LUNCH WITH... JENNIFER BYRNE

ANDREW LOCK

Lunch Jennifer Byrne After scaling 10 of the world's tallest peaks, Australia's most successful mountaineer knows all about life in the 'death zone'.

How hard is it to climb Mt Everest? This hard: “Your hands are in a mitt and you can’t clutch anything. Your vision is totally obscured by your oxygen mask … People will crank up their gas for the Hillary Step, but the air is still so thin and they will just collapse, they’ll scream, they’ll throw up, they’re panting so hard. Everybody knows that if they stay too long they’re going to die.”

Because of the cold? “Because of the altitude. Your body will shut down, you can only acclimatise enough to briefly touch that altitude … You can get a few fists flying, people can get very funny there. They know if they run out of gas the likelihood is they’ll fall off the hill. So they’re highly motivated to get up there quickly, and equally motivated to get down again.” Which is more dangerous? “Going down. By a lot. You’ve never seen anyone so physically destroyed as coming off Everest.”

Mountaineer Andrew Lock speaking. Elite climber, specialising in high altitudes. The steadiest, most coherent madman you could meet.

Lock has scaled 10 of the world’s 14 8000-metre peaks, way more than any other Australian, and is now focusing on the last four. He climbs without oxygen and, by preference, solo. He’s summited Everest twice and describes the standard route, as laid out by Sir Edmund Hillary, as “the dullest of the 8000m climbs I’ve done … it’s so uninteresting, a slog”. For all that, he says, he respects people who achieve it: “It isn’t the hardest 8000 but it’s still a significant challenge.”

So it would seem. Seven or eight people died on the mountain in 1996, as they did this season – “all in the one night in the one storm. That’s how it happens … you spend two months preparing the route and your camps while you acclimatise, then wait for the weather, for the jetstream that’s zooming around, blowing the top off the summit most of the year, to move away and

allow you to grab the summit, and all the expeditions are doing this at the same time.

“That’s why you’ll read about 30 people summiting Everest in one day, or 40 or 50 or whatever it is. But they may be the only 40 or 50 for that entire season, or in fact for that entire year. And it’s because they’re poised waiting for the jetstream to move away, and finally it does so they go for the top.” Is it bedlam up there? “Well, it can be. People get trapped at the Hillary Step, just 100m or so before the summit. Only one person can go up or down at the same time. It’s just a wee step, about as high as that wall over there” – he points to a regular garden wall across the road from the restaurant – “but it’s steep and slippery and, at 8750m, very difficult. It’s definitely thwarted climbers over the years.”

I stare at the sandstone wall across the neat, suburban street and imagine the extraordinary world of Andrew Lock. Icy, terrifying, beautiful, silent, utterly other to our own. What must it be like to crouch in the freezing dark, gasping for oxygen, waiting your turn to clamber up? Or – harder still – to climb so high and come so close but know you must turn back?

He’s done it a number of times, both alone and as a guide. He’s brought groups to within sight of the summit but turned around, following his instinct for pending disaster – “this terrible feeling I get sometimes that ‘I don’t want to be here, something’s wrong’. I can be in the zone, the conditions look right, the climbing’s easy, but it’s like walking into a wall. Perhaps it’s a sixth sense, I don’t know what you’d call it but it works for me and has kept me alive so far.” And, he says, it’s never been wrong. He’s climbed to save – and often bury – the less cautious, but he’s never ignored that internal alarm.

The reverse also holds. When a 10-day blizzard delayed his 1997 attempt on the forbidding Broad Peak in Pakistan, his climbing partner turned back and two expeditions he ran into deemed the mountain “unclimbable”. Lock persevered, alone. He changed route, broke trail through fresh snow and reached the summit just as darkness started to fall; in his wasted state, he decided to bivouac on a small rock buttress in the “death zone” above 8000m.

“I looked down through my feet at base camp, kilometres below me, and I thought: ‘This is ridiculous, what am I doing? If I come off up here, obviously I’ll be killed, but why have I put myself into this position?’ And I started to back-climb and then stopped myself, and I thought: ‘The climbing is within my ability and I’m not going to fall off here’. I sat on the ridge, put my back to the wind and stayed awake all night. Just worked my fingers and toes to keep the blood going so I wouldn’t get frostbite.

“It was the most interminable night of my life. I cooked a meal in my mind and enjoyed eating it, I sang, anything to keep myself awake. And I talked to myself, talked through it, but I would deliberately not look at my watch for an hour, then for another hour, spacing it out, and then finally I’d let myself look. Less than five minutes since I last looked. It was awful. Like being in a

lifeboat, waiting to be saved, and the sun was my saviour.

“The next day, I had to down-climb that thing and went all the way down and I sat in base camp and thought: ‘God, I’ve just done this, what an amazing climb’. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I’d pushed myself through mental barriers that I didn’t know even existed. That was the changing point in my entire climbing career. That was where I really developed a lot of confidence, and realised I could do these things – I could push myself through.

“After that ’97 expedition, I will put myself through just about anything to succeed. I won’t hurt other people, I won’t burn other people, I’ll still rescue other people, but when those distractions don’t occur, I’ll climb.”

For a country that so values its sport, mountaineers travel relatively low on the Australian radar. It’s a political world, Lock says; the combination of big egos, intense competition and loner characters creates a lot of fractures. And excessive generosity wouldn’t seem to rank among the necessary qualities.

Reinhold Messner, the first man to scale all 14 8000m peaks, is he a god? “No, he’s well-respected as an outstanding alpinist but, boy, he has an ego to match.” Sir Edmund Hillary? “He’s revered by the wider public as the god of mountaineering. Mountaineers think: ‘Well, great job, you’re a lucky man for having been in the second summit team’, because the first team gave their oxygen to him and opened the route up to the south summit. He was a very lucky man to be where he was on the day.”

Yet it was Tim McCartney-Snape, the first Australian to climb Everest, who set Lock on his course. He was a country copper and volunteer firefighter, based in Wagga Wagga, NSW, when Tim rolled into town with a slide show about his ascent. “In the back room of a pub – all of 20 people turned up – and as soon as I saw it I thought: ‘That’s what I’ve been looking for’. I was swept up by the romance and the beauty of the whole thing … I immediately moved back to Sydney, took up rockclimbing, took up mountaineering.”

At 41, with 10 down and four monster mountains to go – four ahead of the nearest Australian climber – Lock may seem old to be performing such feats. Not for a high-altitude mountaineer, he says. “As a young fella I would have burned out much faster, whereas I now have the experience to control my energy expenditure – but it hurts. My knees are worn out. It gets harder every expedition. I’m determined to have it done before I’m 45.”

Money is an issue; he reckons he needs about $150,000 to finish the job. His personal life isn’t. He has one marriage behind him, his current relationship is struggling (“It’s the time away. All my relationships end because of the time away. It’s unfortunate but, um …”) and children are off the agenda absolutely. It’s a simple fact, he says, that most of his climbing friends are dead and if you’re going to have kids, you have a responsibility to survive. “It’s a dangerous game and it kills most people,” he says cheerfully, “so I’ll be very happy when I finish the 14. I want to do it, I love doing it, but it’ll be a big

relief when I've finished."

The obvious question, of course, is why? Or rather, what on Earth possesses this man to do something so entirely insane?

Andrew Lock has two answers.

The first is simple: he's good at it. He discovered early that his body could handle altitude, that he thrived on the thin air. He's not much of a tennis or golf player but he can climb mountains, and doing what you can is fun.

Second: "I think it's part of the human condition, it's human nature to want to explore and to push ourselves. I love the feeling of really pushing my body hard and banging that zone where … a marathon runner will tell you, they get into that comfortable stride and they can go all day, and that's how I am when I'm climbing. If I can find that zone, I can just go and go and go and I love the feeling of exerting myself to my absolute maximum, controlling it so that I know I've got enough energy to keep going."

Just short of death? "No, just short of burning out."

And then there's the spiritual element, the whispering transcendence of being alone at altitude. Lock describes the time he stood on top of K2 on the Pakistan-China border, the world's second-tallest mountain – though, by reputation, harder than Everest, and stayed at the top for an hour, his brain fried by lack of oxygen. He describes it as like being a little drunk and extremely hungover – buzzy, with a cracking headache – at the same time.

"It was unbelievable, my first 8000m summit. The sun started to set and as it went down behind me, the shadow of K2 – which stands alone, this beautiful pyramid – stretched out into China and just grew and grew. It went hundreds of kilometres and I'm sitting there thinking: 'My shadow's on top of that somewhere'. I was looking over all the other 8000m peaks in Pakistan and they were turning gold in this beautiful sunset."

It took him many hours to get down, clawing through soft snow over blue ice – "and blue ice is so hard that no matter what crampon or ice axe you have, you can't penetrate it … I'd put the axe shaft down in the snow below me, take one step down and slide 10m, down towards a big buttress with a 3000m drop-off, and each time I would eventually build up enough snow underneath that it did stop me."

Others were less fortunate. Half his team died on that climb. How does that impact on the expedition, on his confidence? "It doesn't really. They died in circumstances where there was nothing to do to help, absolutely nothing, and we were seriously strung out ourselves … I was lucky, but I was careful."

A different world up there. It makes you wonder how, having tasted it, Lock can ever resume a "normal" life. Won't he feel like a racehorse hitched to a milk-cart? "There are other adventures to be had … I might get into deserts, I

love deserts. And I like sailing, I've done a bit of ocean racing. The world is getting smaller but there are still great opportunities out there. It's just a matter of identifying worthy challenges." I

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