



*Nigel Roberts standing on the summit of Denali (6194m) and, instead of a flag, holding up a Victoria University of Wellington t-shirt. Denali was not only the fourth of the Seven Summits that Nigel climbed, but—looked at from a different perspective—the mountain was also the first of the US state highpoints that he climbed.*

## CLIMBING AMERICA'S 'PURPLE MOUNTAIN MAJESTIES ... FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA'

*Successfully ascending the highest peak in each of the fifty US states*

*words and photographs by NIGEL ROBERTS*

It was the end of a quest when I reached the rocky summit of Mt Marcy, the highest peak in the state of New York, at noon on Sunday, 10 September 2017: I became the first resident of the southern hemisphere to have climbed all 50 US state highpoints. According to data compiled by the United States' Highpointers Club, I also became the 298th person ever to have successfully ascended all 50 peaks. Compare this with the facts that about 500 people climb Mt Everest each year, and that by the end of 2017 a grand total of 4833 people had done so.

My goal of climbing the 50 US state summits (or, to use the words of the famous song, *America the Beautiful*, the country's 'purple mountain majesties ... from sea to shining sea') was one that evolved slowly over many years—decades, in fact—with multiple twists and turns. In December 1959, when I was a 15-year-old high-school student in South Africa, I was fascinated by Mt Kilimanjaro, and—thanks to very tolerant, liberal and trusting parents—I hitch-hiked nearly 10,000 kilometres from Johannesburg to Moshi (in what was then Tanganyika) and back, and tried to climb the mountain. I failed to reach the summit, but my dream of doing so did not fade and 26 years later, while I was on my way back to New Zealand after a period of sab-

batical leave in Scandinavia, I finally reached the 5895m summit of Africa's highest mountain. In 1986, the year after I climbed Kilimanjaro, Dick Bass, Frank Wells, and Rick Ridgeway published *Seven Summits*, an account of Bass and Wells' attempt to climb the highest peak on each of the world's seven continents. I bought their book and devoured it. Inspired by it, I devised my own climbing goal—to climb at least 'Three-and-a-Half Summits': namely, at least three of the six highest of the Seven Summits plus Australia's Mt Kosciuszko, which is a mere 2228m above sea level (i.e., less than half the height of Antarctica's Vinson Massif, the sixth-lowest of the Seven Summits), and Kosciuszko can therefore, as a Kiwi I quipped, really only be regarded as a half-summit.

I made reasonably quick progress towards achieving my goal. In August 1994, I climbed Russia's Mt Elbrus, 5642m, the highest mountain in Europe. In December the same year, I summited 6962m-high Cerro Aconcagua in Argentina, the highest mountain in South America (which I like to tell people is 'the highest mountain in the world outside Asia,' and then hope their geography is so weak that they don't realise how huge an exclusion clause those two words, 'outside Asia', are). I then decided to have a crack at climbing Denali, and on 6 July 1997 stood proudly on the 6194m-high summit of North America's highest peak and held up a t-shirt from Victoria University (which is where I taught political science for many years).

Having climbed four of the Seven Summits, I'd surpassed my 'Three-and-a-Half Summits' goal. Somewhat serendipitously, however, a new climbing goal emerged seven years later. In 2004, I was back in the USA—not to climb, but to research aspects of the various voting systems used for United States elections. It so happened that my son was also in the USA, doing a PhD at the University of Minnesota, and—as a belated 60th birthday present for me—he and his fiancée treated me to a brief holiday on the north shore of Lake Superior. While there, the three of us decided to hike up Eagle Mountain, the highest peak in Minnesota. The summit is a mere 701m above sea-level, and after the climb—which took us through pristine forests in The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness—I was intrigued to learn that although Eagle Mountain is the 37th highest of the US's 50 state highpoints, it's ranked as the 18th hardest to climb. Pondering these facts had a major effect on me. In light of the fact that my son was marrying an American and I knew that in the long term they intended to live in the USA, I was sure I would be going to the United States frequently to visit them. I concluded that as I'd already climbed Denali (which is unsurprisingly not only the highest of the United States' 50 state highpoints, but also ranked as the hardest to climb), I would try to climb all 13 mountains that together constitute the ten highest and the ten hardest of the state highpoints. They also account for all the US state highpoints that are over 3000m high.

After reading as much as I could about the remaining 12 of the 13 highest US state highpoints I had decided to climb, I concluded I should initially tackle them in order of difficulty. After Denali, Wyoming's Gannett Peak (4207m) and Montana's Granite Peak (3901m) are ranked as the second and third-hardest ascents respectively, and in July 2006 I was lucky enough to succeed the first time I attempted them. The three-day trek to the base of Gannett Peak, which is in Wyoming's Wind River Range, took me through some of the most beautiful country I've ever had the privilege of visiting. The Titcomb Basin—a U-shaped glacial valley dotted with lakes and fields of wild flowers, and surrounded by soaring granite peaks—puts Gannett Peak very high on my 'I-wish-I-could-go-back-there' list. Granite Peak was especially memorable too, because it is the only US state highpoint that requires technical rock climbing skills in order to ascend it. That's the reason why it was the last of the state highpoints to be climbed. It was first scaled only in 1923—a full ten years after the first ascent of Denali. Fortunately for me, the rock climbing necessary to reach the summit was the type of rock-climbing I like best: somewhere around New Zealand grade 13 on good, clean, solid rock.

Early in 2007 I asked my Canberra-based climbing partner, Eric Hodge, if he wanted to climb the remaining ten peaks with me, and I was extremely fortunate he agreed to join me in my highest-and-hardest



*Roger Marcus (left) and Eric Hodge celebrate their successful ascent of Mt Hood (3426m), the highest mountain in Oregon. Nigel Roberts climbed Mt Hood on his second attempt, two years later.*



*Nigel Roberts rock-climbing on Granite Peak (3901m), the highest mountain in Montana and the last of the US state highpoints to be climbed.*

highpoints venture. It took Eric and me almost eight years—during which time we went on five long road trips covering more than 9300 kilometres—to climb the ten peaks. In mid-2007 we tackled the fourth and fifth-hardest state highpoints: Washington state’s 4392m-high Mt Rainier and Oregon’s 3426m Mt Hood. We reached the summit of Mt Rainier on 4 July 2007—American Independence Day—so I left a note in the Mazama climbing club’s summit register pointing out that, unlike America, New Zealand had been ‘a colony that was loyal!’

Unfortunately, though, the consequences of an earlier illness and a resulting lack of fitness meant that I failed to climb Mt Hood the first time Eric and I tackled it. Even though Eric and Roger Marcus (a friend I first met when I climbed Kilimanjaro in 1985) did make it to Hood’s summit after I turned around roughly 300 vertical metres below the summit, Eric proved to be at least as loyal as New Zealand: he agreed to accompany me when I tried to

climb Hood again two years later. In 2016, Eric and I reviewed the ten US state highpoints that we’d climbed together. With one exception, all are higher than Mt Cook. The exception is Mt Hood. However, proving that size doesn’t always count, it was Hood that gave both Eric and me the greatest degree of individual and mutual pleasure. I had climbed Denali, Gannett Peak, and Granite Peak on guided expeditions, and together Eric and I also climbed Rainier with a guide, but we felt that Mt Hood fell within the level of our competence and technical expertise, and our judgement in this regard proved to be correct: on 6 July 2009 (12 years to the day after summiting Denali), I stood ecstatically happy on top of Mt Hood, while Eric basked in the fact that he’d been there twice (a boast he rightly doesn’t let me forget).

The sixth hardest of the US state highpoints is one that few people have heard about. It’s Idaho’s 3859m-high Borah Peak, and on it Eric and I again had to make judgements that called on our combined expertise and skills. In July 2009, after five hours’ climbing up the lower slopes of Borah Peak, we stopped at the 3500m-mark and assessed the effects of an unseasonably early snowstorm that had occurred two days earlier. We concluded that the avalanche danger was too great for us to continue, so reluctantly—very reluctantly—we turned around and headed back down the mountain. We knew that if we wanted to fulfil our joint goal of climbing ten major US highpoints together, we would have to return to this isolated spot in Idaho, something that’s not an especially easy undertaking when you live in Australia and New Zealand. Nevertheless, we did so fourteen months later, when we were joined by Jeff Williams, a Salt Lake City lawyer with whom I had climbed Granite Peak four years earlier. Borah Peak thus became the one mountain that initially defeated both Eric and me. To rub salt into our wounded pride, the place where Eric and I abandoned our 2009 attempt to climb Idaho’s highest mountain is known as Chicken Out Ridge!

None of the remaining seven mountains that Eric and I had set our sights on were at all technical. Colorado’s Mt Elbert, 4399m, is the second highest mountain in the lower 48 (or contiguous) states, but it took us only a little over seven hours to hike to the summit and return to the trailhead. Likewise, New Mexico’s Wheeler Peak (4011m), Humphreys Peak (3851m) in Arizona, and Nevada’s Boundary Peak (4006m) involved only hiking (plus on occasion a bit of boulder-hopping) and took us six hours, six-and-three-quarter hours, and eight-and-a-quarter hours respectively to get from the trailhead to the summit and back.

Utah’s highest mountain is Kings Peak (4125m). To reach the summit, it is often said, requires a three-day trip, but Eric hates sleeping in tents, so we reduced it to a two-day (and, significantly, only a one-night-in-a-tent) trip, but our second day—from our camp site at the foot of Gunsight Pass to the summit and then

all the way back to the trailhead—was both long (13 hours) and tiring. Our one-day hike up Mt Whitney (4419m), the highest mountain in California (and until Alaska and Hawaii were formally admitted as states in 1959 and 1960, the highest mountain in the USA) was also long and tiring. Unlike New Zealand’s national parks, visitor numbers to the Whitney Zone (which straddles the Inyo National Forest and the Sequoia National Park) are strictly limited. Only 150 people are allowed into the area per day on one-day permits, and to get a permit, you need to take part in the Forest Service’s Mt Whitney Lottery (if only a system like this could be implemented for the Tongariro Crossing). Eric and I were lucky enough to win a permit that entitled us to be in the Whitney Zone for no more than 24 hours on 19 July 2012. As a result, we started out on the Mount Whitney Trail at 1.40am; reached the summit of the mountain at 9.25am; and—buggered but elated—got back to the trailhead at 3.45pm.

Eric and I had now successfully ascended nine of the ten US state highpoints that we wanted to climb together. Only one peak remained. It took us another year-and-a-half to get to it, but in February 2014 we flew to Hawaii (it’s a tough ask, but someone had to do it). Based with friends in a village called Captain Cook on Hawaii’s Big Island, we had the luxury of having time on our side. We waited for more than a week for the weather to clear, and then set off for the base of Mauna Kea, 4205m, Hawaii’s highest mountain (which, because it rises almost ten thousand metres from the floor of the Pacific Ocean, is also frequently referred to as the world’s ‘tallest’ mountain). As a result of the fact that there is an array of world-class observatories near the summit of Mauna Kea, it’s possible to drive almost to the top of the mountain—which is how most people get there. That was not something Eric or I intended to do. Instead, we set off at 6.30am from the visitor centre at the foot of the mountain and hiked up the Humu’ula trail. We reached the summit of the mountain shortly before noon. Apart from a four-and-a-quarter-hour trek back down the mountain, Eric’s and my ten-peak quest and my 13-peak highest-and-hardest US highpoints challenge was over.

However, a year before we climbed Mauna Kea, I’d asked Eric whether he was interested in extending our quest to include the highest peaks in other American states. Thanks, but no thanks, was his response. Oh well, I thought, I’ll have a look at some of them should the opportunity arise. Later that same year, 2013, I found myself back in United States for a variety of family and professional reasons, so I put two and two together—and got ten. A visit to Minnesota led to a side-trip to three neighbouring states that saw me and my son’s father-in-law hike to the top of the highest peaks in North Dakota and South Dakota, and also drive to the highest point in Iowa (which is situated on a farm on which soybeans and maize alternate as crops); after a school reunion in Ohio I couldn’t resist driving to that state’s highpoint; and while on my way to visit my oldest living relative—an aunt in her nineties in Maine—I climbed the highest mountains in all six New England states. As a result, when Eric and I reached the summit of Mauna Kea, it was the tenth US state highpoint that he’d climbed, but my 24th highpoint: one short of the half-way mark towards ascending all 50. Not unnaturally, I submit, I was now determined to reach the highest point in all 50 states of the USA.

There was a problem, though. The continental United States (i.e., counting neither Alaska, the largest state of all, nor Hawaii) is huge. It’s larger than Australia – and apart from the western states and the New England states in the north-east corner of the US, I’d tackled very few of the state highpoints in the rest of the ‘lower 48’. I would have to cover a great deal of ground. The plan of attack I drew up would have made generals like Eisenhower and MacArthur proud. I plotted the course of six road trips during the four years from 2014 through to and including 2017 (and, as events transpired, I was forced to add a seventh road trip



*Ascending 17 of the 50 US state highpoints ‘involved almost no hiking at all’. A prime example of such a highpoint (and the first one in this category that Nigel Roberts ‘climbed’) is Iowa’s Hawkeye Point (509m), which in 2013 was surrounded by soybean fields.*



*A panoramic view from the summit of Mauna Kea (4205m), Hawaii's highest mountain, looking southwest across a snow-covered cinder cone and towards Mauna Loa (4169m), the second-highest mountain in Hawaii. Because Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa have their base on the floor of the Pacific Ocean, they are sometimes referred to as the world's tallest and largest mountain respectively.*

to my schedule). I had already driven about 18,000 kilometres in order to climb my first 24 US state highpoints; in order to complete all 50, I had to drive another 24,000 kilometres. My longest single road trip was in April-May 2014, when I drove 6,371 kilometres in order to ascend six highpoints in the deep south of the United States. My shortest road trip—a mere 894 kilometres—was particularly special: I did it in early September 2017 together with my wife, son, and then three-year-old grandson in order to hike up Charles Mound, the highest point in Illinois.

It's not only possible to drive right up to the summit of many of the US state highpoints, but it's also impossible not to do so. As a result, as had been the case with my Iowa and Ohio 'climbs' in 2013, my 'conquests' of the highest natural points in Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Wisconsin involved almost no hiking at all.

Reaching the summits of another 13 of the state highpoints involved only short or moderate hikes—ranging in time from an hour or so to about four hours. I've already mentioned Minnesota and Illinois. The other eleven states were Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Vermont.

A final set of seven states had highpoints that weren't especially high—they ranged from Maine's 1606m-high Mt Katahdin up to the 2667m-high Guadalupe Peak in Texas—but each peak required more than a half-day hike to the summit and back, and several were moderately challenging. The highpoints in South Dakota, Tennessee, and Virginia were no trouble at all; nor too was Guadalupe Peak but it deserves special mention both because it is the highest of the US state highpoints that are less than 3000m above sea level and because the scenery was especially stunning. The mountain rises steeply out of the plains of the Chihuahuan Desert (a former inland sea) and its slopes were covered by a variety of vivid wildflowers. I can only echo the words used by Douglas Butler in his book, *A Walk Atop America*: "There are good hikes. Sometimes there are great hikes. Occasionally everything comes together, creating a fantastic hike. This was such a hike. ... Each bend in the trail (on Guadalupe Peak) brought wonderful sights."

Truth to tell, I could have driven up New Hampshire's 1917m-high Mt Washington, or (similar to Mt Snowdon in Wales) taken a train to the top, but I chose to climb the peak via the Tuckerman Ravine. I set off alone at 6.00am, and didn't see a soul until I reached the summit. I decided to descend via the Lion Head route. While I was doing so, the weather deteriorated. The route became quite treacherous. What had started out as a pleasant hike under sunny skies turned into an object lesson in the dangers of solo travel in the mountains. When I returned to my hotel after an almost nine-hour hike, I celebrated appropriately—by downing a Tuckerman pale ale. Two days later I climbed Maine's Mt Katahdin. The summit is the northernmost point of the 3500-kilometre Appalachian Trail and, as a result, I was far from alone. Literally dozens of through-hikers keen to conclude their quest to walk one of the world's great trails passed me as I made my way towards the top. Five months of hiking (or even more in some instances) meant that the AT hikers were fantastically fit and fast—and, dare I say it, somewhat malodorous. Incidentally, Katahdin was not the only state highpoint on which I hiked parts of the Appalachian Trail: I was also on the AT when I ascended the Massachusetts, Tennessee, and Virginia highpoints.

New York's state highpoint, Mt Marcy (1629m), isn't especially high (even the flat and featureless highpoint of Nebraska is higher). However, it was the one mountain that defeated me in my solo attempts to knock the US highpoint bastards off. I set off from the Adirondack Mountain Club's 'loj' (spelt that way because the original owner, Henry Van Hovenberg, was a spelling reform enthusiast) at 7.45am on Friday, 28 October 2016. Heavy overnight snow had been forecast for Mt Marcy, but the lower slopes of the mountain had been subjected to only a light dusting and I made good progress during the first hour that I headed

up the Van Hovenberg trail. After I crossed the Marcy Brook, however, the trail got steeper and the snow was noticeably thicker. At 11.50am I reached the junction of the Hopkins and Van Hovenberg trails, where I stopped and put on 'micro-spikes' (i.e., mini crampons). I was only two kilometres from the summit, but the slopes were icier, the snow was thicker, and the visibility was getting poorer. At 1.10pm, after floundering around in knee-deep snow, I realized I had no chance of finding, let alone attaining, Marcy's summit, so turned around and headed back down the mountain. My decision was a wise one: I was ahead of the only other climbers (two young Canadians) on the peak that day. I met them during my descent, and later learnt that they too had had to abandon their attempt to climb the mountain.

Ten months later, however, I returned to Mt Marcy. The weather was perfect—it was an exceptionally pleasant autumn day—and I was accompanied by my wife most of the way up the mountain. 20 years, two months, and four days after reaching the summit of Denali, I held up my VUW t-shirt on the top of my 50th US state highpoint. Getting there had been quite an adventure. It involved shifting goals, as well as driving more than 42,000 kilometres—more than driving right around the circumference of the earth. Hugely important, however, was the fact that my quest had also taken me to some amazing places in the United States. Geographical highlights included Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Canyon, as well as lesser-known gems such as the Painted Desert in the Petrified Forest National Park (in Arizona) and the Craters of the Moon National Monument (in Idaho). Two roads that are, in effect, national parks—the Natchez Trace Parkway and the Blue Ridge Parkway—are among the least-known jewels in America's crown. I would never have come across them, let alone driven hundreds of kilometres on them, were it not for my quest.

Had I not set out to stand atop all 50 state summits, I may well never have visited Gettysburg, the site of the best-known battle of the Civil War, in which the North gained crucial ascendancy over the Southern rebel states in July 1863. Just one day after the conclusion of the bloody battle at Gettysburg, the Southern stronghold of Vicksburg in the state of Mississippi surrendered to Union forces after a 47-day siege. The tide of the Civil War had turned; and the tide of my 50 state quest took me to Vicksburg too. As a political scientist with an interest in parliamentary architecture, I made sure my mountaineering itineraries included state capitol buildings and as a result I have visited and photographed 49 of the 50 state legislatures (I think Eric Hodge has forgiven me for dragging him along to see the Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming state houses). Other cultural icons I made sure that I saw on my climbing escapades included Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural masterpiece, Fallingwater, which has been called 'the most famous house of the twentieth century', and—at the opposite end of the cultural scale—the glitz and glitter of Las Vegas.

I didn't gamble in Nevada's casinos, but like many of the people who visit them I spent a small fortune pursuing my dream: not of generating overnight wealth, but of visiting every state in the USA and reaching the highest point in each of them. Over the course of 20 years, 13 visits to the United States and 18 separate road trips in the USA certainly lowered my bank balance. On the positive side of the ledger, however, I have the immense satisfaction of having achieved an unusual and not especially easy feat. As mentioned earlier, my son's decision to live and work in Minnesota was a key factor behind my quest, so it's appropriate that I end this account of my 50 state odyssey by repeating lines that have frequently been sung by Bob Dylan, one of Minnesota's best-known sons:

*The wealthiest person  
Is a pauper at times  
Compared to the man  
With a satisfied mind.*



*Thirteen state highpoints involved only short or moderate hikes, ranging in time from an hour or so to about four hours. In this photograph, hikers make their way towards the 1339m-high summit of Mt Mansfield, the highest mountain in Vermont.*

*Standing on the summit of his 50th US state highpoint—New York's Mt Marcy (1629m) – Nigel Roberts holds up the VUW t-shirt that he'd displayed twenty years previously on the summit of Denali.*

