

AIMING HIGH

Outer Edge goes peak bagging with Andrew Lock, Australia's 8000-metre mountain specialist

STORY Patrick Kinsella IMAGES Josh Caples



Lock leads the way, high on the range

20.32, 4 February 2009: World Expeditions' Office, 1st Floor, 393 Little Bourke Street, Melbourne (circa 66 metres above sea level)
"Well...good luck this year then. I hope you don't die."

Andrew Lock is packing away his slides, having just given a talk about a trip to Antarctica that he will be leading for World Expeditions later this year, when a member of the audience approaches him and donates this touching thought.

"Thanks," replies Andrew. "That makes two of us."

Andrew has just given the attentive room a potted personal history, explaining that besides his Antarctic experience (three lengthy expeditions and several trips as a guide) he also spends a bit of time in the high hills of the Himalayas.

In fact, Andrew is easily Australia's most accomplished high-altitude mountaineer. He has climbed 13 of Earth's 14 peaks that tower above 8000 metres, and in April he will be back in the Himalayas attempting Shishapangma, the lowest of the 14 and the only one left to cross off the list he set himself when he began Summit 8000.

“Andrew is, honestly one of the nicest guys I know to be on an expedition with...I have never ever seen him lose his composure or his focus, even when the situation gets dicey or frightening.” - Héctor Ponce de León

07.40, 31 January 2009: Dead Horse Gap (1582 metres)

Australia is a country that likes to big up its sports stars and high achievers, but not – apparently – if their chosen pursuit is climbing mountains that poke eight kilometres or more into the sky. At least, not unless they die, or come close to it.

In publicity terms, Lock is a victim of his own competency. Despite his achievements, so far he hasn't lost so much as a fingertip to frostbite. And that's no way to get noticed.

"It's a tragedy how little recognition Andrew gets for his achievements in this country," says Zac Zaharias, who climbed Dhaulagiri with Lock in 1997.

"Other people have been given the Order of Australia for doing the seven summits...guided!

"But I think other people are smarter at marketing themselves. Andrew isn't into that at all. He's actually quite a hard person to get to know."

And that's one reason why I find myself straining to read a map of Kosciuszko National Park in the early-morning half-light, having just bivvied overnight at Dead Horse Gap.

The way to get to know Andrew Lock properly, I've discovered, is to get him interested in a challenge. "Let's try and climb Australia's 14 highest peaks in one weekend," I suggested to him recently.

"I like it," he emailed straight back. "Let's do it."

09.40, 31 January 2009: Rams Head (2190 metres; Australia's fourth highest peak)

Lock, 46, gets up at quarter to six and runs up and down a local peak every morning. He climbs three times a week and spends almost all his weekends bushwalking and canyoning in the Blue Mountains or diving along the NSW coast.

He's a fit man and this jaunt along the Great Dividing Range is just a bit of light training for him. The ascent from Dead Horse up onto

the range is steep, however, and the morning sun is flexing its muscles impressively. By the time we reach the rocky top of Rams Head, the sweat is running down our necks.

Early morning heat aside, the climb to Australia's fourth highest peak is easy enough. Lock climbed Rams Head's global equivalent, Lhotse (8516 metres), solo via the mountain's West Face in 2002. He summited on 16 May, less than a month after he'd stood on the top of Manaslu (8485 metres). This was the first time an Australian climber had ascended two 8000-metre peaks in one season.

10.30, 31 January 2009: North Rams Head (2177 metres; Australia's sixth highest peak)

This is more like it. The smaller of the ram's two heads this might be, but it's certainly the rougher and more challenging of the pair, with some good bouldering on the top.

Cho Oyu (8201 metres), the world's sixth highest mountain, was another peak that Lock soloed. It was also the second time he'd

climbed two 8000-metre peaks in one season (having just been on Everest as cameraman for Discovery Channel). The plan was to push for a third, Shishapangma, but an injury sustained in an accident on the descent put an end to his season.

11.40, 31 January 2009: Unnamed Peak on Etheridge Ridge (2180 metres; Australia's fifth highest peak)

While 14 mountains in the world stand prouder than 8000 metres, but Australia hasn't managed to push any of its terra

firma beyond 8000 feet. Indeed, our mountains are so insignificant that no one has even bothered to name the fifth highest peak in the country. To add insult to injury, Parks NSW have built a toilet on one of its shoulders – the highest dunny in the land.

Lock reached the planet's fifth highest spot, the top of Makalu (8485 metres) on 21 May 2008. During a season interrupted by everything from earthquakes and rioting to the crash of their transport helicopter, both of Lock's teammates were forced to withdraw and he again reached the summit on his own.

12.25, 31 January 2009: Mt Kosciuszko (2228 metres; Australia's highest peak)

The highest point in Australia is something of an anticlimax as a stand-alone peak. One of the only features on Kosciuszko's big, bald head is the scar formed by the paved track to the summit.

If you can block out the noise of your fellow summiteers whipping out their mobile phones and telling anyone misfortunate enough to know them where they are, however, the views over the range are spectacular.

Of course, even the world's greatest mountain can cause disappointment. The first 8000er Lock ever took on was Everest (8850 metres) in 1991, as part of an Australian team attempting to climb the mountain without oxygen or Sherpa support.

The expedition was hit by tragedy when one member was knocked 1000 metres down the Lhotse Face by an avalanche, but Lock and his climbing partner Ian Collins continued the climb. The pair got to within 600 metres of the summit, but Lock had to sacrifice his attempt in order to assist and descend with Collins, who was in distress.

Two seasons later Lock was back, this time with a joint Australian/Macedonian expedition. Once again, however, he never made it past 8200 metres, because of bad weather and the disappearance of a team member, Lobsang Tshering. After three horrendous days stuck on the South Col, at over 8000 metres without oxygen, Lock and another climber, Tracie Aleksov, located Tshering's body.

On our way up Kosciuszko's incomparably tame flanks, I ask Andrew whether there is ever really an element of choice in deciding to turn back in such circumstances.

"Absolutely not," he replies emphatically. "It's human life. That's not to say it isn't disappointing, especially when it's other people's bad decisions that lead to the situation arising."

In 2000, Lock led his own expedition to Everest. This time they got to within just 100 metres of the mountain top before worsening conditions forced Andrew to make the heartbreaking decision to turn around. Bitterly disappointed, the team stayed at Base Camp until the weather cleared, and then began a monumentally tough second climb. On 24 May, Lock and two of his clients reached the summit.

He was back on Everest again in 2004, as a cameraman for a documentary being made for Discovery Channel.

"We were supposed to film our own expedition, but everything was going too smoothly in our camp," Andrew recalls. "So we found some more dysfunctional expeditions to film instead!"

The result was a doco, *Ultimate Survival – Everest*, which has been screened several times in America, but never in Australia, much to Lock's annoyance.

Despite having stood on the summit twice, Lock still has unfinished business on Everest – it's the only 8000-metre peak that he has used oxygen on, because he was guiding and filming. This year, after Shishapangma, Lock plans to return to Everest without gas.

14.15, 31 January 2009: Unnamed Peak, Abbot's Ridge (2159 metres; Australia's eighth highest peak)

Leaving the pedestrian freeway that is the Australian Alps Walking Track we wade down through the tough scrub that grows on Kosciuszko's flanks to the valley floor. Here, by water of Wilkinsons Creek, we leave our packs and set off on a five-peak circuit dash.

The first is a nameless beauty, perched on the periphery of the range with a dramatic drop off down to the northwest reaches of Kosciuszko National Park. It seems criminal for the eighth highest spot in the land to remain anonymous.

What's to stop us naming it, I wonder to Andrew and Josh, my photographer. "What about Lock's Lookout?" They laugh. Seriously though, why not?

The world's eighth highest peak, Manaslu (8163 metres), at least has a name, but it too is often ignored by climbers. Lock became the first Australian to climb it in 2002.

14.40, 31 January 2009: Abbot Peak (2145 metres; Australia's ninth highest peak)

We later discover that we've chosen the hottest day on record to begin our 14-peak mission, and the climb from the valley onto Abbot's Ridge is not an easy one.

Andrew, however, is a walking machine. He travels at a constant speed no matter what the gradient. Tenacity and physical strength are essential weapons in a mountaineer's arsenal and Lock needed plenty of both on his 1998 ascent of the world's ninth tallest mountain.

Nanga Parbat (8125 metres) had already eluded him twice, once when he'd had all his gear stolen while making a doomed push for the top. His third crack was successful, but not without plenty of drama and conflict.

His partner for ascent was Alan Hinkes, another high-altitude specialist on the hunt for the 14 big ones. On the summit push, Lock says he had to break trail for the entire ascent, while Hinkes and other climbers selfishly conserved their energy.

After leading right to the top (another first Australian ascent)

Lock was left to bivouac at almost 8000 metres with no shelter, sleeping bag or stove when a blizzard separated him from the group and no one came to assist him.

Lock doesn't have much to say about Hinkes now, other than to say the Briton's claim to have climbed the full compliment of 8000ers has been widely disputed.

These days Lock chooses his climbing partners more carefully, and he himself is held in high regard by many international mountaineers for his achievements and ethics.

Mexican mountaineer Héctor Ponce de León has climbed on Everest and Makalu with Lock, and will be joining him this season on Shishapangma.

"After my first Himalayan expedition (K2 and Broad Peak in 1992) where I had terrible experiences with people – big egos, selfish climbers – I decided that unless I was getting paid for it I would not climb with people that I did not think were fun, down-to-earth, and had integrity," Hector told me.

"Andrew is one of the few guys that I know I can be tent bound with for days and there would not be any friction building up. He is, honestly one of the nicest guys I know to be on an expedition with...I have never ever seen him lose his composure or his focus, even when the situation gets dicey or frightening."

15.10, 31 January 2009: Mt Townsend (2209 metres; Australia's second highest peak)

Ruggedly handsome, Townsend appears taller than Kosciuszko from many angles, an illusion that led the Polish explorer Strezelecki to mistakenly climb it when he led an expedition through the area in 1840.

Lock's first successful 8000-metre ascent was of K2 (8615 metres), the second highest mountain in the world. It was a brutal introduction to life and death at extreme altitude, and he counts himself lucky to have walked off the mountain alive.

Two German climbers who accompanied him, Peter Mezger and Reinmar Joswig, were killed in separate falls during the descent, and Lock saved the life of Swede who collapsed with severe cerebral oedema.

15.40, 31 January 2009: Alice Rawson Peak (2160 metres; Australia's seventh highest peak)

Our own little expedition had now become separated. Josh was missing in action and Andrew and I debated whether to walk through the night or to set up camp where we'd left our packs.

Our hydration packs lay with the rest of the gear in the valley below. My water bottle was empty and I begin to feel seriously dehydrated. Andrew doesn't seem too phased. But then he is famed for his toughness.

Zac Zaharias climbed Dhaulagiri (8167 metres) with Andrew in 1997, as part of an Australian Army Association expedition to claim the first Australian ascent of the planet's seventh highest mountain.

"At Camp Three we got buried by snow and had to retreat to Base Camp," he recalls. "Half the team left, but Andrew said something along the lines of: 'I've come here to climb. I'm not going home – even if it's just me left with one gas stove.'

Lock tells our editor where to go

“Lock's first successful 8000-metre ascent was of K2, the second highest mountain in the world. It was a brutal introduction to life and death at extreme altitude...”



Lock climbing Annapurna in 2007





Lock on Makalu in 2008

Shishapangma and get the permits for both sides of Everest," he explains. "I have to fork out about 80% of that from my own pocket."

When he's not climbing or guiding in Antarctica, Andrew works as a civil servant in Canberra and gives key note speeches about his experiences. "I live very frugally," he says wryly.

The night is clear and we forgo the tent – as cool as it is – to sleep under the star spangled sky. A few flashes of lightening flicker from somewhere behind the plump rump of Kosciuszko, but rain seems to be a distant memory these days, and it certainly doesn't threaten tonight.

08.00, 1 February 2009: Mt Northcote (2131 metres; Australia's twelfth highest peak)

More of a grassy hillock than a peak, Northcote would make a sensational camping spot. It's certainly a long way removed from its global equivalent, Broad Peak (8051 metres), which

Lock successfully climbed on his second attempt in 1997.

Having already climbed Dhaulagiri earlier in the season, Lock made an attempt at a climbing a new route along the South Ridge of Broad Peak with Rick Allen. When that failed, he tried a solo ascent of the West Face, using gear borrowed from other climbers, who'd been put off their own mountain missions by treacherous conditions following a big storm.

Lock's Broad Peak story, as recounted to a spellbound audience of two (myself and Josh) the previous night, is the stuff of pure legend. At one stage he fell through a cornice above the col, saving himself by instinctively throwing his arms out. As his legs dangled high above China, he spotted an ice axe, and before extricating himself he grabbed it. "There was no sign of its owner," he adds, drily.

Reaching the summit late in the day, Lock decided to bivvy at over 8000 metres – "which isn't a good look." He has no memory of the hours that followed, but recalls coming around just before a particularly technical part of the descent.

08.55, 1 February 2009: Carruthers Peak (2145 metres; Australia's tenth highest peak)

Our stroll along the Main Range Track and over Carruthers is pretty, but particularly pedestrian when contrasted with Lock's experiences on the world's tenth tallest peak.

With a 50% fatality rate, Annapurna (8091 metres) is easily the most dangerous of the 8000-metre peaks.

Lock's first visit in 2005 ended in tragedy, with a colleague dying in his arms. In 2007 he returned, and after spending three terrifying, sleepless weeks on the mountain he made the first Australian ascent of the deadly peak.

I first interviewed Andrew just after he returned from this trip, and there was no mistaking the earnestness in his voice when he said he'd never set foot on Annapurna again. And this is a man who doesn't scare easily.

10.15, 1 February 2009: Watsons Crag Dome (2136 metres; Australia's eleventh highest peak)

Our final three peaks lay grouped behind Blue Lake. Like Lock in the Himalayas in 1999, we knock off the eleventh and thirteenth highest peaks on our list in fairly rapid succession.

11.05, 1 February 2009: Little Twynam (2120 metres; Australia's thirteenth highest peak)

Despite having left his high-altitude gear at Camp 3 on Gasherum I

(Hidden Peak), Lock and his Spanish climbing partner took advantage of clear weather to make an unplanned dash up the less technical Gasherum II (8034 metres), summiting in near-record time. Less than a week later he reached the top of Hidden Peak (8080 metres), a feat almost unprecedented in mountaineering history.

11.45, 1 February 2009: Mt Twynam (2195 metres; Australia's third highest peak)

Our little expedition draws to a successful close on the top of Australia's bronze medal-winning hill.

Although Lock climbed on both K2 and Everest early in his mountaineering career, it wasn't until 2003 that he took on the world's third highest peak, Kanchenjunga (8586 metres) with Christine Boskoff. Climbing lightweight and without oxygen, they were forced to turn back in the face of awful conditions.

In 2006, Lock returned with a highly experienced team. They successfully summited, but blizzard conditions on the way down led to one of Andrew's worst ever descents.

Our own descent from the range is a gentle walk to a car that we'd left parked at Charlottes Pass. If nothing else we have proved that it is possible to climb Australia's 14 highest peaks in a little over 28 hours, even with an overnight stop.

Andrew smells a greater challenge though. "I think you could do that in under 24 hours," he says. "You'd need a cooler day and you'd have to pack much lighter than we have, but you could definitely do it."

And do it he will; I have no doubt of that. He can't help himself.

22.45, 4 February 2009: Pugg Mahones pub, Hardware Lane, Melbourne (circa 64 metres above sea level)

During an overdue post-expedition beer, I wonder whether Andrew gets the I-hope-you-don't-die comment very often. "It happens," he replies. "People just want to say something, and that comes out."

And what is it like living with the ever-present possibility of death on the mountains?

"I used to be a policeman, I've seen a lot of deaths. Obviously I don't want to die, but death itself doesn't worry me unduly. I am concerned about how I die though."

If Lock's 2009 expedition to climb Shishapangma and then Everest without oxygen is successful, he will join a very elite group of climbers to have summited all 14 of the world's peaks over 8000 metres without oxygen – a club that has a membership of just seven people.

Elizabeth Hawley, a former American journalist who has been based in Kathmandu since 1960, has been chronicling climbers' ascents of Nepal's 8000-metre peaks for decades. It has become unofficial but accepted procedure for mountaineers to provide Miss Hawley with detailed accounts of their summit experiences in order for their climbs to be verified.

Over the years she he has come to know Andrew, the only Australian consistently climbing at this level, quite well.

"To succeed in such undertakings, especially without bottled oxygen, a climber must have considerable talent and stamina," she tells me. "One must have exceedingly strong motivation to climb any one of these great mountains successfully, let alone to keep plugging away at all 14 of them.

"Some people are driven by the desire for unusual bragging rights. Others seek to prove to themselves what kind of stuff they are made of. Still others – and I suspect Lock may fit in this category – get tremendous satisfaction from coping well with a huge challenge."

And what will he do after he has completed this challenge?

"It will definitely leave a void in my life, but I'm looking forward to getting on with other adventures," Andrew admits. "I have an Antarctic expedition in mind, but I can't give too much away."

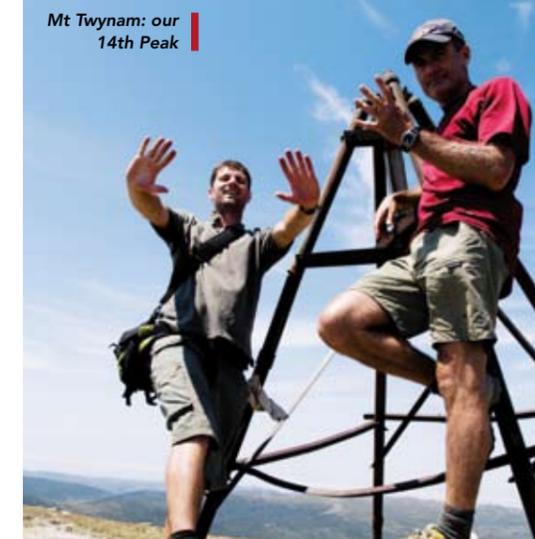
He sips his pint and thinks.

"But when I finish Project 8000? I'll have beer I think.

Maybe 14 beers." 🍷

Maps: Thirteen of Australia's highest peaks are found on the Department of Lands *Perisher Valley* map (1:25,000). The remaining peak (unnamed, Abbott Ridge) is just on the eastern extremity of the adjoining map, *Youngal*.

Web: For more about Andrew Lock and Project 8000, check out andrew-lock.com. For behind-the-scenes information, video and a map of Andrew and Patrick's Australian 14-peak epic, see outer-edge.com.au



Mt Twynam: our 14th Peak

The World's top 14

- 1) Mt Everest, 8850 metres
- 2) K2, 8615 metres
- 3) Kanchenjunga, 8586 metres
- 4) Lhotse, 8516 metres
- 5) Makalu, 8485 metres
- 6) Cho Oyu, 8201 metres
- 7) Dhaulagiri, 8167 metres
- 8) Manaslu, 8163 metres
- 9) Nanga Parbat, 8125 metres
- 10) Annapurna, 8091 metres
- 11) Gasherbrum 1 (Hidden Peak) 8080 metres
- 12) Broad Peak, 8051 metres
- 13) Gasherbrum 2, 8034 metres
- 14) Shishapangma, 8027 metres

Australia's top 14

- 1) Mt Kosciuszko (2228 metres)
- 2) Mt Townsend (2209 metres)
- 3) Mt Twynam (2195 metres)
- 4) Rams Head (2190 metres)
- 5) Unnamed Peak on Etheridge Ridge (2180 metres)
- 6) North Rams Head (2177 metres)
- 7) Alice Rawson Peak (2160 metres)
- 8) Unnamed Peak, Abbot's Ridge (2159 metres)
- 9) Abbot Peak (2145 metres)
- 10) Carruthers Peak (2145 metres)
- 11) Watsons Crag Dome (2136 metres)
- 12) Mt Northcote (2131 metres)
- 13) Little Twynam (2120 metres)
- 14) Muellers Peak (2120 metres)