

## Climb High Down Under

A. S. Hunt

Plates 52–53

Chris Baxter is the editor of the excellent *Wild* magazine, a sort of Australian *Climber and Rambler*, and it was his lecture at the BMC's Buxton Conference in 1982 that gave me a foretaste of what to expect on the 'Oz' rock scene. He also gave me a warning of the particular humour to be expected 'down under' when he described one of the then current car window stickers that advised 'Grow your own dope, plant a Pom!'

In 1983–84 I had the good fortune to spend some time in the Australian State of Victoria and was able to taste some of the very best outdoor experiences that part of the world can offer, not least a visit to the New Zealand Alps — the mecca for 'Oz' ice climbing experience and an important testing ground for those who are involved in the increasing number of Australian Himalayan probes.

Rumours and talk of Australian daring do have been around and growing for some time now and many of you will have heard of Kim Carrigan, their answer to Ron Fawcett, and Arapiles, 'the best crag in the world' according to Henry Barber! The advance of standards in the Southern Alps of New Zealand has reached levels that, despite lacking the protagonists and publicity of their European counterparts, stand up well in terms of boldness and skill. A major loss to the mountaineering strength of this part of the world occurred with the recent tragic deaths of Mark Moorhead, Craig Nottle and Fred From, all Australians, and New Zealander Bill Denz; all died in Himalayan accidents on Makalu and Everest. Denz was the perpetrator of several new, difficult and committing ice routes and Moorhead was the fearless originator of many of Arapiles' high standard modern rock climbs.

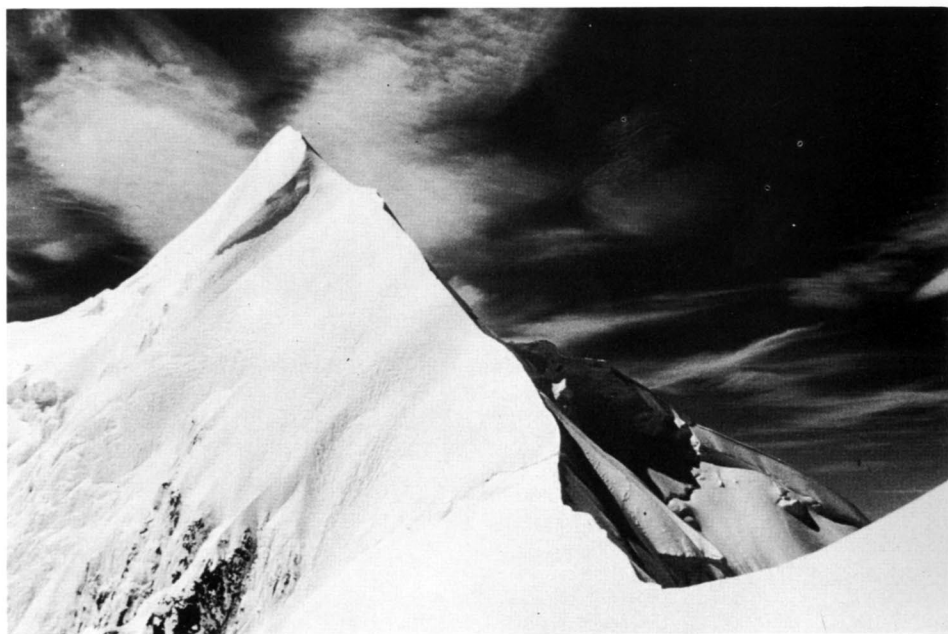
Next time you hear about gear being pinched in South America, border disputes in Pakistan, increased peak fees throughout the Himalaya, the alarming cost per head of a Chinese/Tibet trip, bad weather in Alaska, bears in Yosemite, no camping at Boux, rain in Wales or a thaw on the Ben, think of a trip 'down under'. No language problems, well not really! Guaranteed good cragging in 'Oz', equally guaranteed grip in New Zealand, no queueing for routes although a fine couple of days at peak season may mean a tight squeeze in the more popular New Zealand Alpine huts, and a bank holiday weekend at Arapiles may see an increase in the chalk content of the local atmosphere.

Getting there is not that expensive through one of the many 'Visit your Relations' clubs or via the local 'bucket shop', and living, once you have arrived, is a bargain. Most 'Oz' crag-access campsites are free and very pleasant places to be, with the delights of 'billy tea' or nourishing cask red wine at give away prices, and of course the friendly sociable locals for company. Watch out for the 'sandbagging' though (stoking you up a route that is likely to frighten, by understating its problems!). You could pay for your trip by selling off your modern gear and the surplus you had the foresight to take with you.



*Photo: Frank Solari*

52 *Mount Cook and the Tasman river flats.*



*Photo: Alan Hunt*

53 *Mount Tasman from Graham Saddle.*

Arapiles is the crag to go for without a doubt, over a thousand routes of all grades of difficulty, an excellent guidebook, an unfamiliar yet appropriate grading system from one to thirty, and a bunch of regulars to show you around. Other Victorian crags offer longer quality routes, for example Mt Rosea or Mt Buffalo, and are well worth a visit, and up in New South Wales there are crags of all sizes with routes of quality to suit everyone. Further north just over the border into Queensland is Frog Buttress, a small crag by some standards but it has something about it that attracts folk from all over, not easy routes though! This is the crag for hand and finger jamming or desperate face climbing and best visited in the Australian version of winter (July/August) when the crags further south may be a wee bit damp from time to time. Up at Frog it will be warm and balmy with shorts 'all the go', but beware the 'crawlies', the spiders or snakes. The sloughed off snake skins on the belay ledges at Frog testify to the 'true' story of the climber who had just struggled up the 'Oz' equivalent of a HVS crack and reached the finishing jugs only to come face to face with a malevolent brown snake: he flung himself off into space preferring to take his chance in flight rather than risk a deadly bite! If all this should prove too much go and explore the Dividing Range Mountains, their 'High Country', or get down to the surf if it's 'pumping'.

New Zealand is that bit further and as in any high mountain area, the weather can affect the experience. The mountains seem much bigger than they really are, without telepheriques to help access, although flying in and out by ski-plane is now commonplace and not too expensive. The New Zealand Alpine Club and the National Park services have an excellent system of open huts equipped with all facilities and often a two-way radio to help with weather bulletins or safety checks.

The Mount Cook National Park area is the best known with a good valley and mountain hut system and reciprocal rights arrangements should you be a member of a UK club. There are a tremendous range of routes here to suit all levels of ability and experience. Classic pass traverses such as the Copeland, one of a few to breach the main range; easily approached huts in wild surroundings, such as the Tasman Saddle hut; classic high summit traverses; or ice climbing at its most fearsome. Other areas such as Mt Aspiring, offer fine tramping and climbing in wilderness surroundings and the Darren range will satisfy anyone who has a taste for granite mountains in a remote and inaccessible setting. If the nor'wester stops you going out (the Kiwi version of an Atlantic depression) you can always go and look up those long lost relatives or that friend of a friend you used to know in the Lakes: they will be more than glad to see you. They may even take you down to the local pub at the weekend, an experience not to be missed if it turns out the same as when I went. There was the distinct air of the old West at times when the younger set started to get lively! Have a good trip.

1. *Classic Climbs of Australia* by Joe Friend, Second Back Row Press, 1983.
2. *Mt Arapiles — a rock-climber's handbook*, edited by Kim Carrigan for the Victorian Climbing Club.
3. *The Mount Cook Guidebook* by Hugh Logan, New Zealand Alpine Club, 1982.