

Eleven Years in the Life of Franz Josef



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

Franz Josef is my friend. I visited him in 2003 and again in 2014. In this relatively short period of time, he has changed quite a fair bit and I am very concerned.

I am referring to the famous glacier on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island. German geologist-explorer Julius von Haast named it after Emperor Franz Josef I of Austro-Hungary Empire in 1865. The glacier is located in Westland Tai Poutini National Park which also encompasses Fox Glacier some 20km to the south.

My family and I had stayed the night at the lovely little village of Franz Josef. The following morning, we drove to a carpark 5km to the south of the village and then walked 3km towards the glacier face.

From the temperate rainforest next to the carpark, we emerged at a vast gravel plain left behind by past glacial retreats. The glacier itself loomed majestically ahead, flanked by lofty mountains. Waterfalls tumbled down the cliffs. Boulders coated with orange-coloured mosses covered much of the plain.

The view was one of the most impressive on our trip and the walk was quite relaxed and pleasant. We took about two hours to reach the viewing platform on the terminal moraine. The glacier face was still more than 100m away but that was the nearest we could get to it.

Had we wanted to take a walk on the glacier itself, we would have had to take an expensive helicopter flight to a level spot about midway up the glacier. As we walking to the viewing

platform, we could see about a dozen helicopters flying towards the glacier.

The scenario was very different during our first visit to Franz Josef Glacier in 2003. My friends and I were able to walk onto the glacier directly from the valley floor, wearing blue jackets to keep warm and using crampons attached to our shoes to enable us to walk on the ice. These items were provided by the tour company. We had a great time walking on the glacier and we even squeezed our way through one or two crevasses.

Obviously Franz Josef Glacier has retreated quite significantly over the past 11 years. Its rate of retreat is indeed extremely rapid in geological terms.

Over time, Franz Josef Glacier has exhibited a cyclical pattern of advance and retreat, depending on the volume of melt water flowing from the glacier to the river downstream and the volume of snowfall added to the snowfield high on the mountains which feeds the glacier. The glacier advances if the former is less than the latter. On the other hand, it retreats if the former exceeds the latter.

According to glaciologists, most of the glaciers in the world have retreated substantially over the years and are continuing to retreat. The cause, they say, is global warming. ■

