny day, the Black Hole,

tucked back in a deep embrace of mountains, remained in deep shadow.

We quickly discovered that the Black Hole and its canyon didn't intimidate tahr, though. In fact, they seemed to prefer its forbidding landscape to the sun-drenched hills around it. John and I sat on the steep slope where we had a good view across the canyon into the Black Hole. Bracing ourselves with our feet to keep from sliding down the mountain, we focused our binoculars on four big, heavily maned bull tahr across the canyon in the Black Hole. They were too far away to see us, so we had plenty of time to study them. I dug my lunch out of my pack as we glassed—a lamb-and-cheese sandwich, typical hearty New Zealand fare—and for a fascinating couple of hours we studied the behavior of the tahr. Two of the bulls strolled parallel to each other along the sidehill, one below the other, walking back and forth in an odd slow-motion dance, for some thirty minutes. John explained that they were literally sizing each other up, judging which was bigger. A third bull, walking with a slight limp, kept his distance from the others.

Presently a fourth bull joined the paralleling bulls, and hostilities began. Through the spotting scope, we watched one bull shove another with his horns. The shoved bull lost his footing and fell several yards down the mountain, but



Erik Eike, president of Kilimanjaro Rifles, with a beautiful tahr taken with his Kilimanjaro African rifle in 7mm Remington Magnum.

CRAIG SMITH

quickly regained his feet and stubbornly returned to the melee. I now had an inkling of why bull number three was limping.

Eventually the bulls worked out their dominance issues and split up. The shoving match had given John a fine opportunity to compare horn sizes, not an easy task with the relatively short, thick horns of tahr, where just an inch can make a real difference: an 11-incher is a good, mature tahr and a 12-incher is a bruiser. I was more interested in an old, heavy-horned animal than in one sporting fantastic length, and John quickly zeroed in on the one we wanted. The eventual winner of the sparring match, he had moseyed on down to an outcrop where he could stand in view of some nannies browsing in the thick turpentine brush. I studied him intently through the binocular. He posed confidently atop



DIANA RUPP

This hunt was conducted entirely on foot, which is somewhat unusual in New Zealand where helicopters are often used to transport hunters to the high peaks. It made for a challenging but highly rewarding experience.



CRAIG SMITH

Will Eike exhibited shooting prowess that belied his young age, taking several animals at distances over 200 yards, including this fantastic chamois.

his rock; he didn't exhibit the panache of the blond-maned, posturing bull I'd watched earlier, but he probably had no need to show off as he was clearly the patriarch of the Black Hole.

"Absolutely!" I responded when John asked me if was ready to go after him.

A shallow, rocky wash cut straight down our side of the mountain, and John and I used it to cover our approach, slipping and sliding our way down. It was a miserable place to descend, but it was just deep enough to keep us out of sight of our bull and the nervous nanny tahr that formed a protective ring of eyes around him.

Partway down, we heard shots from the far side of the basin. I surmised that my hunting partners, Erik and Will Eike, who were hunting in that area with Stu and Ben, had probably just succeeded in taking their own tahr. We were a long way from them, but the sounds carried clearly in the mountain air and echoed through the basin. John and I crouched tensely in the wash, watching the nannies milling nervously around our bull. Fortunately they did not spook, and after waiting some time for things to settle down, we resumed our awkward downhill stalk.

As we closed the distance to the tahr, I realized with some trepidation that if I should get the opportunity for a shot at the Black Hole bull, I would then have to cross the deep, intimidating canyon to get to the animal, and then cross it again to get back out. As we got closer to it I could see that it was even scarier than I'd realized, with rock walls dropping down to a boulder-strewn streambed. John shrugged off my concerns with a smile and his usual remark.

"No problem. You shoot the bull, and we'll just pop over there and get him."

Well, one thing at a time: first, I had to make the shot. We made our way to an outcrop and crawled behind it to study the bull. We were now just 200 yards cross-canyon from the tahr, looking straight into the Black Hole. He was unalarmed; in fact, he had bedded down in the brush while the nanny tahr fed around him. I had plenty of time to get myself and the

Kilimanjaro .30-06 into a comfortable shooting position; the outcrop was flat-topped and solid as a benchrest. I braced my elbows with daypacks and waited for the tahr to stand, squinting through the glare of the late-afternoon sun. It was now beaming almost straight into my scope, although the Black Hole remained as dark and forbidding as ever. As John moved unobtrusively to my left and shaded the objective lens with his hat, the bull tahr stood and turned broadside.

When I squeezed the trigger, I was sure the shot was a good one. The *smack* of the bullet came back to us quite clearly and the bull stumbled, but then we

lost sight of him in the heavy brush and the sun glare that rendered our optics useless.

There was nothing for it but to cross the canyon and find him. We gathered our gear and descended to the edge of the dropoff, where I cinched the rifle tightly to my daypack, sucked in a breath, and made the finger-and-toe climb down the cliff. It wasn't as bad as I'd feared; I found plenty of handholds to ease myself down the face. Large, flat boulders choked the streambed, giant stepping-stones that made it relatively easy to cross. On the other side of the creek, we were faced with a dauntingly steep, brush-choked mountainside with limited visibility. John, a faster climber, forged ahead to start searching for the tahr, leaving me with brief instructions: "Stay to the right of the waterfall as you go up."

Dripping sweat and gasping, I made it to the top of the waterfall five minutes after John had vanished, and seeing no sign of either him or the tahr, I called out. His head appeared, jutting from a rock ledge some forty yards directly above me, his broad grin like a beam of sunlight.

"He's here, and he's a cracker!" he shouted.

Thrilled and relieved, I fought my way uphill through the brush to the bull, which had fallen only yards from where he was standing when I shot. Awed, I fingered the long guard hairs of the mane and marveled at the thick, copper-colored fur. Age rings on the horns showed the tahr to be 7½ years old with heavy, 11½-inch horns. More importantly, I had earned this magnificent trophy by accepting the challenge of climbing into his domain.

Stu arrived to help as John and I were taking photos, having sidehilled all the way around the bowl from where he had just caped out my hunting partners' tahr—a feat of physicality that would have given Spider-Man a run for his money. At sunset, we started the trek back, and I was happy to re-cross the canyon before darkness closed in on us. Then, in the gathering dusk, we made our way along the mountainside, gingerly crossing several shale slides (called "shingle" by the



DIANA RUPP

Will and Erik Eike stop for a breather during a steep climb on a snowy day in New Zealand's rugged Southern Alps.



CRAIG SMITH

Will Eike's lightweight Kilimanjaro Leopard rifle in 6.5x55 Swede features a stunningly beautiful quilted maple stock.

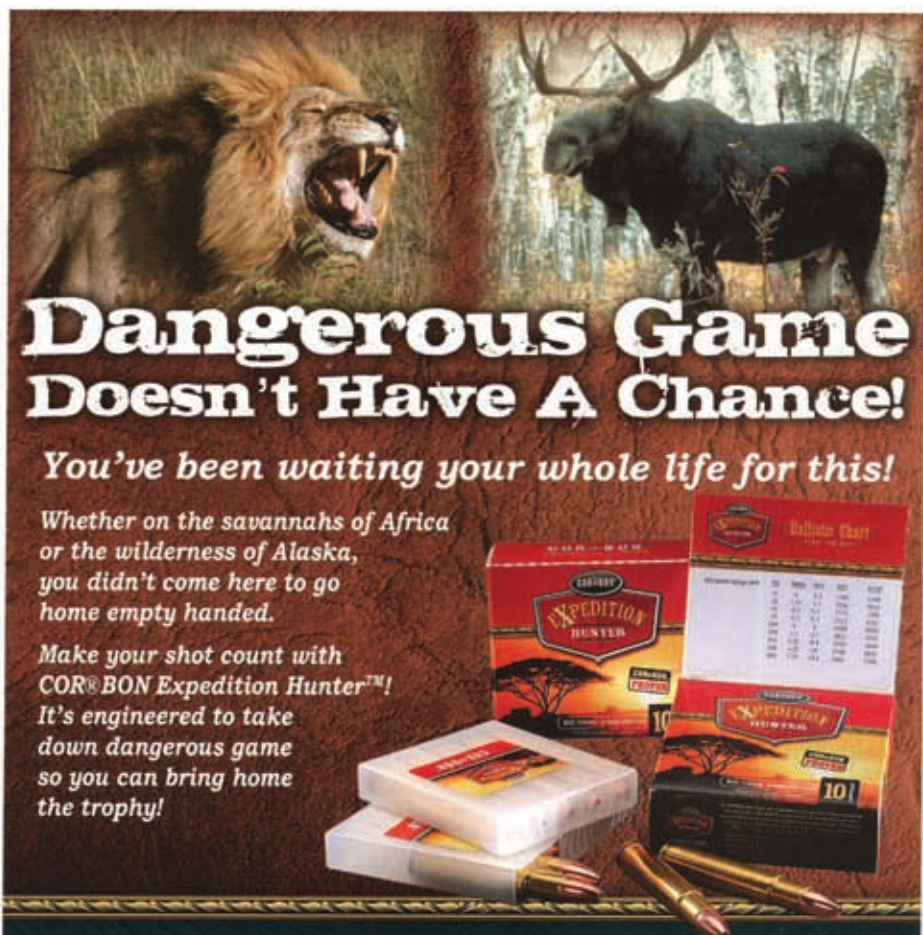
Kiwis) until we reached the ridgeline. There, we fished our headlamps out of our packs for the long nighttime hike back down to the truck.

Halfway down, even though my legs felt like rubber, my head was full of the wonder of the day. Just before we left the ridge and began the steep scramble down to the road, I stood for a moment to rest, switching off my headlamp. I could see the flicker of the guides' lights some distance ahead of me, and utter quiet closed in around me as I contemplated the night sky from this high, lovely vantage point on the spine of a South Pacific island. The Southern Cross gleamed directly over my head, surrounded by a wild scattering of other unfamiliar stars. Then I recognized my old friend Orion, companion of many nighttime hikes in another hemisphere, upside-down on the horizon.

South for Chamois

When Stu, John, and I got back to the cabin where we were staying that evening, there was a roaring fire in the kitchen fireplace, and the guides quickly rustled up some wild-game cheeseburgers. My hunting partners, Erik and Will, had both taken magnificent tahr, and as our exhilaration trumped our exhaustion, we all stayed up late to celebrate. Erik is a Honolulu-based attorney and the president of Kilimanjaro Rifles, and he and his sixteen-year-old son, Will, are experienced international hunters. Still, neither of them had ever encountered mountains like the ones we'd just hunted in, and we all swapped enthusiastic stories about the experience.

But our hunt was far from over. The next day we drove south through postcard-perfect lake-and-mountain scenery, passing through towns with charming names like Tekapo and Twizel, winding through the wild lands of the Otago district, and ending up in the lovely resort town of Wanaka. This would be the base for Erik's and Will's hunt for chamois, New Zealand's other highly sought-after mountain-game species. I wasn't hunting chamois on this trip, but I



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was looking forward to accompanying them on the climb.

By midmorning we were glassing a rocky face where a lone chamois buck was feeding. Will got ready for the 260-yard shot as we all watched intently through our binoculars. His first shot went high, and the chamois trotted out onto a rock that jutted out from the spine of the ridge, then stopped, broadside, for a fatal moment. The second shot from Will's 6.5x55 was perfect and sent the chamois cartwheeling off the ridge. Stu and John quickly retrieved the magnificent ram from the base of the cliff; it had a dark-chocolate-colored winter coat and 9½-inch horns. Young Will's broad grin could probably be seen all the way to the North Island.

We could see a couple of other chamois much higher on the mountain, and we all laughingly agreed we ought to just "pop up there." We spent

the better part of the afternoon scaling a steep, grassy slope to a place where we could peer around the mountain's shoulder for another view of the big, rocky faces where we had seen the chamois. Fortunately, they were still there. Erik's 7mm Remington Magnum had plenty of reach for the 290-yard shot, and photographer Craig Smith and I got some amazing photos of him with his chamois high on the peak with a spectacular view of Lake Wanaka in the background.

Later in the hunt, Will and I each took fine Arapawa rams, which are curly-horned, free-ranging feral sheep that trace their lineage to sheep released on South Pacific Islands by Captain Cook and other explorers in the 1700s. And on our second-to-last day, Erik scaled the highest ridge we'd seen yet to take another fine bull tahr.

On the last evening of our South Island safari, we recapped the hunt

over a crispy plate of fish and chips and a couple of ice-cold Speight's Gold Medal Ales at a local pub. Erik and I agreed that mountain hunting in New Zealand, done the right way, is a hunting experience to equal or exceed any in the world. The feeling stayed with me on the long flight back over the Pacific, along with indelible memories of the South Island's rugged peaks, stunning scenery, and my magnificent Black Hole bull. **S**

Stu Marr and Ben Smith of New Zealand Safaris hold concessions on some of the top hunting land in New Zealand and offer hunts for all of the South Pacific game species. New Zealand Safaris can arrange hunts to suit any client, but they specialize in free-range, fair-chase, hike-in hunts for mountaingame. For more information, see www.newzealandsafaris.com or e-mail nzsafaris@yahoo.com.

Kilimanjaro Tigercat Artemis .30-06



A Kilimanjaro rifle will stop traffic at any shooting range or hunting camp. My Tigercat Artemis model in .30-06, with its stunning exhibition-grade English walnut stock, caused quite a sensation at my local range during testing sessions. A beautiful rifle is nothing but an art exhibit if you can't hunt with it, though, and the gunsmiths at Kilimanjaro Rifles build their rifles to be both head-turners and serious all-weather hunting tools.

The good looks come not just from the beautiful wood but also from as many as twenty different coats of museum-quality oil finish, which also helps to protect and weatherproof the stock. All this beauty isn't just skin deep. The stocks are built with a special Stealth Lamination process that involves halving lengths of wood and bonding them together, creating significantly more resistance to moisture and temperature changes than solid wood. Stealth Lamination is a process that both strengthens and stabilizes the wood and enhances its grain and figure. It's almost like having a synthetic stock—but a lot prettier.

The Stealth Lamination process sets Kilimanjaro Rifles apart from other fine custom rifles, but the work doesn't stop there. Every stock is precisely fitted to and mated with the action and barrel by hand—a time-consuming process that produces exceptional accuracy. I tried several different loads in the .30-06 and settled on a Barnes VOR-TX 168-grain Tipped Triple Shock load that gave me the most consistent three-shot groups at 200 yards I've ever shot with any rifle, printing all the bullets in a nearly identical pattern under two inches apart at 200 yards every time I shot it.

Kilimanjaro's high-end mountain rifle model is known as the Tigercat, and it's a lightweight, compact rifle that is a pleasure to carry and shoot. I tried a Tigercat in .270 and liked it, but in the end I fell head over heels for the Tigercat Artemis, which is the version of the Tigercat designed specifically for women. It's built on a Kimber 84L action, which Kilimanjaro modifies by shaving off some weight, constructing a new recoil lug, and smoothing and polishing the components. The rifle has a three-position safety, custom-contoured Lilja stainless 22-inch barrel, a 13-inch length of pull, Diamond Fleur checkering, ironwood fore-end, grip, and cross-bolt caps, blue titanium ceramic metal finish with color-case-hardened accents, and engraving on the floorplate.

The Tigercat Artemis differs from the standard Tigercat primarily in its stock configuration. Naturally, as these are custom rifles, they can be built to the shooter's exact dimensions and specifications. The Tigercat-Artemis fit me perfectly and was a joy to carry—trim, elegant, and perfectly balanced at 7.25 pounds with a Swarovski Z3 3-9x36 scope. As I've already noted, it shot beautifully, dropping both of my New Zealand animals with a single shot.—D.R.