



## AUSSIE, AUSSIE, AUSSIE. OI, OI, EIGHT!

*Climbing the highest mountain in each of Australia's six states and two mainland territories*

words and photographs by NIGEL ROBERTS

LEFT *Ralph Baulis, Eric Hodge and Nigel Roberts on the summit of Mt Ossa (1617m), the highest mountain in Tasmania. Pelion West (1560m) is in the middle distance and Barn Bluff (1559m) is on the horizon.*

LEFT *Battered by wind and fire, snow-gums stand below the summit of the Australian Capital Territory's highest mountain, Bimber Peak (1913m).*

My Australian climbing partner, Eric Hodge, and I were in the midst of a quest to climb the highest mountains in ten of the USA's western states when we came across an article in the Australian outdoors magazine, *Wild*, about climbing the highest peak in each state and territory of Australia. Written by Nick and Ben Gough, a father and son team, the *Wild* article described the challenge they'd undertaken as physically demanding, logistically intriguing, culturally enlightening, and immensely satisfying.

Not content with spending a small fortune, and making five separate trips to the United States in order to achieve our US goal, Eric and I simply couldn't resist rising to a different challenge. We decided that we too would try to climb what have been called the Aussie Eight. We began our

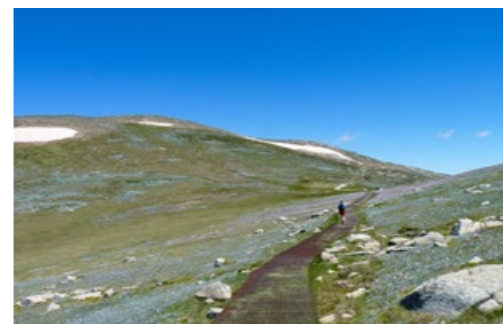


Australian quest in February 2009, and, as was the case with our United States' climbs, it involved five separate expeditions. What is more, it took us seven-and-a-half years to climb the Aussie Eight.

In the mid-1960s I was a 'ten pound pom' migrant to Australia, and, as a result, spent three years in that country as a university student in Tasmania, which is where I met and, 50 years ago, married my wife. It was thus appropriate that the first peak Eric and I tackled was Tasmania's Mt Ossa (1617m). I've known Eric since 1991, when we took part in a gloriously unsuccessful attempt to climb Lobuje East, a minor peak in the Khumbu region of Nepal. It was, therefore, also fitting that in order to climb Mt Ossa, we teamed up with Ralph Baulis, a Tasmanian climber who was also a member of our Lobuje East expedition. Every year, hundreds of people climb Mt Ossa, but almost all of them do so as a roughly three-hour detour while undertaking a four- to five-day hike on the Overland Track through the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park. For our part, with Ralph's help, Eric and I planned to climb Mt Ossa in just one day.

On 4 February 2009, the three of us were up before 4.00am. We left Ralph's Launceston home half-an-hour later, and drove to the start of the Arm River track on the eastern edge of the national park. It was still dark at 6.10am when we started hiking towards Mt Ossa. However, when the sun rose, it quickly burnt off a light mist to reveal wonderful weather and glorious scenery. The top of Mt Ossa is a three-metre-high obelisk on the northern edge of the mountain's boulder-strewn summit plateau, and it is probably the most difficult section on all the Aussie Eight's peaks; it's a grade 10 rock-climb!

After we'd climbed it, we sat on the summit, enjoying stunning views and lunch in the sun.

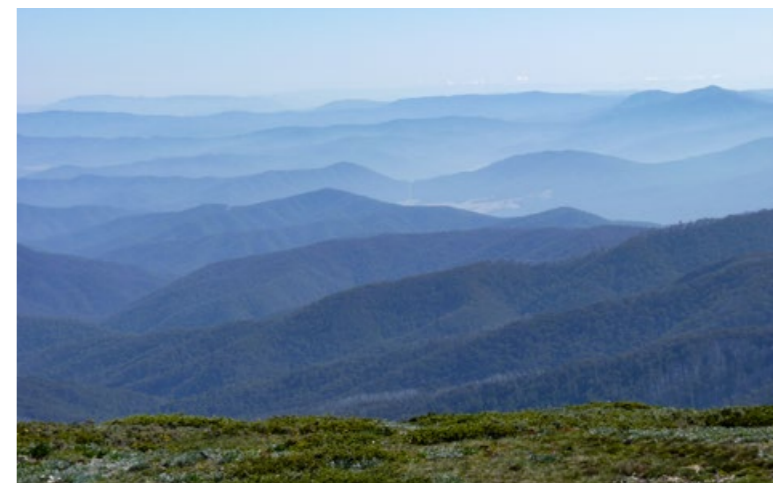


We had ascended 1000 vertical metres and walked roughly 20 kilometres, so we still had a long way to go when we began our descent at 1.20pm. When we finally got back to Ralph's 4WD car, we'd been on the go for a total of 13 hours and 20 minutes. It proved to be our longest day.

Climbing Mt Ossa turned out to be a template for the vast bulk of our Aussie Eight climbs. With one notable exception, all the peaks involved an alpine start. We would rise in the early hours of the morning and set off in the dark, not because the snow would be frozen, of course, but to beat the heat, and to ensure we'd be able to get back to our basecamp or vehicle before dark.

Eleven months after climbing Mt Ossa, Eric and I did a four-day, three-peak road-trip from Canberra to Melbourne. First we climbed Bimber Peak (1913m), the highest mountain in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). To access the mountain, we drove south from Canberra to Cooma and then north-west to Adaminaby and the Currango Plains, which are in New South Wales on the western side of the ACT. The hike to Murrays Gap, a pass separating Bimber Peak and Mt Murray, took us through classic Australian bush with gum trees and kangaroos. Then, after fighting our way through almost impenetrable thickets of seven-year-old eucalyptus saplings, we reached Bimber's summit plateau, which was covered with burnt and bent snow-gums. We returned to our hire car at 1.40 pm, after a climb that had taken us a tad more than eight hours. We left immediately, driving towards the third peak in our eight-mountain quest.

Mt Kosciuszko (2228m) is the highest mountain in Australia. It was, therefore, ironic that when we climbed 'Kozzie', as they say in Aussie, it was the one peak on which Eric and I didn't need to have an alpine start. We simply left our Thredbo hotel after breakfast, crossed the road, and headed up



the other side of the valley (I should stress we didn't cheat by using the chairlift to get to the start of what's known as the Kosciuszko walk, but with one exception everyone else did).

Although the day involved only a six-hour hike, it was far from anti-climactic. It was mid-summer and Australia's highest mountain was awash with wild-flowers. Fields of purple eyebrights, snow daisies, hoary sunrays, scaly button flowers, and branched everlastings made this particular walk in the park—the Kosciuszko National Park, to be precise—especially enjoyable. What is more, when I reached the summit, I notched up my fifth (and final) peak in a long-running attempt to scale at least half the Seven Summits, an adventure that lasted from December 1985 until January 2010.

Two days later, we made our way up Staircase Spur in order to reach the summit of Mt Bogong, which is 1986 metres above sea-level, and is the highest mountain in Victoria. We had wisely set our alarm clocks for 4.00am, because temperatures on the plains below Bogong were forecast to reach 30 degrees C. Above the bush-line, though, there was a refreshing light breeze, and from the top of the mountain there was a stunning view across range upon range of the Australian alps. When we returned to our hire-car, we had not only taken less than seven hours to hike to Bogong's summit and back, but we'd also 'knocked off' half the Aussie Eight in less than a year. However, our quest was a game of two very unequal halves. We didn't know it at the time, but climbing the remaining four peaks would take us another six-and-a-half years.

In August 2011, Eric and I rendezvoused in

LEFT *Boardwalks protect alpine flowers on the hike towards the summit of Mt Kosciuszko (2228m), the highest mountain in New South Wales and, indeed, all of Australia.*

RIGHT *The view from the summit of Victoria's highest peak, Mt Bogong (1986m), looking across range upon range in the Australian alps.*



LEFT Eric Hodge using tropical rainforest tree roots to pull himself up the steep, slippery slopes of Mt Bartle-Frere (1622m), Queensland's highest peak.

RIGHT Peter Nyaningu, the traditional owner of Mt Woodroffe/Ngarutjaranya (1435m), gave his permission for us to climb the highest peak in South Australia.

Queensland. The state's highest peak, Mt Bartle Frere (1622m) is just 70 kilometres south of Cairns, which makes it closer to an international airport than any of the other Australian highpoints. However, that doesn't make the mountain any easier to climb. Mt Bartle Frere is by far the northernmost of the Aussie Eight (it's only 17 degrees south of the equator). To climb it we battled heat, humidity, and, worst of all, leeches. We literally pulled ourselves up the mountain—not by our bootlaces, but by tropical rainforest tree roots. The round trip from base to summit and back—a distance of 15 kilometres, and an altitude gain of 1500m—took us ten-and-a-half hours. When we showered afterwards we had leeches clinging to our unmentionables, still sucking blood. Mt Bartle Frere was the only Aussie Eight peak where we had no view from the summit, but that was not utterly unexpected; clouds cover the mountain for four days out of

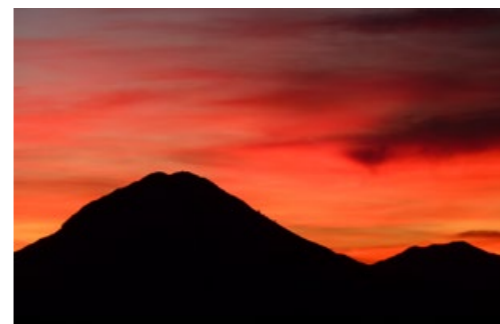


five. Nevertheless, neither Eric nor I is in a hurry to go back to Bartle Frere on the off-chance that we might possibly strike a cloudless day.

Success on Mt Bartle Frere meant we had completed the five Australian highpoints that are fairly easily accessible. The remaining three peaks are seriously remote mountains. South Australia's highest peak, Mt Woodroffe (1435m) is on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatja (APY) Aboriginal lands. An entry permit is required to gain access, and there are fines, starting at \$2,000 a day, for anyone who enters APY lands without a permit. Eric and I secured a permit by joining an officially-sanctioned trip to Mt Woodroffe, which its traditional Aboriginal owners call Ngarutjaranya. Thus, we found ourselves in mid-May 2013 in the company of 25 other Aussie Eight highpointers!

In the deserts of central Australia, humidity and leeches are not a problem. Woodroffe/Ngarutjaranya, though, introduced us to a new form of torture: spinifex. Its sharp, spiky leaves contain silica, which makes them stiff and rigid, and spinifex's spear-like points are easily able to pierce gaiters and clothing. For good reason, spinifex is sometimes also called porcupine grass. Although the summit of the mountain is only 685 metres higher than its base, it took Eric and me almost three-and-a-half hours to get to the top, and even longer to descend. We tried as hard as possible to avoid the spinifex on the mountain, but failed miserably in our efforts to do so. The following day, after we'd returned to the comfort of our hotel near Uluru (formerly Ayres Rock), I took a photograph of one of Eric's legs—it resembled a large, bloody pincushion.

Nevertheless, climbing Woodroffe/Ngarutjaranya was a wonderful illustration of why we undertook the Aussie Eight quest. Going there offered us the opportunity to visit both Uluru and Kata Tjuta (the Olgas)—places we'd never before



had a chance to see. In addition, sleeping out under the stars (without any light-pollution whatsoever they were brilliant) in swags was an unforgettable first-time experience for each of us.

After our success, despite the spinifex, in South Australia, Eric and I drove north to Alice Springs, where we hired a large 4WD vehicle, replete with bull bars, two fuel tanks, a second spare tyre, and lots of water, and set off in it for the base of Mt Zeil, some 220 kilometres north-west of Alice. Mt Zeil is 1531 metres above sea-level, and is not only the highest mountain in the Northern Territory, but is also the highest mountain in Australia west of the Great Dividing Range. Sleeping in swags at the foot of Mt Zeil was a magical experience. After an amazing sunset, we settled down on the soft sand of a small dry creek bed, and were serenaded by a mixed choir consisting of the rustle of wind in the trees, lowing cattle, and an occasional dingo howl. Climbing Mt Zeil the next day was a far more pleasant experience than South Australia's Woodroffe/Ngarutjaranya had been. A fire the previous year had diminished the amount of spinifex we had to wade through or, preferably, skirt, and for part of our ascent we had the congenial and knowledgeable company of a team of zoologists from La Trobe University collecting invertebrate samples from traps they'd laid on the mountain. Reaching the summit of Zeil and returning to our basecamp took a total of ten-and-a-quarter hours—it was our third longest day.

More than three years passed before Eric and I were able to go on our fifth and final Aussie Eight expedition. In early July 2016, we met up in Newman, a mining town just north of the Tropic of Capricorn in Western Australia. Although we were up well before sunrise the following morning, we delayed driving north until it was light because cattle and kangaroos make Australia's outback roads especially lethal at dawn and dusk. By 9.30



am, however, we'd driven 160 kilometres and had parked our 4WD hire-car on a gravel bed. We then set off for Mt Meharry, Western Australia's highest peak. At 1248m, it's the lowest of the Aussie Eight. It was also, by far and away, the easiest of the eight Australian peaks to climb. Reaching the summit took an hour and twenty minutes of non-arduous hiking. We had, at long last, finally completed the Aussie Eight. We toasted the success of our endeavour with champagne on the summit—the first time I've ever done that on a mountain!

Mt Meharry, like so many of the Aussie Eight, took us to places we'd never otherwise have visited. After climbing the mountain, we spent three days exploring some of the sights that north-west Australia has to offer. We hiked down into deep red gorges in the Karijini National Park. We climbed Mt Bruce (Western Australia's second-highest peak). And we toured a massive open-cast iron-ore mine.

For my part, I had to organise five trips to Australia in order to achieve our goal. We both travelled tens of thousands of kilometres by plane, as well as thousands in cars both big and small. We also spent literally thousands of dollars. Even so, we never once questioned the wisdom of our quest. It was supremely satisfying. At 73-years-old, Eric is possibly the oldest person to have done the Aussie Eight, while I strongly suspect I'm the first New Zealander to have climbed the eight Australian state and territory highpoints. Whether these claims are borne out matters little though, because the truth is that Eric and I have, both physically and metaphorically, been high on Australia.

LEFT The evening before Nigel and Eric climbed Mt Zeil (1531m), they were treated to a stunning sunset behind Mt Heuglin.

RIGHT Atop Mt Meharry (1248m), Western Australia's highest peak, Nigel Roberts and Eric Hodge toast the successful completion of their seven-and-a-half year quest to climb the Aussie Eight.