
The Seven Summits

On the highest mountains of all continents

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(Plates 79, 80)

The Swiss climber Dölf Reist was the first to succeed in climbing the highest peaks of five continents. He reached the summit of Mont Blanc in his early years, climbed Mount Everest in 1956, Mount McKinley in 1961, Kilimanjaro in 1969 and Aconcagua in 1971. At that time the highest point of Antarctica, the Vinson Massif, was inaccessible; and Mount Kosciuszko in Australia was considered too insignificant to justify such a long trip from Europe. The Japanese climber Naomi Uemura later repeated Dölf Reist's feat.

In 1981 Dick Bass, a millionaire from Texas, created the idea of climbing the 'Seven Summits' which include the Vinson Massif and Mount Kosciuszko. Furthermore, Mount Elbrus in the Caucasus replaced Mont Blanc as the highest peak in Europe. Although it took Dick Bass more than four years, instead of one year as planned, to climb his Seven Summits, his achievement which culminated on the summit of Mount Everest in October 1985 was most remarkable, particularly if one considers the fact that Bass was not a mountaineer when he started thinking about the Seven Summits.

The Canadian mountaineer Pat Morrow competed with Dick Bass for the first full set of Seven Summits. He lost the race because he was unable to raise enough money to hire a plane for Antarctica. However, he introduced another hurdle by claiming that Carstensz Pyramid in Irian Jaya is the highest peak of Australasia. He argued, as did others such as Reinhold Messner, that Mount Kosciuszko, whose top can be reached by car, should not be regarded as the highest point of that area but rather Carstensz Pyramid, a much higher and more difficult limestone mountain which is almost inaccessible for political reasons. Pat Morrow succeeded with his version of the Seven Summits on 7 May 1986, when he reached the summit of Carstensz Pyramid. Half a year later, on 27 November, Messner completed his collection with the Vinson Massif, having climbed Carstensz Pyramid already in 1971. The Dick Bass version of the Seven Summits was subsequently repeated by two more mountaineers, Gerry Roach from the USA and Gerhard Schmatz from Germany, but the version of Morrow and Messner with Carstensz Pyramid had not been repeated by February 1990.

Mount McKinley (Denali, 6194m), Alaska

After several attempts by various groups the highest peak of North America was climbed on 7 June 1913 by Hudson Stuck, the Archbishop of the Yukon Territory, together with three others. The thankful mountaineers said a Te Deum on the summit at a temperature of -14°C . In the meantime Mount McKinley has developed into a major goal for North American climbers and is attempted every year by several hundred mountaineers. The peak is considered to be one of the coldest mountains in the world, and temperatures far below -50°C have been measured.

Mount McKinley was my first big mountain. In June 1976, Reinhold Messner and I landed at the traditional place on the Kahiltna glacier and ascended the normal W ridge route in three days to the plateau at 4200m. There Messner identified an ice and snow couloir that led directly to the summit area and had not been climbed before. We decided to give it a try and started on 6 June at 2pm. We climbed gaining 200m of altitude per hour and had agreed not to wait for each other, never to sit down, and to turn round if our altitude gain dropped to less than 200m per hour. We carried neither rope, food nor drink. Messner led all the way and reached the summit half an hour before midnight, while I followed almost exactly at midnight. During our descent, which followed the route by which we had come up, we experienced the Alaskan sunrise at 30 minutes after midnight. The 'detachment from the world so far below', which had already impressed the archbishop and his colleagues, was an intense experience.

Mount Everest (8872m), Nepal

On 29 May 1953, Ed Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reached the summit of Everest for the first time. Although Everest has by now been climbed more than 300 times, the success-to-death ratio on this mountain is still terrible: for every three climbers who have reached the summit there is one who has died on the slopes of the mountain. The statistical chances for an individual climber to reach the summit during any one expedition are below five per cent. When I was a member of the Austrian Everest expedition in 1978, the chances for Messner and Habeler to reach the summit 'by fair means', that is, without bottled oxygen, were considered to be even lower. Furthermore, many experts had predicted that Messner and Habeler, even if they got to the summit at all, would be victims of irreversible brain damage. On 9 May I had the privilege of examining them 16 hours after their summit success at an altitude of 7400m. It was a pleasure to ascertain that they had retained their mental capacity intact. My climbing partner was Reinhard Karl who was at that time the most original and most successful German mountaineer. He died in 1982 in an ice avalanche on the S face of Cho Oyu, during our next climb together. However, in 1978 we were two very happy, although breathless, human beings when two days later we stood on the summit of the world after a $6\frac{1}{2}$ hour climb from the South Col.

Vinson Massif (4895m), Antarctica

The Vinson Massif was first climbed on 18 December 1966 by an American expedition, with substantial support by the US navy which provided the essential transport to the Base Camp. After that, private journeys into Antarctica were strongly discouraged by all nations running scientific (and pseudo-scientific) operations on the seventh continent. In the autumn of 1986 Messner, having climbed all the 14 eight-thousand-metre peaks, succeeded in organizing the money and transport for our long-desired journey to Antarctica. The legendary Giles Kershaw, the best pilot of Antarctica, took us together with some Americans to the foot of the mountain. It was the most exciting and impressive flight that we had ever had in our life. 33 hours after landing we reached the highest point of Antarctica and enjoyed the splendid isolation and a unique environment reduced to just light, sun, ice, cold and fog far below.

Aconcagua (6960m), Argentina

After having climbed three of the most difficult peaks of the Seven Summits, my appetite for the others grew. On our return journey from Antarctica we were forced to spend six days in Santiago de Chile. We used this for a quick trip to Aconcagua which we climbed in 2½ days from Puente del Inca. It was an easy way to come back to this mountain, where I had spent one month on the S face in 1974 and was forced back just below the final slopes because a friend had developed cerebral oedema. It was also quite a contrast to the adventurous first ascent by Matthias Zurbriggen from the Valais Alps who summited alone on 14 January 1897. His expedition leader, Edward A Fitzgerald, had become a victim of acute mountain sickness and was almost unable to stand on his feet in their last camp at 6400m.

Kilimanjaro (5895m), Tanzania

The highest peak of Africa was climbed on 6 October 1889 by the German geographer Hans Meyer, together with Ludwig Purtscheller from Salzburg. This success was a result of Meyer's perseverance. At his first try in 1887 he had had to turn back at the edge of the crater, and during his second try in 1888 he was captured by rioting natives, put in chains and transported back to the coast. Meyer noted with German pride: *'es erschien mir fast als eine nationale Pflicht, daß der Gipfel des Kilimandscharo, wahrscheinlich des höchsten afrikanischen und zweifellos des höchsten deutschen Berges, der von einem Deutschen (Rebmann) entdeckt und von einem Deutschen (von der Decken) zuerst näher untersucht wurde, nach allen Bemühungen englischer Reisender doch zuerst von einem deutschen Fuss betreten werde.* He planted auf dem verwitterten Lavagipfel mit dreimaligem, von Herrn Purtscheller kräftig sekundierten Hurra eine kleine, im Rucksack mitgetragene deutsche Fahne auf, and joyfully proclaimed: *Mit dem Recht des ersten Ersteigers taufe ich diese bisher*

unbekannte namenlose Spitze des Kibo, den höchsten Punkt afrikanischer und deutscher Erde: Kaiser Wilhelm Spitze.

When I stood, together with my wife, at this very spot in the autumn of 1987, the opening pop of a bottle of champagne seemed to me a more appropriate sound to celebrate the moment.

Elbrus (5633m), USSR

Craufurd Grove, Horace Walker, Frederick Gardiner and the Swiss guide Peter Knobel were the first mountaineers on the highest peak of Europe on 28 July 1874. They found the ascent over endless snow slopes to be 'exhausting and utterly unexciting'. They thought that their prostration was due, not so much to the thin air, but rather to 'not being in fit bodily condition for severe walking' and to the 'enforced abstinence from any kind of wine whatever and the total change of diet'. Nevertheless, Grove noted after their success that the only remaining question was 'how soon it will be practicable to ascend another peak'. I had similar thoughts when, standing on the summit of Elbrus in April 1989 in an icy storm, I noted many future mountain goals in the Caucasus. At that moment my wife and I celebrated my seventh summit in the style of Dick Bass, opening a bottle of almost freezing champagne from the Crimea. Three months earlier I had walked up to the summit of Kosciuszko after a long flight to Australia.

Carstensz Pyramid (5030m or 4883m), Irian Jaya, Indonesia

The highest point of Australia/Oceania, first seen by the Dutch sailor Carstensz from the sea in 1623, is located in the central highlands of Irian Jaya, the Indonesian part of New Guinea (the exact height is uncertain). It is surrounded by almost impenetrable forests, and it took Heinrich Harrer, the first ascender in 1962, several weeks to get to the base of the mountain. He was supported by Dani porters who were at that time still living in a pure stone age culture. Harrer noted that the climbing was very rewarding because of the excellent firm limestone. Reinhold Messner made the second ascent in 1971, approaching the mountain from a missionary station in the highlands. Later hopefuls met even more difficult obstacles, because in the meantime the Indonesian government had started a joint venture with an American company to exploit the extremely rich copper sources of the area. With enormous effort and much money a road was built to a potential mining site, and the exploitation was started. Since the natives were not satisfied with the payments by the mining company they started some small sabotage actions. The Indonesian government reacted with machine gun fire and bombs from helicopters based on battleships, aimed against the Dani warriors armed with bow and arrow. Since then the area has been hermetically sealed to foreigners. Only a few Indonesian climbers and some daredevils have climbed Carstensz Pyramid since 1971 [Editor's note:

amongst them the Alpine Club members Richard Isherwood, Jack Baines and the late Peter Boardman.]

Reinhold Messner had told me about his adventurous journey to Carstensz Pyramid in 1971 and I had long waited for an opportunity to climb this mountain. Various attempts to get a permit all failed until I finally heard of an American climber with unusually good contacts in the US government who was apparently able to get such permits. After some transatlantic telephone discussions I met him and seven other North American climbers, among them Pat Morrow, at Biak, Irian Jaya. Five days later we finally got our special permit and approached the mountain through the mining area. Local porters assisted our transport for two days to the start of the climb. Subsequently the Danis rapidly retreated since the temperature dropped towards freezing and the continuous rain changed into snow. Carstensz Pyramid was not visible through the fog. We spent the following days climbing in almost constant rain and snowfall. Waterfalls seemed to block access to the higher parts of the mountain on all sides. On two days I reached the summit ridge but was forced back each time by storm and 30cm of snow on the rock. I spent most of my time sitting in my tent and drying my clothes over a candle. The penultimate try ended, several hundred metres west of the summit, on vertical rock plastered with ice. None of us had expected such conditions, and therefore our equipment was simply insufficient. While drying my clothes yet again over the candle flame I started to meditate, wondering whether Peter Matthiessen was right when, on his journey to Dolpo where he never sighted the longed-for snow leopard, he concluded that the journey was all the more successful because he did *not* reach his goal. However, I was not yet mature enough to accept this attitude with more than faked conviction.

On 16 March 1990, together with Pat Morrow and the British Antarctic veteran Martyn Williams, I started on a last attempt. Eventually we traversed the long ridge to the main summit, leaving a rope in place at a 40m high abseil site. After that we were in a white land where all the fantastic rough rock on the equator was plastered with ice. Reaching the summit in such conditions was a particularly rewarding culmination.

Mixed feelings

Climbing the five summits was a natural development for Dölf Reist because of his lifelong passion for mountaineering. The Seven Summits were an opportunity for Dick Bass to demonstrate that an American businessman in excellent bodily condition, with the help of money and a good portion of luck, can achieve almost anything. In the meantime climbing the Seven Summits has become a status symbol for executives and climbers. Actually, anyone with little more than average strength, the patience for long air journeys and some money in his bank account can without too much trouble climb five of the Seven Summits: Elbrus, Kilimanjaro, Mount McKinley, Vinson and Aconcagua. Carstensz Pyramid is still reserved for daredevils or people with very special political connections. Mount Everest is the eye of the needle, passable only by

those with the fitness and experience resulting from long years of mountaineering. In addition, a good portion of luck is required at the decisive moment. Several mountaineers with five or six of the Seven Summits have yet to climb Everest. Thus the Seven Summits are not entirely buyable.

The original reports of the first ascenders of these mountains arouse nostalgic feelings. It took them months or even years to reach their goals; their expeditions were real in the sense of the Latin word *expeditio*, which means travelling to foreign unknown hostile country where the outcome is uncertain. I envy Stuck, Grove, Meyer, Zurbriggen, Hillary, Harrer and all the others for their adventures which are not repeatable any more. However, I am happy to have had the privilege of spending many moments above the clouds in another world which, as Herbert Tichy has written, seems not to have been made for human beings, and to have been able to experience the feeling of utter detachment from the world so far below.

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79. *Antarctica: view from the summit of Vinson Massif, 4895m. (Oswald Oelz) (p 173)*



80. *The N side of Aconcagua, 6960m. (Oswald Oelz) (p 173)*