THE MOUNTAINEER

AUGUST 2010

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MOUNTAINEER
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JOURNAL OF THE
MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY MOUNTAINEERING CLUB

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COVER

A spectacular view of the valley nestling the small town of Kagbeni alongside terraced fields. This photograph was taken by Tim Carter on a recent trip to Nepal, where he and other club members joined up with Felix Dance to walk the Annapurna Circuit. Their story features on page 24.

ABOVE

MUMC bushwalkers walk the Razorback towards Mt Feathertop in the distance. Photo taken by Jaz Manabat on a club trip to MUMC Hut in March.

Kathryn Whalley
Outgoing President

PRESIDENTIAL DECREE

It's been a busy semester with lots of people heading out climbing, bushwalking, rogaining, participating in conservation activities and even some skiing and ice–climbing in New Zealand. Presentations ran throughout semester ranging from information sessions, *Introduction to...* sessions, leadership talks and inspirational tales from past adventures. Club T–shirts were also finalised sporting the winning design by Andy Green—they look great and there's still some for sale, so, if you haven't already, make sure you add one to your wardrobe.

MUMC hosted an Advanced Wilderness First Aid Course (AWFA) which helped boost the depleted level of first aid training within the club, and it was great to see the event go ahead with such enthusiasm. The intense four–day course took twelve MUMC members (and about ten non-members) through a lot of scenario–based learning, finding out how to manage a wide range of issues in a wilderness setting. While this training doesn't come cheap, a subsidy provided by MUMC, with the support of Melbourne University Sport, made the cost a bit friendlier for MUMC members and everyone agreed that after all the fake blood and broken bones it was money well spent. We look forward to continue providing these opportunities for members in the future.

With much excitement, the first round of submissions for the MUMC Adventure Grant draws near, creating a buzz around the club as members discuss potential adventures, with thoughts going to remote places both here in Australia and abroad. It will certainly be exciting to find out later this year what adventures this initiative has inspired.

Events over the past year have prompted me to delve into the history of MUMC, including stories from old members, resulting in reflection upon how things have changed over the years. A difference that really stands out to me is the sense of adventure, and the importance placed upon this in a lot of the old stories, and I can't help but wonder if we've lost some of the adventure from days of old. With the activities becoming more common place, and information and instruction more readily available, a higher level of safety and certainty is expected by those partaking in these activities. The skills and experience people once had when setting out in the past we would today think of as foolish, and yet it was that level of personal challenge in the adventure that made them begin in the first place. While I'm not suggesting we should avoid managing the risks of our endeavours, I think too often these days we look for the nice relaxing 'adventure' that doesn't involve too much stress and that we know we can achieve. I think we are particularly guilty of this after becoming familiar with an activity and reaching a basic independent skill level, and forget that the learning and challenges don't stop there.

Many of us don't keep challenging ourselves, yet it's when we are game enough to seek the limit of what we can achieve that we find these activities most rewarding, and we allow ourselves to come alive with the sense of adventure and achievement. I know I am particularly guilty of this, having reached a comfortable level of experience in rock–climbing and skiing, so with a little borrowed sense of adventure from the historical stories I decided it was time this needed to change. Unlike my previous thoughts, I realised that this doesn't necessarily mean heading out every weekend, and while I didn't quite set off on a grand 'never before attempted' adventure, it's amazing the difference something as simple as your attitude and mindset can have. Just being focused on challenging myself and doing my best resulted in the most entertaining and rewarding weekend of skiing I've ever had—not to mention the benefits to my confidence and skill level! I'm personally looking forward to appreciating my time outdoors a lot more in the future, and making the most of that time by challenging myself, improving my skills and going places and doing things I haven't done before.

I encourage everyone to question whether they're really making the most of the wonderful opportunities presented by MUMC and the wider outdoor world and to never stop challenging yourself, as there's always something new you can learn or some skills you can gain or improve that can make each trip a little more rewarding.

CONTACTING THE EDITOR

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MUMC ONLINE

Full colour PDF versions of current and past editions of the *Mountaineer*, as well as information about the club and how to join can be found on the website:
www.mumc.org.au

MEETINGS AND GENERAL ENQUIRIES

Regular meetings are held at the MUMC club rooms each Tuesday at 7:00 pm. For specific questions about the club, contact the club secretary:
secretary@mumc.org.au

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EDITOR'S BIT

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Welcome to a rather belated August edition of The Mountaineer. Work commitments and other events have played havoc with my involvement in the club this year, resulting in a late Mountaineer and a seriously reduced level of participation in club trips. Therefore, I've been very pleased to see such a wide variety of articles flood in across a range of club activities, which has provided me with a satisfying number of vicarious travel experiences for the year.

There are articles documenting the many bushwalking, climbing, skiing, mountaineering and conservation trips that happened, with highlights being Felix Dance's article on his ongoing trek through Nepal and Asia (that is still in progress), and Jessica Trevitt's surprisingly wet Larapinta hike.

Noticeable is the increasing number of photographers hanging around the club with digital SLRs and the odd medium-format camera; it almost seems we could start our own photography club! The recent Pie and Slide Night showcased the talents of these photographers and the winning photos will be published in the next Mountaineer, however, many of the excellent photos from these club members can be seen in articles throughout this edition.

An unusual situation caused by an early AGM together with the extended production time of this Mountaineer has meant that the President's Decree and many Convenor's reports have been written by previous holders of those positions. So any attempts to approach some of these past committee members in their old capacities will be doomed to failure. In an attempt to alleviate some of the confusion, the list of newly–elected committee members can be found under Announcements below—these are the correct people you need to pester...

Thanks again to all those who have contributed, and may you be inspired to write more for the next edition. Go forth and travel!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

New Committee for 2010-11

An unusual occurrence this year was the holding of the Annual General Meeting while the August edition of the Mountaineer was still being completed. This has resulted in the President's Decree and many Convenor's reports being written by previous holders of those positions. Following is the current list of MUMC committee members as determined at the AGM and subsequent committee meetings:

Executive:
President: Andy Green
Vice President: Dan Hearnden
Treasurer: Heather Couper
Vice Treasurer: Jesse Bates
Secretary: Roisin Briscoe

Auxilia:
General Member: Richard Bassett-Smith
Gear Store Officer: Egg (Eng Wu) Ong
Hut Warden: Daniel Hearnden
IT Officer: Steven Choi
Publications: Richard Sota
Social Events: Deborah Piattoni & Jesse Bates

Convenors:
Bushwalking: Mitchell Stephens
Canoe Polo: Emma Bland
Canyoning: Kate Abel
Caving: Shannon Crack
Conservation: Josh Howie
Cross–country Skiing: Jeremy Walthert
Kayaking: Ben Webb
Mountaineering: Dale Thistlethwaite
Rockclimbing: Aaron Lowndes
Rogaining: Tanya Craig
Bush Search and Rescue: Lincoln Smith

Obituary

Dr. Phillip Law
21 April 1912 - 28 February 2010

It is with sadness that we announce the passing of Dr Phillip Law, Antarctic pioneer and MUMC Life Member, who died in Melbourne in February aged 97. Dr Law was always looking for adventure, starting out camping and then bushwalking at a young age and later trying his hand at skiing and mountaineering. Along with his academic pursuits this lead to his passion for Antarctica; he is now regarded as the father of Australia's scientific presence in Antarctica. He was a Life Member of MUMC and was still inspiring new OXO's with his stories at the 60th Anniversary dinner. Our condolences go out to Dr Law's family and friends.

FROM OUR CLUB CONVENORS

Bushwalking

Tim Carter

bushwalk@mumc.org.au

We began this year with a series of beginner trips to Mt feathertop, Mt Buffalo, the Fainters, Wilsons Prom, Cape Liptrap and the Grampians. These ran over a three month period and hopefully allowed new members multiple opportunities to get involved in the club. Thank you to the trip leaders, Jess, Dan, Andy, Egg, Prashant and Dale and everyone else who helped out for running these trips. I think the club can be a bit intimidating to new members and these trips provide a great avenue for people to get to know the club. Dan's Mt Feathertop Razorback and MUMC Hut maintenance trip continues to be very popular as well as trips to Wilson's Prom, and I would hope there are plenty of beginner trips again next year.

A few years ago there was concern at the AGM that MUMC no longer did walks longer then two days. Over the last two years we have seen a renewal of longer trips been undertaken by club members. In the last year we have had trips to do the South Coast Track and Walls of Jerusalem in Tassie, the Larapinta Trail in the NT and a four day walk around Mt Bogong. These trips have reignited interest in these areas within the club. We now have a dedicated group of people able to lead these trips.

Another series of walks worth mentioning were the trips to Mt Feathertop. We had several trips tick off the less well-trodden tracks. Late last year we went up Diamantina Spur on the eastern side of the ridge. Earlier this year we found the infrequently-used Champion Spur with its nine river crossings. A trip also went in via the Northern Razorback and due to a few delays, OXOs experienced a fantastic sunset north of the summit then saw a sky full of stars from the summit. Hopefully next year we can continue seeking out some less-frequented walks.

A second trip to the Larapinta Trail was organised by Deb in September, and for the summer we've had interest in trips to the Overland, South Coast Track in Tassie and a traverse of the Arthurs. In NZ, Richard Basset–Smith is planning some back-country walking and there is always the option of some of the Great Walks.

We had a pretty full trip list for Midnight Ascent this year. It happened to be on the weekend of the federal election so the theme was changed slightly to Vikings, Pirates and Australian Politicians. Bonus points went to those who turned up in budgie smugglers or as a ranga!

I hope everyone enjoyed their walks this year and I hope to see you out there in the future.

Rockclimbing

Dave Ellis

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It's been a hectic climbing year and, unsurprisingly, one full of ups and downs (bad joke!). Looking back I've spent a lot of time working on accessibility and participation with some great results. I thought I'd look at the goals I set for myself and share a few of my trials and tribulations.

1. *Make learning to climb more accessible and safe for those who are keen.* It's made a big difference getting new climbers to visit the climbing gyms. The level of competence has been far higher when we go to the cliff, allowing everyone to spend more time climbing. The organised gym trips, particularly the Lactic Factory instruction session, were really well received and helped people socialise as well as improve their technique and fitness. Regular email updates, the climbing calendar and climbers contact list were really useful for those people who couldn't make it in every Tuesday.

2. *Develop a larger pool of competent leaders to share the load of teaching & training.* With a growing number of leaders, the challenge was to give them more experience/instruction at running trips for people less experienced. Keeping day trip numbers down to 10-12 people allowed me to organise more trips and get help from a range of leaders. As a result I was able to provide instruction to intermediate leaders on their top-rope setups early in semester and we had beginner-level trips run throughout Semester 1. Aaron Lowndes wrote up a template (with input from Stuart Hollaway) for an intermediate-level leader instruction weekend. It was a steep learning curve but we did have heaps of fun falling off. The template has laid the groundwork for future instructional weekends that will develop these sorely–needed skills.

3. *Adventure: go to far off, wilder places more often.* Whilst we ran heaps of trips and had a large number of participants we only travelled as far as the Blue Mountains which wasn't quite as remote as I was hoping. That said, we have a lot of keen climbers with another year's experience which offers heaps of potential for future adventures…

4. *Environment: maintaining and repairing the areas we use for climbing.* I've made several attempts with the Victorian Climbing Club to create an arrangement whereby MUMC takes responsibility for maintaining/restoring an area at Arapiles or the Grampians. It's a bit of a slow process but I think it would be a really worthwhile project (and fantastic PR) for the club and is worth pursuing.

FROM OUR CLUB CONVENORS

Canyoning
Kate Abel

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Winter 2010 and canyoners are in hibernation. However, just wait until Spring when all the excitement starts again! Abseiling down waterfalls, jumping into deep pools of water, swimming and scrambling down narrow creek beds, usually with towering cliffs on either side. Some incredible views with some navigation and bushwalking along the way. Sounds like fun? It definitely is.

So far this year we have had some fantastic canyoning adventures, at both beginner and advanced levels. The "Abseiling Skills for Canyoning" beginner day-trips permitted many MUMC members unfamiliar with canyoning to learn some basic skills. We'll run some more beginner trips like this in the second half of the year... watch this space. If you don't have any canyoning skills, or you want to see if you'd like it without committing to a long weekend, then these trips are for you. You'll learn the basics of abseiling, rope skills such as setting up anchors, making yourself safe on the rope and some tricks on rope management. We'll focus on canyon safety so that you can be confident and therefore have more fun.

Last semester I ran a technical skills session in the clubrooms for those people with some level of rope skills developed in other sports. I'll run another evening skills session for intermediates this semester. If you've done some rock climbing, caving or mountaineering then you'll find it easy. The skills sessions will be worthwhile to help you brush up on relevant techniques. Canyoning also utilises skills from other MUMC sports such as rogaining and bushwalking. If you want to come canyoning, head out to at least one rogaine and the trip leader will love you!

Most of the canyoning we do in MUMC takes place interstate, particularly the Blue Mountains and Kanangra Boyd National Park. You'll need to reserve a long weekend at least to come along, but it's well worth the travel. The scenery alone is spectacular and the canyons provide an endless supply of fun.

At the advanced level MUMC canyoning has been very exciting this year. At Easter the first multi-day MUMC canyoning trip took place down the difficult Davies Canyon near Kanangra Walls. Listed as a two-day trip in the poorly-written canyon guide book, the trip extended out to three and a half days but with adequate preparation and experience the canyon was completed successfully. This trip involved more than thirteen huge waterfall abseils and three nights camping out in the canyon.

I look forward to another semester of canyoning fun with MUMC. If you're interested in coming along on a trip, please contact canyon@mumc.org.au and keep an eye on the website for upcoming trips.

Skiing
Jessica Trevitt

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If you had a cooking pot filled half-way with snow, would you see it as half empty or half full? In Canada, I imagine it would be half-empty – why stop there when you have so much at your disposal? They would then drizzle maple syrup over it, roll the drizzles and the snow onto a paddle-pop stick and eat it (known as "tire" or "taffy").

In Australia, of course, we would see it as half-full – and be proud of it too. But then we'd probably have to throw it out because the tree-matter stuck in it would make it inedible.

This is how we had to approach the ski season of 09/10 – with a lot of optimism, and just a hint of irony.

Optimism was evident from the outset in our buying two new pairs of backcountry touring skis, and in the big turnout to our *Introduction to Skiing* presentation night. Irony was there, however, in the amount of skiers who had injured their ankles. Optimism was high as we prepared for an early season start in June. Irony was higher when the first dump came unexpectedly on a weekend, so we had no time to organise gear and get up there. Optimism came back with a vengeance as we got gear out every Tuesday night regardless of the fore-cast, ready to confirm the trip later in the week. Irony got sneaky as it foiled trips through lack of cars. Optimism remained fair and square with about five trips succeeding and some new skiers improving. Irony still favoured the convenor when it had me hiking in the desert at the time.

But then August arrived, and on the first weekend we had a skating trip to Lake Mountain and a challenging climb up the Fainters to discover a huge expanse of untouched snow on the summit. As we practiced our runs with panoramic views of the Alps flashing by, irony died out and optimism won for the season.

Gear Store Officer

Egg (Eng Wu Ong)

gear-store@mumc.org.au

This is Egg. E double G. He is your (not so) friendly gear store officer, especially if you get into his bad book. You can piss him off by not returning gear on time and leaving gear around without telling him.

The gear store is a challenging environment to manage. We have a huge inventory of stuff available for rent at very cheap rates. Obviously this is a privilege of being a club member. With the privilege of course, comes some responsibilities.

These include:
1. Taking care of the gear as if it was your own personal gear.
2. Keeping it reasonably clean for the next user.
3. Returning gear on time, or making notifications of delays.
4. Paying gear hire fees, which run on an honesty system. Fees are used to maintain and repair gear.
5. Recording down diligently what you have borrowed, to keep track of the equipment.

At the moment, we have just repaired a few of our nice down sleeping bags in preparation for Midnight Ascent, as well as acquired five sets of new waterproof overpants for skiing or general use in the snow. We are in the process of repairing a few of the tents in quarantine, and looking at acquiring a few more packs.

I'm a gear freak, and I like to talk about gear. We can chat the whole day about the best gear, technical specs, repairing stuff and how to shave grams off your load! I'm also a bit of a Mr. Fix-it. Got a hole in your jacket? I can fix it… for free! So, if you want to know more about gear, come and talk to your friendly gear store officer!

Conservation

Chelsea Eaw

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Hell-bent on making an epic out of the nest-box monitoring trip, this semester we've pulled out all the stops to get everyone thinking trees-equal-good. Ray Thomas, Conservationist of the Year and project coordinator extraordinaire, was in town and pulled into our clubrooms earlier this semester to shed light on the Regent Honeyeater Project (a nest-box building and tree-planting scheme). Small bird-banding trips transpired in Heathcote-Graytown National Park, home of the bush bird; and a team of MUMCers took part in Grass Tree monitoring in Brisbane Ranges National Park.

All in all, this semester, focus has been the name of the game, and our improved relationships with various conservation organisations and targeted awareness-raising has seen MUMC conservation move forward step-by-step. Four cars hit the road to get to nest-box monitoring—that's three more than last year. And August tree planting went ahead convenor-less, thanks to the initiative of five enthusiastic MUMCers. Can anyone say 'progress'?

Rogaining

Tanya Craig

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The 2009/2010 year has been a good one for MUMC rogaining. We've had several new members try rogaining for the first time and then come back for more. We got a few "top three" placings in rogaines over the past year (four to be exact) including a 3rd place in the Vic Champs by Lincoln and Alison. A team of MUMC volunteers also helped with the catering at this major event.

In the coming year it would be good to have two or three events where an MUMC team helps out with volunteering, both to increase overall volunteer participation and to give people a choice of different events (e.g. 6 hr, 24 hr, etc.) to try helping out at. Come rogaining!

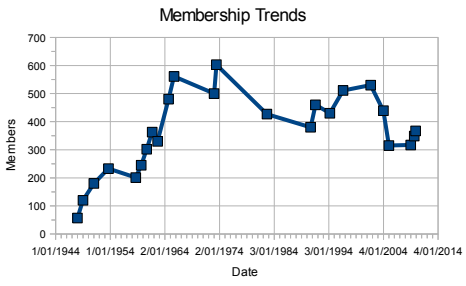
SECRETARY'S RAMBLINGS

- from the desk of Daniel Hearnden

secretary@mumc.org.au

Membership for the AGM 2010 was around 283, with a few forms from the mid-year O-week not yet included in this amount. This is down from last year which is surprising, as the activity level in the club has not dropped hugely.

I have a suspicion that there are a few stray former members who have not yet renewed their membership for 2010. It is really important for these people to understand that if they are not financial members of the club, they are not covered by insurance. The club does not endorse this and would like to ask anyone in this position to promptly send in their membership form and payment for 2010.



Apart from that, other intersting numbers from this year: 55% : 45% males to females; 75% : 25% students to non-students.

FROM OUR CLUB CONVENORS

Mountaineering

Dale Thistlethwaite
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The traditionally quiet winter mountaineering season has been alive with activity this year with two trips running in July. Egg headed to New Zealand to do some winter mountaineering and ice climbing, and Stuart and I headed over in the hope of doing some ski mountaineering. Perversely both parties were somewhat thwarted by weather; Egg by persistent storm cycles, and Stuart and I by endless sunshine (and hence softening/disappearing snow pack).

Egg started his trip in the North Island's Tongariro National Park, climbing Mt. Tongariro via the South Ridge, but bad weather forced him to abandon his other goals, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu. Heading down to Queenstown for some ice climbing at Wye Creek, he finished his trip with an avalanche awareness course out the back of the South Island ski fields. Stuart and I did some touring out of Treble Cone, digging of holes and snow pack analysis, and general mucking around.

Now that winter is over it's time to get psyched for the summer season. December 2010 will bring the 100th anniversary of the first female ascent of Aoraki/Mt. Cook by Australian mountaineer Freda du Faur. There will be a range of celebrations, slide shows, guest speakers and commemorative ascents occurring in NZ and it's sure to be a great party.

For those interested in getting involved in mountaineering, MUMC offered a pre-alpine instruction trip on the weekend of October 23/24 at Mt. Arapiles. This trip was run by myself and New Zealand Mountain Guide Association member Stuart Hollaway for members of MUMC and the New Zealand Alpine Club, and covered a range of alpine climbing techniques and considerations. The trip was designed for both experienced and novice mountaineers to refresh or gain skills to allow them to make the most of their time in the hills. It was also a great chance to meet some potential climbing partners. For more info or if you have any questions please email me at alpinism@mumc.org.au.

MUMC Hut Warden

Daniel Hearnden
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The hut still stands and is more or less still weather proof. So I guess we can call that a successful year. There have been two maintenance trips this year to tackle the continuing battle with the elements. In the first trip, I spent four days at the hut solo in early March completely rebuilding a section of the stone wall behind the sink. Very slow work, but this section is now weatherproof and has stopped the moisture attack on the stump and floor in this area.

The second trip was a combined maintenance and beer-brewing trip! A large group helped sand back the sleeping area and put a fresh coat of varnish on it to help protect it against drips from roof leaks and condensation.

The Abyss separating World's End from Isla da Muerta (above).

The view into The Abyss from the summit of World's End - *Here There Be Monsters* climbs the central line (below).

PHOTOS: STUART HOLLAWAY

HIC SUNT DRACONES

An exploration of the unknown continues to unveil Cape Woolamai as a great climbing destination.

BY STUART HOLLAWAY
ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER ARCH & LINCOLN SMITH

The great journeys—the source of memories and discoveries—are not necessarily the long ones, but rather the ones with uncertain outcomes. Adventure, like difficulty, is relative, but to have the thrill, and the risks, of the unknown, you have to head off the edge of the map. This is the essential nature of adventure: being willing to start without really knowing how it will end.

For the last couple of years I have been luring people to Cape Woolamai where the granite spires sticking out of Bass Strait provide a compelling interface of ocean, earth and sky. Woolamai as a crag had a period of early development but was largely abandoned with a reputation for terrifying climbing on rotten rock. This is true of some of the areas there, but in developing these previously ignored crags we have consistently found good, well protected climbing in a fantastic setting.

Initially we climbed on the landward cliffs and the pinnacles, with later trips developing routes such as *The Opportune Moment* (16) and the classic *Aztec Gold* (7) on Isla da Muerta and eventually reaching World's End.

The great adventure of *Not Trying to Find North* (13), which leads to the summit of Isla da Muerta, was, rather than climbing up, finding a way down. The stellar line of *Ahab* (18), on the ocean side of the first pinnacle, took two attempts, months apart, to solve the thin upper corner.

The first effort to get to World's End was thwarted by the surging Abyss. Our second option was a traverse that gained the chockstone bridge to reach World's End, but it was a drenching epic of huge surf and we were forced to open *Before the Storm* (16) to escape over the summit of Isla da Muerta.

Big surf in The Abyss, first ascent of *Edge of the Map* (above).

Lachie topping out on *Edge of the Map* (left).

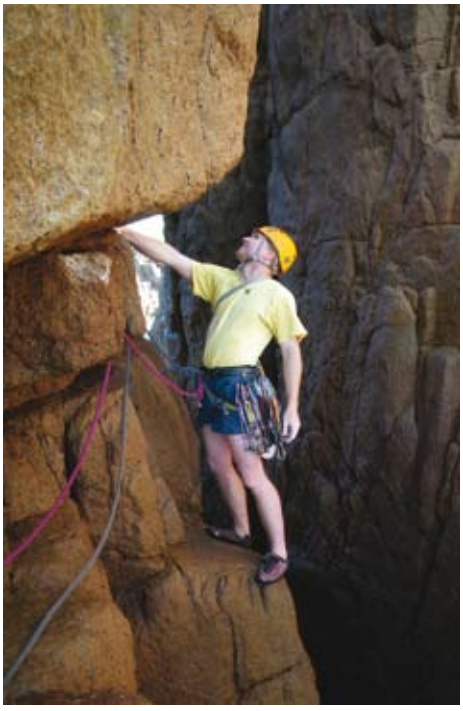
Lachie and Peter descending the arete from the summit of Isla da Muerta (below).

PHOTOS: PETER ARCH (ABOVE, LEFT); STUART HOLLAWAY (BELOW).

Stuart finally established in The Abyss (now we just have to get back out again) (below).

Lincoln in the depths of The Abyss (right) and on the crux of *Here There Be Monsters* (below right).

PHOTOS: LINCOLN SMITH (BELOW); STUART HOLLAWAY (RIGHT, BELOW RIGHT).



The last mysteries were the *Poseidon Adventure* and the awesome hanging wall of The Abyss. Serious attempts to gain the weird blowhole chimney feature that starts in The Abyss and tunnels through to top out on the other side of World's End where the surf comes from all directions, have resulted in total running away or retreat to easier lines, so the *Poseidon Adventure* remains a daunting and unclaimed prize (although if anyone can find a passage in, the climbing will probably be 10 or easier).

Our first attempt to get into The Abyss was abandoned as the waves surged past at head level starting the traverse, but we got the fantastic consolation prize of the dramatically positioned *Edge of the Map* (18).

With a forecast of light winds, little swell and low tide at 12:15, Lincoln and I drove back to Woolamai in May this year, determined to get into The Abyss. Conditions were ideal. After making the traverse and crossing to World's End to get a view of the overhanging wall, I thought that there was every chance I might wet myself, but the sea was only slopping around low in The Abyss and there appeared to be a climbable seam running up most of the wall, so I was out of excuses just before I ran out of nerve.

Feeling that exotic mixture of excitement and nausea, I went over the edge. The traverse was awkward, but the rock and protection great. From a reasonable stance at the base of the seam, an incredible place to be, I built a nest of five pieces of gear—two of them really good—and was able to talk myself into heading up. From a pumpy position I managed to mash a reasonable cam into a flaring flake and fiddle a couple of rubbishy micro-nuts into the seam. I was pumped and the climbing above looked hard, but the cam and Lincoln's upbeat commentary (although he was anchored around the corner so couldn't see any of what was going on) gave me enough courage to try the next moves.

I thought that there was every chance I might wet myself . . .

They were hard and technical. On the third attempt I discovered a sequence to reach a good crimp from which I could stuff a micro-cam into a small flaring in the seam. As soon as I clipped it I reversed the moves to the better, but still pumpy, stance to try to recover. Now I had really good, high protection—I committed myself over the edge again: I might not get up the route but I was going to fall trying. The realisation that I was willing to fall in that outrageous position is one of the great memories from my trip into The Abyss.

I headed up again and from the crimp stabbed at the next opening in the crack, but it was too small for my fingers and, having stretched so far for the move I struggled to hold balance. Desperately I stuffed in another small cam and started a long, clumsy retreat to the stance at the base of the seam to try to recover enough to climb through to the top. Lincoln's patience was awesome, but eventually I headed back up, balanced my way through the strenuous side-pull sequence, before slamming a hand and two cams into the crack that opened above the crux. Pumped silly, but thrilled, I worked my way to the top and back into the sun.

Lincoln followed, showing great composure above the rising tide and swell, and after a bit of hanging on the rope to recover and figure out the pumpy crux sections, joined me by the summit of the Isla da Muerta. Ocean and earth; time and tide; stone and sand; alone and together: for the second time in my life, I had gone climbing for the day and was totally satisfied by one pitch.

It is one of the great things about exploring our sports: I drove 110 kms from Melbourne and went playing with my friends. With people that I love I had fun in the sun (and the water) and, a couple of times, we slipped over the edge—where the map was blank except for the note "*Here There Be Monsters*". We climbed 19 m, and there we found many wonderful things.

(*Here There Be Monsters*, grade 20, The Abyss, Isla da Muerta, Cape Woolamai; First Ascent Stuart Hollaway & Lincoln Smith, May 2010)

WILSON'S PROMONTORY

The lucky winners experienced a walk that was mischievously more difficult than expected.

BY EMILY FRENCH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES CRISTOFARO & JAZ MANABAT

Our trip to Wilson's Promontory began with a little bit of controversy. With only ten spots and nearly thirty people clamouring for them, stand-in leader Tim was forced to resort to a slightly archaic method of choosing in Josh's absence. Oh yes. We pulled names out of a hat.

Turns out luck was on my side, since both I and Stacy, who I had planned to share a tent with, were selected. I was extremely happy when she offered for us to be tent and food buddies again, since this would seem to indicate that I hadn't been too unbearable on our last trip, which is always comforting.

Taking advantage of the long ANZAC day weekend, the motley crew rocked up at the MUMC Clubhouse at 7 am on the Saturday. Well, almost all of us. One of our number (Stacy) had overslept a tad and had to be called up and subsequently picked up from her home on the way. There's always one and it has certainly been me in the past, so there will be no judgement meted out in this article.

The drive to Wilson's Prom was joyously uneventful until our designated driver, James, suddenly turned to me and mumbled: "Emily…I'm feeling really tired. Do you mind taking over?"

I can drive. I *can* drive. Sort of. My license says I can. Those who have driven with me in the past might say otherwise. I weighed up the options in my head (driver asleep at the wheel vs. me) and decided that I was the marginally safer option. Wetting my lips and saying in a breezy high-pitched voice: "Sure!" was intended to instil confidence in both me and those around me, but I couldn't quite keep the quiver out of my voice.

Anyway. We shall skim over the next hour of the trip and assume that my driving was excellent. We arrived at Wilson's Prom mostly intact (what's a wing mirror here or there) and busied ourselves getting to know the group, most of whom I had never met before. I was overjoyed to find some fellow Europeans in the gang—the age-old animosity between the French and the English aside—and we quickly got discussing European politics and the upcoming British election, which was no doubt fascinating for the rest of the group to listen to.

The first day was extremely comfortable. A solid 15 km, which was largely on a track suitable for cars to drive on, stroked all of our egos as we encountered no difficulties and quickly proclaimed ourselves masters of the walking world. That evening, a slightly daring side-trip was proposed to the southernmost point of Australia, which would add an extra 7 km to our day's walking tally and also see us walking back in the dark. Note to self: overconfidence is a hazardous quality.

However, even after staggering back in the pitch black with about two head torches between six of us, I can't pretend that the windswept coastal sunset views weren't worth it.

That night, it absolutely chucked it down. I lay awake in my tent with everything crossed, just praying that we had done a half-decent job setting it up. Frankly, my confidence in our tent-erecting-skills was not especially

high and I expected to start feeling water dripping onto my face at any moment. The tent-gods smiled on us that night, however, and I awoke feeling dry although not entirely refreshed from my uncomfortable kip. I love hiking, but sleeping in a tent is definitely not something I find enjoyable. No matter which position I try to sleep in, one of my joints always feels like it is having way too much contact with the ground.

Day two heralded what we knew would be a moderately epic day. 26 km awaited us. However, our group had been comforted by Bushwalking Convenor Tim less than a week previously that we should not be too daunted by this, as it was "mostly flat". Tim is so very, very lucky that I have not run into him yet since this trip.

Safe to say, this walk was not flat. In fact, to illustrate to the unimaginative of you out there, it was about as flat as the contours of Scarlett Johansson. Note to self: Tim fibs.

Desperately trying to make a good distance before we had lunch, we eventually stopped on what was undoubtedly a gorgeous beach at gone 2 pm and attempted to recuperate. The worrying impression that I was the only one with achy muscles was thankfully vanquished on hearing the rest of the group's pitiful groans as they dumped their backpacks onto the sand and fell into something resembling a seated position. It was at this point, however, that Sally produced what would turn out to be a never-ending supply of chocolate (and subsequently earned her the nickname Santa Claus) which definitely boosted my morale.

After a mere half an hour break for lunch, we were off again, desperately keeping our wearied legs going. As the prospect of arriving at our second campsite after dark looked worryingly likely, we picked up the pace and pushed hard to get there while it was still light. Triumph! We hurriedly pitched our tents and just about got the final pegs in as the day turned to dusk. After some dinner, Julien produced some spectacularly intact ANZAC biscuits for dinner, James shared a substantial quantity of powdered milk and Milo and Sally once again presented us all with Dairy Milk. I don't think food has ever tasted as good as it did that evening!

The next day, leader Josh just about got us all moving. I think it's fair to say that after having walked 48 km in two days, we were all a weensy bit sore. I had amused the group the previous evening by staggering about the campsite like a penguin because my hamstrings were so tight, and it turns out that one night of bad sleep on the hard cold ground is not an effective remedy. After getting moving, however, my hamstrings were pummelled into submission and started co-operating for us to get going on our final 16 km day.

We did it. I don't know how we did it, but by the time we stopped for lunch in a grassy knoll, a glorious sign told us we were a mere 3 km from our final destination. We collectively collapsed in a heap, intent on food, sleep or in the case of some, kneeling in worship before the sign. After finishing all of the remaining food in my pack, I cheerfully accepted some of Sally's ubiquitous chocolate supply and contemplated the lovely car journey home, where I could remain seated for several glorious hours.

The gang stopped at a pub on the way home for some well-deserved dinner where I found myself waddling like a penguin again because my hamstrings had taken the rest in the car as an opportunity to seize up again. Still, I was nearly back in civilisation again. No one needs working legs in the real world. And I can't deny that the feeling of having really tested myself and achieved something was just so worth it. If you can do 64 km in three days, you can do anything! (Unfortunately, laws of gravity still apply.)

It's quite amusing to think on the number of people who were eager to head on the Wilson's Prom trip. I ran into Prashant next Tuesday at the club who gleefully informed me that on the first day of his trip that weekend, his group walked 8 km. And somehow didn't arrive until after dark. I think it might be a good thing that they weren't with us for our second day; they might not have had any opportunity to sleep at all.

So, everyone be aware—next time Josh wants to lead a trip, or Tim assures you that a spectacularly long day is "mostly flat", you can be sure that you are in for several days of hills, pain and the feeling of pure, undiluted accomplishment.

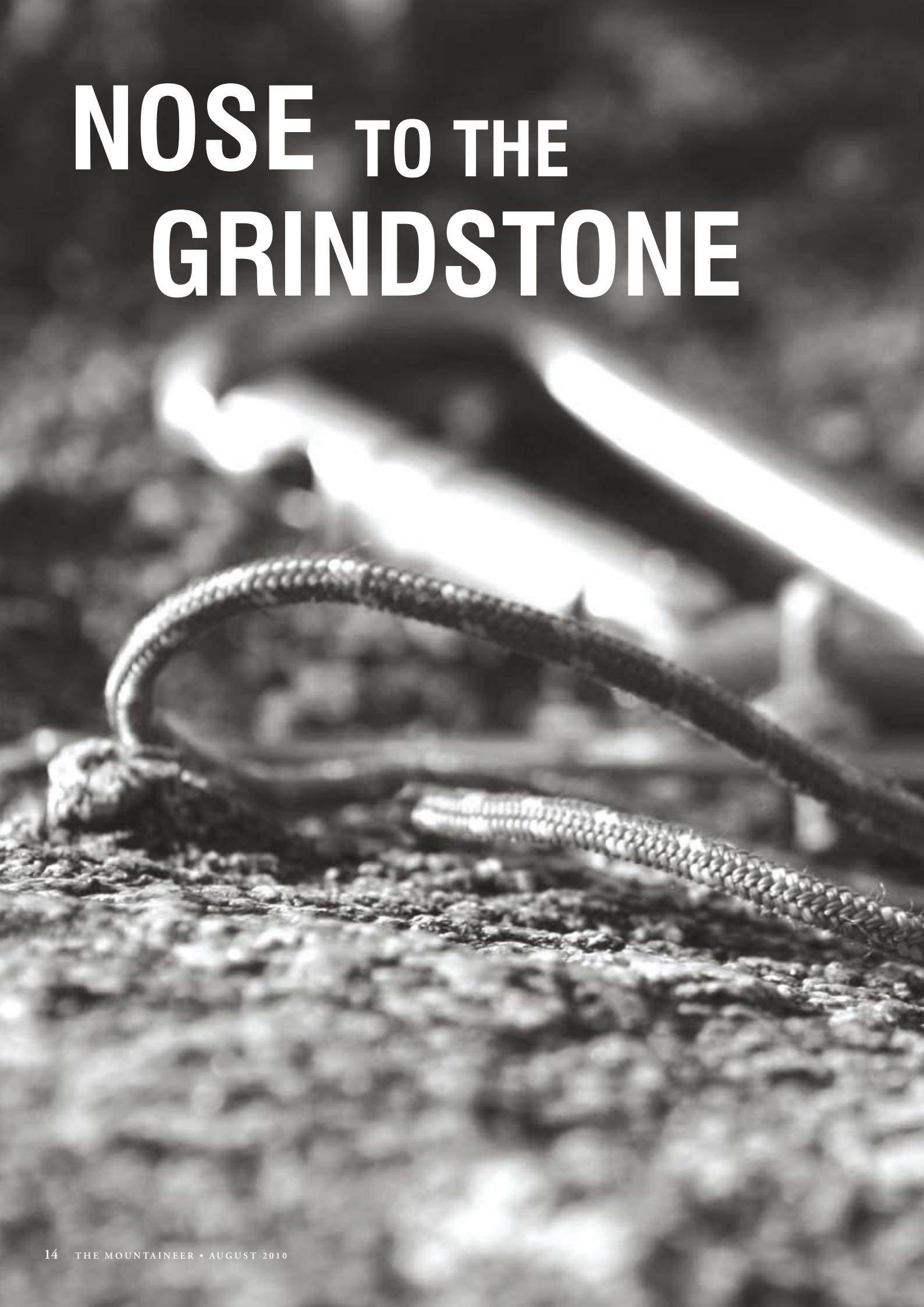
The comfortable first day with perfect weather (opposite bottom) and additional side-trip to the windswept Southern-most point of Australia (top) created a small amount of overconfidence.

The rest stop on the beach provided some recuperation during the second day (main).

Collapsed on a grassy knoll in front of the distance sign (above).

PHOTOS: JAMES CRISTOFARO (MAIN, TOP); JAZ MANABAT (OPPOSITE BOTTOM, ABOVE).

NOSE TO THE GRINDSTONE



WORDS AND LAYOUT CONCEPT BY CHELSEA EAW
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHELSEA EAW & MAC BRUNCKHORST

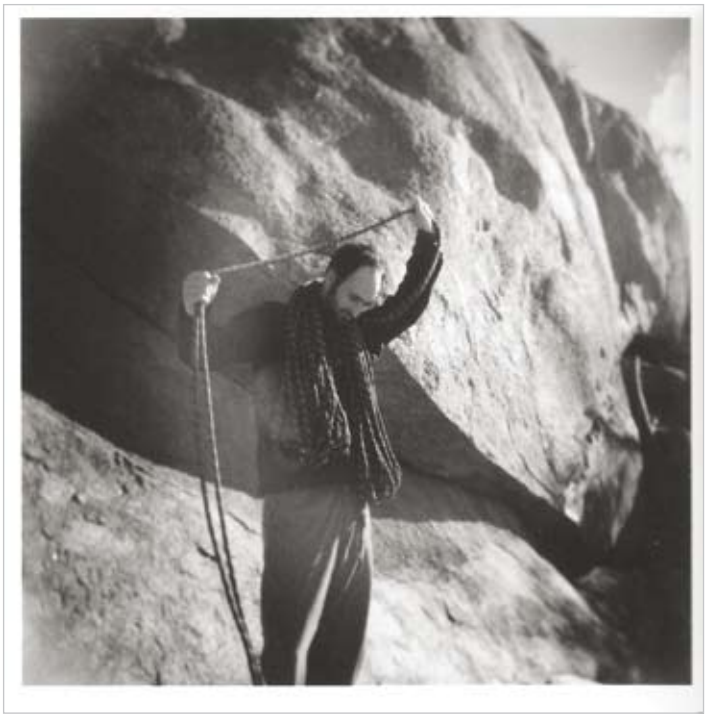
Slab—a whisper of the 's' word sends some climbers running for the hills. Notorious for poor protection, run-out climbs and invisible holds; as granite legend Kevin Lindorff describes, "You don't have to be fit to climb slabs. You need to be technically solid and have your head together". Neophyte climber CHELSEA EAW recounts the first climb to defeat her; a granite slab route, which was the first to declare that learning to lead is no walk in the park.

A purple Petzyl Am'D (a locking carabiner) was my first piece of rockclimbing gear. I had always thought that my favourite piece of gear would be the first one I acquired, but as it turns out, my poor Petzyl Am'D has been whacked off its rocky pedestal.

Not by my most reliable piece of gear, either. You would think that, trading sentimentality for sapience, the second most likely candidate to earn the admirable title as my favourite piece of gear would be something that would save my life, given the chance. Say, a nut or a cam?

Nope. My favourite piece of gear is a small length of 3 mm cord. It serves no other function than to link my nut tool to its straight gate carabiner. If its colouring—teal with light pink flecks, a combination that seemed popular a decade or two ago—didn't betray its age, you wouldn't know that this cord is close to 19 years old. It remains unfrayed and intact, divulging nothing to suggest that this cord has been in use for all 19 years of its life. It clings to a cobalt blue Kong straight gate carabiner that has seen better days. Much of the once dazzling blue has scratched off from years of tough slogging on Arapilesean, Grampian and Ben Cairnean walls; and the gate has a disconcerting tendency to close only partially. If it wasn't for this dodgy quirk, it would be a viable contender to my nondescript cord.

Not that this cord has always been mine. It can't have been—I haven't been climbing for 19 years. Not even close. In fact, I have yet to mark my one-year anniversary with Australian rock, a relationship that, from the outset, distilled an exorbitant obsession: a fixation on rocks, and climbing them.



There's much more to the Youies than Urinal Wall and Gravel Pit Tor. Hidden gems of crags can be found all over the joint (opposite top).

Chelsea's favourite piece of gear: her 3 mm cord, along with her carabiner and nut tool (opposite below).

PHOTOS: CHELSEA EAW.

Mac at Westauwant Wall, You Yangs (left).

Chelsea learns to lead on *Camelot* (10), The Plaque Area, Arapiles (below & bottom).

The teal and pink-flecked cord (previous page).

PHOTOS: MAC BRUNCKHORST (BELOW, BOTTOM); CHELSEA EAW (LEFT, PREVIOUS PAGE).

Although my evolution from noob to lead climber has been swift, it hasn't been scarce. Week-in week-out exposure to real rock (as opposed to plastic) has bred in me a wholesome reverence for the things that can go wrong on geological paradise. And joining different motley (climbing) crews has hammered it home, that no matter how much you think you know, there is always something you don't.

This rang well true on my first attempt to lead on granite slab. Silently egotistical after ending all my first trad leads with mental high-fives, and patting myself on the back for placing epic gear, my first foray onto non-Arapilesean rock—something I have been spoilt with—shoved the metaphorical roses under my nostrils. It was time to wake up.

Slab—for some people—holds a daunting stigma. Notorious for its arresting exposure and teeny, sometimes non-existent holds; the thought of falling and scraping off multiple dermal layers along the length of your body is what makes noobs like me quiver at the knees. If you've ever seen a climber's hands after granite jams, you'll know what I mean. I love slab climbing. But I also love having skin.

Visions of grazing my forearms to the bone are searing my brain while I tip-toe up a slope of peachy-grey granite, unprotected, since I haven't placed any gear yet. It's May, and the wind is brisk. The rock feels cool under my fingertips, and I let my fleshy tips sink in. When I can feel an edge, I raise my foot. The next foothold isn't really a foothold. Typical slab. I smear my shoe against the rock. As most of you climbers will know, smearing works using friction. Your foot isn't actually holding onto anything with an edge. Suddenly, I become acutely aware that there is nothing but my weight holding my foot in place. And I don't weigh that much. My palms get damp.

They say climbing is 100 per cent mental and 100 per cent physical. You need to train for both. Right now, I'm not doing anything that requires physical prowess, but my mind is faltering. I am a few metres from the ground—probably not far enough to break anything if I fall, but far enough to scrape myself skinless on the way down.

"I can't do it," I confess.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to put a piece of gear in unless you want to down-climb." My calves feel solid, but my lower legs are shaking. I twist a bit to reach for a cam. "Not that one," advises my belayer. My weight

shifts. My foot slips a nanometre. This is so silly. Really, I'm not far from the ground. But you try telling my brain that. I can still see vivid images of myself sans skin.

"I can't do it," I say again.

"You have to get down somehow."

"If I move again, my feet are going to slip," I insist.

"The yellow cam," my belayer advises. "That one looks good."

Back at Arapiles, on my previous leads, my gear was bomber. It would have taken tectonic plate movement to dislodge my nuts. But that's because I took a hundred years to place each one. (Little did I know, this meant I was living on the edge, because by the time I placed one piece of gear, it would almost be time for the next great continental landmass shift again).

Here, at the You Yangs, perched on granite slab, my time is limited. Whether it is purely in my head or not, my feet feel unreliable. I take a deep breath, unclip the yellow cam from my harness, shove it into the parallel crack, whip a quickdraw onto it, and clip in the rope.

In retrospect, perhaps I should have kept going. But my mind was so far gone that I was actually reduced to tears by the time my heels touched the ground. In retrospect, although I was defeated by what I thought would be an easy lead, I placed that yellow cam more efficiently than I had ever placed any piece of gear. What's more, this was a sobering reminder that I was not infallible.

This was a sobering reminder that I was not infallible

My 3 mm cord was given to me by someone who led their first climb when I was six years old. This person—who was my belayer that day—is my mentor; somebody every climber should have. The cord is a perpetual reminder of the years of experience—and keeping your nose to the grindstone—it takes to become a truly excellent climber; one well versed in rock lore, rock types and the trials likely to befall an Australian climber. My favourite piece of gear isn't my shiniest, newest number; nor is it my favourite because its age dictates it should come with a sample of Pre-Cambrian rock. My favourite piece of gear tells me a story. Every time I reach for my nut tool and my fingers grasp the slight but indelicate teal and pink-flecked cord, I remember that this cord has been climbing for much longer than I have—I think of all the places it's been, and all the places I have yet to climb.

THE GEAR FREAK: PACKS

Our resident gear freak offers some handy advice when it comes to fitting and choosing a pack.

BY EGG (ENG WU ONG)
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD SOTA

This pack is almost big enough to sleep in! (above) Decide on what size pack you really need before committing to a purchase.

Most people shudder at the thought of carrying 15-20kg of gear on trips. The straps cut into their shoulders, their waist gets chaffed, the pack is just uncomfortable and they can't wait to throw it to the ground. Well, packs aren't supposed to be uncomfortable. The purpose of a pack is to make load carrying as comfortable as possible.

Fitting a pack

Here are a few ways to ensure a good fit:

1. Get fitted at a store. Don't simply purchase one online unless you absolutely know what you want. Any store worth their salt will have weights to put into the packs, and retail assistants who are knowledgeable and patient enough to fit you correctly.

2. Go for comfort over anything else. Don't be dazzled by the bells and whistles that manufacturers have planted to convince you to buy the pack. Check for the fit of the waist belt and harness system. Load the pack up and walk around the store for as long as you can. Your hips should be taking most of the weight and your shoulders should be relaxed.

3. When loading your pack at home, keep the light and bulky items (such as sleeping bags) right at the bottom of the pack. On top of that the moderate weight items like clothing, jacket and food. Keep the dense heavy items as close to your back as possible. Normally this will be water or the tent. The overall effect is a centre of gravity which is closer to your body, which makes it easier to move with the weight.

4. If all else fails, remember one thing: "light is right". One of the most common and simplest mistakes is to pack too many unnecessary items. One spare set of clothing will be more than sufficient. Everything has weight, and so every small item eventually adds up. That extra pot, extra underwear, extra batteries and extra carabiner all add up. Take only what you will really use. Normally clothes are the biggest culprit. Every spare jacket or pants is 500 g each! One jacket and one pair of pants, and TA-DA! 1 kg lighter!

Purchasing a pack

Remember that there are many different types of packs. Most people have multiple packs. There are expedition packs, bushwalking packs, climbing packs, cycling packs, day packs, skiing packs, and so on. Some of them cross over and work well for multiple activities, but it is hard to get one pack that does it all.

The first question you need to ask yourself when purchasing a pack is, "What am I using it for?". If you are going on just weekend overnight bushwalks, then maybe a 50 litre pack will suffice. If you plan on doing epic week-long walks, then you will need a bigger pack (70 litre or more). However, the bigger the pack, the more you will usually end up carrying (duh!). If you want to go ultra–light, then consider a smaller pack made of lighter fabrics (generally 40 litre for a weekend overnight trip). If you are after a climbing pack, then look for specific features like gear loops.

There are also other things you can do to help upgrade your pack. Consider purchasing an internal pack liner (basically a large trash bag) which will keep the pack waterproof, or an external rain cover. Some packs come with this feature in-built.

Conclusion

My parting words of wisdom are: at the end of the day, nobody cares how your packs look in the bush (it'll be covered in mud anyway). Make sure that the harness fits well and is comfortable. Think carefully about what you will use the pack for and how big a volume you **really need**. Bigger is not always better!

SKI–TOURING IN NZ

Where the snow falls more regularly.

BY DALE THISTLETHWAITE
ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY
STUART HOLLAWAY

1. Hiking towards snow on the Crown Range (between Wanaka and Queenstown).

2. Textbook slab development—Stuart investigates the snow pack.

3. Treble Cone chairlift and resort boundary—lovely day for skiing while the inversion layer of cloud makes the day in Wanaka gloomy in the valley below.

4. Thank goodness for ski crampons—climbing the Rocky pinnacle behind Treble Cone.

5. It's about this moment that you regret skiing down so far—fitting skins to start the uphill journey home.

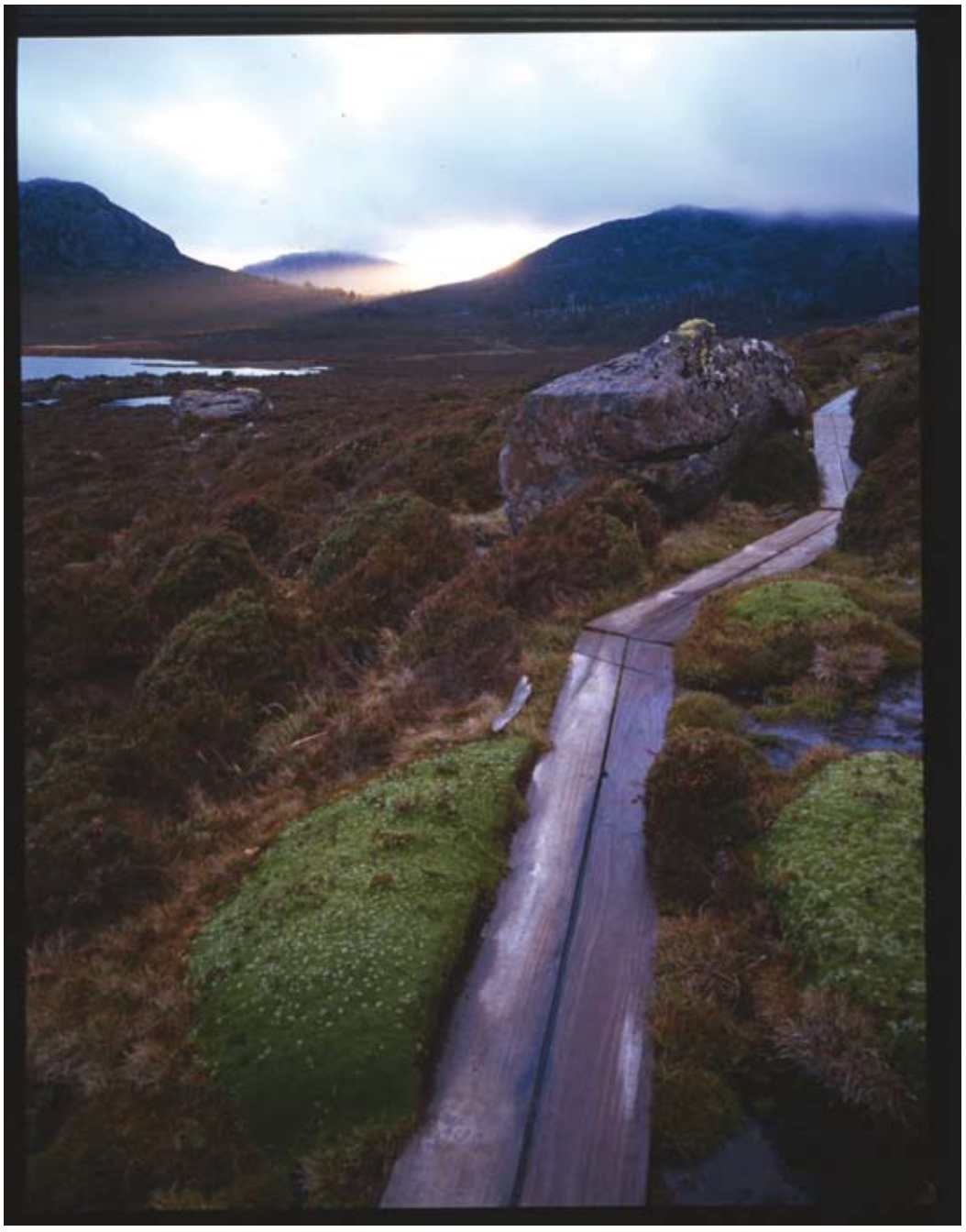
PHOTOS: STUART HOLLAWAY (1, 4 & 5); DALE THISTLETHWAITE (2 & 3).

PHOTOS, IN MEDIUM–FORMAT

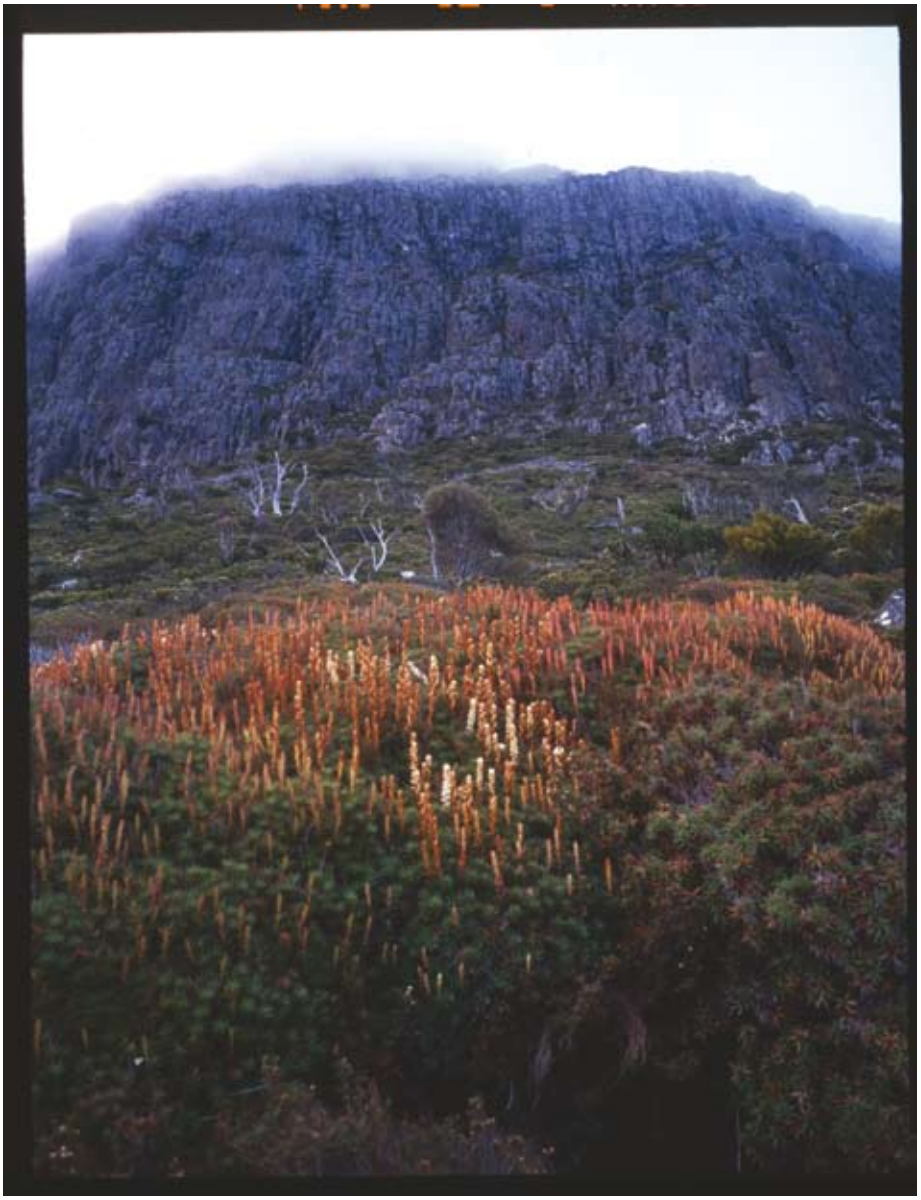
A collection of medium–format photographs from bushwalking trips, by club member Jesse Bates.

Great Oyster Bay, Freycinet Peninsula, Tasmania.

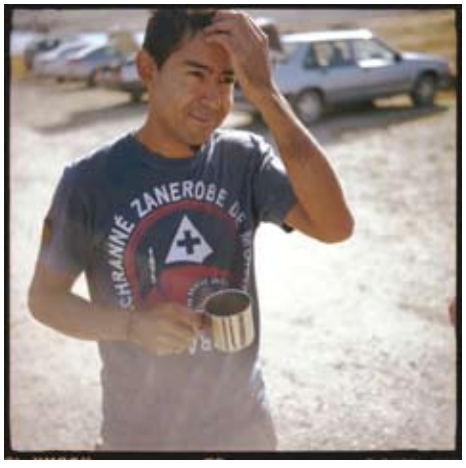
Great Oyster Bay,
Freycinet Peninsula, Tasmania.
(left & far left)



Walls of Jerusalem, Tasmania.



Walls of Jerusalem, Tasmania.
(top, above & right)



(Top) Summit of Mt Jaithmathang near the Fainters, Victoria. Summitters from left to right: Abbie Hamilton, Alex Bowen, Kristina Suing, Emily French, Jaz Manabat, Li Xie, Deborah Piattoni, Prashant Dabee, Tanya Craig, Richard Sota, Stacey Chan, Mark Patterson, Jessica Trevitt, Khanh Tran, & Jethro Harcourt.

(Above & Opposite) Six–portrait set at the Fainters, Victoria. First three photos shot on colour film, final three on black and white. Subjects from left to right: Richard Sota; Mark Patterson; Jessica Trevitt; Alex Bowen; Abbie Hamilton; Jaz Manabat.

(Left) Five–photo colour sequence from Pretty Valley Pondage near the Fainters, Victoria.

TREKKING IN NEPAL: THE ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT

The next chapter in an epic tour through Asia began with a birthday.

BY FELIX DANCE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM CARTER & RHONDA HASTIE

Having toured Asia for the last seven months on bus, train, walk and bicycle, it was time for me to celebrate my 27th birthday. Months earlier I'd announced the party for the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu—Friday, May the 21st, 2010. Much to my surprise four people turned up, three of whom were past or present MUMC members, the other being my dear old Dad. Of course, we threw in a trek afterwards to sweeten the deal. This is its story:

The evening began as advertised months in advance at the Jatra Bar in Thamal where I bought everyone a round of longnecks for making the effort to turn up—that should be sufficient incentive to travel thousands

Mountain views en route to the Thorong-La pass (main).

Birthday celebrations at the Jatra Bar (opposite below).

Rhonda's washing gets aired on her pack while she admires an immense glacier (above right).

Felix leaves behind lush forests (right).

PHOTOS: RHONDA HASTIE (OPPOSITE BELOW); TIM CARTER (REMAINDER).

of kilometres to meet me on my birthday. There were six of us there to congratulate me on my great age, dispense presents and well-wishings, laugh at my jokes (as all good birthday party guests should) and party long into the night.

Getting up the next morning for the trek was painful and difficult—I wondered why I'd even bothered to go to bed. However, the eight hour bus ride's presentation of the epic Marsyangdi Valley did its best to bring me back to health, as did the haphazard traffic rules and a thorough update on the missed goss' from home. Finally, the lodge at Bhulbule, overlooking the Marsyangdi River and underlooking the eight kilometre-high Manaslu Range, announced the commencement of the trek.

And the next morning we were off!

The participants:
– The stoical unstoppable Rhonda;
– The avuncular Tim and his knowledge historical;
– Rob, doyen of bushwalking Southwest Tasmania;
– Sandy, faithful father, fit beneath his years; and
– I, Felix, who came up with the idea in the first place.

This marked the beginning of for some of us three weeks of almost continual trekking. On that day I dealt the group a bad portent when I misstepped while appreciating the disappearing cloud cover and thus fine views of mountain-hemmed villages, and fell several metres off a cliff. Miraculously I landed onto an adjoining path upright and completely unharmed, pumping with adrenaline, despite having to support and balance an eighteen kilo pack. I used to criticise Tim's sure-footedness: he's so tall the electrical impulses take too long to get from his brain to his feet, lacking the advantage of a second brain in his hips like a brachiosaurus. But this trek has proved my critique outdated (has his lower spinal ganglion inflated?).

Over the next few days we learnt that we had chosen an excellent time of year to go trekking—perfect weather as the monsoon had yet to hit but, they not willing to risk it, no crowds. From the few trekkers we did encounter we found ourselves to be in an extreme minority for opting out of both guide and porter. One French trekker we discovered later had employed both, like the motorcade of a presidential outing. Unfortunately, we were all versed in independent

It took time to spin all the prayer wheels (above left).

Having to negotiate jack hammers, explosives and machinery on parts of the track resembling a construction site (centre left).

Upper Pisang at 3500 metres (below).

Snow-capped peaks and wide valleys (below left).

PHOTOS: TIM CARTER.

Australian bushwalking rather than teahouse trekking and lacked the ability of some European trekkers to keep their packs in the five kilo range. I managed to bring about five kilos of books alone (okay maybe two), not to mention a one litre glass bottle of port and 750 grams of salt (for oft-threatened but non-eventuating leeches).

The next day found us deeply insulted by the horrible scar on the landscape wrought by picks and jackhammers from nascent road-building, belying the remark in the guidebook, after promising ancient wooden galleries to negotiate some steep rock faces, that "They'll never get a road through here" (a wry phrase we used sardonically throughout the trek). This, however, changed to great excitement as we were stopped by the army so they could blast the opposing cliffs with dynamite. The awesome spectacle was enhanced by the long delay between sight and sound, entirely unlike Hollywood special effects.

A few days into the trek the real stuff began. Climbing higher into the Himalayas we passed through beautiful rhododendron forests (I'm told the flowers are a vivid red), around a curved, sloping and smooth glacial

wall the size of a dangerously angled city, through sleepy villages of the Tibetan culture (prayer flags, sutra wheels, chortans and gompas vying for our irreverent attention) and beneath the ever-present gaze of the Annapurna Range's ice-capped behemoths, scraped up from the Tethys Sea to just below the maximum height our planet can sustain—if you want more go to Mars.

We heard a distant, deep rumble. We all looked at each other nervously: an avalanche . . .

And on the seventh day we rested, for purposes of altitude acclimatisation. Or we called it resting. In actual fact the non-Rhondonians got up early in the regional centre of Manang for a day walk to Milarepa's Cave. This involved a lot of scrambling uphill and arguing over directions, but for our troubles we received a cultural experience in a Tibetan Buddhist gompa and, our curiosity getting the better of us, a further climb to 4400 m altitude to watch from close-range a gigantic glacier groaning and grumbling, tumbling and tinkling under its own weight.

It was during the surprisingly exciting audiovisual experience of the glacier (its face was in view but the rest was buried in cloud) that we heard a distant, deep rumble. Over the seconds it enloadened into a violent roar like thunder or a low-flying 747. We all looked at each other nervously: an avalanche.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" someone shouted, possibly inside my head. Sandy and I legged it uphill obeying the old principal that where the interests of good photography and life preservation coincide you should always follow your instincts, but Rob and Tim were too cool to do anything except adjust the focus on their cameras, as though for them Death by Avalanche was a typical Friday afternoon. When the rumble died away without consequence I was so relieved and disappointed I laughed until my brain ran out of oxygen.

Day 9. The Ascent over the Thorong-La Pass. Rob is feeling poorly due to sipping untreated tap-water (I need not describe the symptoms). The group is nervous but excited, somewhat short tempered. It has been snowing the previous night. The target elevation

Rhonda and Rob continuing the ascent (above).

Prayer flags on the stairway to the Cave of Milarepa, where a nice monk offered some tea (below).

PHOTOS: TIM CARTER.

The view down the other side of the pass (opposite).
Terrraced fields beside the town of Kagbeni (opposite below).

PHOTOS: TIM CARTER.

A silly steep path (left).
The group plods along to Thorong-La (below left).
Other hikers amongst the scree (below).
The top of Thorong-La pass: 5416 metres (bottom).

PHOTOS: TIM CARTER.

is 5416 m with Rhonda fronting the assault. Tim has made the ultimate sacrifice. He is taking up the rear to ensure that any injuries are treated with a humane rock-to-the-back-of-the-head.

As it happened the actual ascent was not that tough. But it was spectacular—we were ascending to almost rival the surrounding peaks: teetering cornices towering above fluted snow faces, snaking moraines evolving from the rock/ice landscape with Himalayan Griffins nonchalantly peering down at our puny party. At 5000 m we heard a distant rumble and turned to this time actually witness a vast avalanche falling about a kilometre, reshaping an opposing mountain-face before of our eyes at the deceptive speed best known to astronomers.

At the pass we celebrated the highest altitude ever reached by any of us (from sea-level, not from the Earth's core) by passing around the port for Port on the Pass (traditionally known as Port on the Hill, but one must be flexible). This communal offering deeply excited a pair of Spanish girls as the brand I'd lugged up here was a local favourite of theirs at home, luckily they got to it before the Nepalese porters got a chance—the porters' gluttony of the drink is surely an etymological clue.

The next day saw us slowly making our way downhill towards the oasis town of Kagbeni. This journey was harrowing in every sense of the word: deep bull dust, violent winds, then a combination of the two resulting in an onslaught of airborne missiles. I got one in my eye, ruining my views of 3000 year–old Buddhist caves and monasteries nestled amongst the eroded badlands.

Unfortunately, on the day subsequent to our recuperation at Kagbeni, the monsoon finally struck, grounding Tim and Rhonda's plane and forcing them into an epic series of bus rides, an enormous taxi ride and a fuel fail as they limped and struggled towards the airport at Pokhara so they could catch their flight home. Rob, Sandy and I were ignorant of this adventure at the time as we negotiated the Kali Gandaki river valley for our circuitous route to the Annapurna Base Camp. Here we were to find ourselves thrust into the contrasting environment of lush rainforest and fertile paddy terraces for our week–long sprint to the Annapurna Sanctuary. But that's another story.

NEST BOXES: HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Kelly Country — the home of Ned Kelly, and lesser known box–ironbark dwellers. Nocturnal marsupials were part of this country long before people, but they are losing the battle for land.

BY CHELSEA EAW
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALASTER MEEHAN, RICHARD SOTA & GEORDIE TING

When a man loses his house, wife and kids; he can be said to have lost everything. But when a Squirrel Glider loses its hollow, mate and offspring; few people bat an eyelid. Likewise, when a person is forced off their land, you feel for them, don't you? But when a Squirrel Glider is forced to make a living in cleared land—a shadow of its natural environment—we're left eyeballing the person next to us for something intelligent to say. Any numpty can tell you a Squirrel Glider isn't a man, but it's nonetheless an original inhabitant of the unique ecosystem we hail as 'Kelly Country': Victoria's box–ironbark forests.

This haunting landscape that is an intrinsic part of Victoria's history is also home to a host of wildlife; some of which are found nowhere else. Squirrel Gliders, Brush-tailed Phascogales, Regent Honeyeaters, and Grey-crowned Babblers are found in box–ironbark woodland, and form the four target species of the Regent Honeyeater Project.

The project began 16 years ago, and is based in the country town of Benalla, nestled between northern Victoria's plains and the rolling foothills of the Great Dividing Range. Once swathed in box and ironbark trees, this dry farming zone was heavily cleared for agriculture and remains—for the most part—bare of its original vegetation.

Ray Thomas, the project's officer who has been around since the project's conception, is a local resident. Although he is commonly thought to be the rough age of a fossil, Ray epitomizes hard yakka. Time after time, I've seen him leading by example—wielding mattocks on planting days or scaling precarious ladders on nest box monitoring weekends; and mostly with more vigor and gusto than even his most spritely young volunteers. It's no fluke that he's earned the title of the Australian Geographic Society's Conservationist of the Year. But as prodigious as Ray may be, he can't save Victoria's box–ironbark's critters alone. So in April this year, furball-loving MUMCers strapped ladders to their roof racks and headed north. We formed part of 2010's nest box monitoring crew.

Nest box monitoring is organised chaos. It seems simple enough: you meet everyone at the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) Benalla, you get given a map with dots (indicating nest boxes) on it, and you go forth. Easy, right? Wrong. It didn't take us long to work out that the map we were given was inaccurate. Sorry, did I say inaccurate? I meant totally wrong. It wasn't unusual for dots on the map to be about one centimetre out from the nest box's real position. On a 1:25 000-scale map, a difference of one centimetre is 25,000 centimetres in reality—that's 250 metres. That's a pretty large distance to be off by, and we relied on a few individuals' hawk-like vision to spot the nest boxes from that far

Radiance climbs up to check a nest box, positioned where box–ironbark forests were once prevalent (top).

A Squirrel Glider adopts a home away from home; not a natural tree hollow, but a purpose-built nest box (left).

PHOTOS: GEORDIE TING (TOP); ALASTER MEEHAN (LEFT).

Geordie skilfully negotiates a barbed–wire fence: one of the many obstacles faced when searching for a nest box (above). PHOTO: RICHARD SOTA.

Chelsea opens a nest box in the hope of finding some furry marsupials (left). PHOTO: ALASTER MEEHAN.

away. Sometimes we anticipated the map's fallacies, but mostly this was pulled off by the miracle of guesswork; a rather fallible method.

What's more, second-guessing the map had to be done whilst lugging a ladder the size of a small giraffe by hand. Yes, we had cars, but they can only get you so close to a point on the map. Obstacles like logs, puddles and hills alone were worthy of a dog agility course. But often, we had to navigate through barbed-wire and electric fences, crumbling creek beds and dead cows—I'm not kidding about the deceased ungulates; nest box monitoring is not for the faint-hearted (or anyone with a pacemaker likely to be jump-started by an electric fence).

After dodging a death from inhaling several dying beasts' festy fumes, and narrowly missing a badly placed wire barb whilst straddling a fence, it wasn't uncommon to reach a spot marked by a dot on the map, only to find the nest box was superbly hidden amongst the vegetation. Trying to find a eucaypt-green box amongst eucalypt foliage was a bit like trying to find a pubic hair on an animal-skin rug. But someone always pulled it off.

Clutching one end of the ladder, I yelled and waved my clipboard with my other hand. We scurried, like ants carrying a piece of cake, towards the nest box tree. At the foot of the tree, we hurriedly scanned our surroundings to take note of the vegetation. Information on habitat types is useful to the guys conducting the project. (Is it hilly? Are the trees mature? Is there regrowth?) Meanwhile, two or three other people set up the ladder, jamming one end into the earth and adjusting the top so it sat solidly against the tree trunk.

Mostly, we tried to conduct our affairs in library silence. At first, our efforts were only rewarded with empty nest boxes filled with leaves, poo or spiders—sometimes all of the above. Nevertheless, this was still useful information. Apparently, gliders aren't creatures of habit and don't always stay in the same box each night. A nest box could have tenants one day and be empty the next.

It wasn't until we were brazenly loud and clumsy that, of course, we encountered our first living gliders. Instead of crusty leaves and faeces, the box was filled with the warmth of several grey marsupials. Tucked in an entwined heap of fur and fluffy black tails, it was hard to tell where one critter ended and the other began. The biggest one clutched one of its companions with mouse-like talons, returning my gaze with two shining black orbs. We were both transfixed. We stayed locked in this unusual encounter until I ended it by closing the nest box's lid.

These gliders were wild. This wasn't some nest box nailed to a cage in Healesville Sanctuary. The animals that use these nest boxes are truly wild, and truly homeless. The mature box and ironbark trees that once dominated this landscape are few and far between now, meaning hollows (that only old trees can provide) are literally prime real estate. The only reason the gliders we encountered had somewhere to hide, sleep and breed is because the Regent Honeyeater Project continues to both restore habitat and provide nest boxes for these critters. A positive by-product is that us common folk, in turn, are able to experience this unique face-to-face with a threatened species. The experience is a humbling reminder about the ever-diminishing interactions between city-dwellers and wildlife (at least, the interactions that don't involve one or the other coming out worse off in a car crash).

Ray's project proves you don't have to be a scientist, or an activist, or a grumpy old person with a stick up your arse to do some good for wildlife. Checking a nest box or planting a tree is a good start. After all, it's the Regent Honeyeater Project's huge community support that attracts funds and keeps the project going. And when the topic of cleared farmland and disappearing habitat next comes up in a conversation, you won't have to eyeball the person next to you for something intelligent to say. You can say you chipped into a project that gives Australian wildlife a home.

HIKING—MINUS A SENSE

Hiking with a cold has its benefits, as discovered on a trip up to the Fainters.

BY EMILY FRENCH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAZ MANABAT & RICHARD SOTA

"I love the smell of the rain!" exclaimed the driver of our car, James, on our way to the Pretty Valley Campsite. "Can you guys smell that?" My fellow passengers, Lee and Stacey, both took obligatory deep breaths and agreed enthusiastically. I made a wan attempt at sniffing, swallowed some mucus and decided to refrain from attempting to do so again.

Yes, as sheer bad luck would have it, I had managed to come down with a cold the day before the trip. I'd seriously thought about giving it a miss—in fact, I'd actually called trip leader Jess to tell her that I wasn't. A bizarre kind of reverse–psychology kicked in immediately after putting the phone down and I'd decided that, having already hired my gear and cleared my schedule for the weekend, I'd have more fun being snotty on a hike than being snotty at home. Plus, my housemate had his girlfriend coming to visit that weekend and I didn't think the sound of my trumpeting nose–blowing from the next room would enhance their time together. Quite selfless, really.

On the drive down, our group stopped off at La Porchetta in Seymour on the way to our first campsite and enjoyed various food-

stuffs soaked in copious amounts of oil. Had I known that the diner's toilets would be the last time I would see soap or a mirror for several days, I probably would have savoured the moment of my clean, shiny reflection a little more. Unfortunately, our detour meant that we didn't arrive at the campsite until gone 1 am and pitching a tent in the chilly dark didn't do much to convince me that I'd made a good decision in coming on the trip.

However, a new day dawned and I came to realise that hiking without a sense of smell had serious benefits. For one thing, I couldn't smell myself, which was a blessing since I'd done some serious sweating in the night. Also, it was sunny, which is always helpful for improving one's mood.

After setting off on an uphill stretch,

being bunged up quickly became slightly embarrassing as I was forced to breathe only through my mouth and consequently made sounds like I was dying barely ten minutes into the trip. Leader Jess asked me several times if I was OK and although I assured her between gasping breaths that I was, she didn't look entirely convinced.

Unfortunately it wouldn't be long before my tent buddy, Stacy, had a nasty fall and twisted her ankle. After initially attempting to walk on it and deciding that this was a bad idea, we stopped there and reacted to the general crisis situation by having lunch. Sadly, this didn't solve Stacy's rapidly swelling ankle and we were forced to split her pack, strap up her foot and head back to a nearby clearing where we had earlier stopped for a break to camp there for the night.

This proved to be a bit of a diversion from my contemplations of hiking minus a sense, since I can't really pretend that me being equipped with a sense of smell might have saved Stacy's ankle. However, I quickly returned to these musings at our camping spot upon discovering the presence of a long drop, which I could not smell at all. Marvellous.

That night we built a spectacular campfire which I'm pretty sure violated most of the regulations for national parks throughout Australia. After dinner a few amazing people produced packets of chocolate biscuits and willingly shared them with the group, which I am confident will have secured their place in heaven. As alcohol was freely passed around, the campfire was built steadily higher and higher by a few particularly tipsy looking individuals (Deb being the main culprit).

As drifting embers started to head dangerously close to both us and the surrounding wooden structures, I decided to call it a night. The last thing I heard before drifting off was some of the more sober individuals around the campfire chanting: "No more wood! No more wood!"

I felt much, much better the next day; mostly cured by a warm fire, some chocolate biscuits and a decent sleep. Unfortunately, both I and the long drop smelt significantly worse, but that was all worth it to be able to smell the grass and distribute my breathing between my mouth and my nose as we made our way up Mount Jim. We were sadly without Stacy as her foot had turned an interesting shade of purple and she was banned from excessive walking.

We made our way back to where we had parked the cars in a leisurely fashion, where some sensible people had brought clothes to change into. We began the drive home with the traditional plan to stop at a pub on the way home. Although feeling slightly awkward about going into public place where there would be other people who had had access to showers in recent days, I bravely soldiered on and went straight into the bathrooms to wash my hands with soap and water. After a couple of washes, the water stopped looking brown and I felt a lot better about touching my food with my hands again.

One of our group (Kristina) had been feeling slightly twitchy without having had a coffee for a few days. I came out of the bathroom to find her at the table drinking a latte and, on asking her if she was enjoying it, I was informed that this was actually her second; she had downed the first one she received and immediately ordered another. Having since been on another trip with Kristina, this appears to be a regular theme. I commend her for stepping up to the challenge of hiking while suffering withdrawal!

It has to be said, our trip wasn't exactly the most taxing expedition that MUMC hikers have ever been on. However, what it lacked in hiking, it more than made up for with food, booze, campfires and injuries. And I discovered that while hiking with a cold may be slightly crappy on some fronts, it isn't half bad for protecting you from the smell of the long drop. And yourself.

By this stage, the nasal passages were reasonably open as the group stops for a photo near the end of the walk (above).

Khanh, Emily and Abbie make the descent from Mt Jim (main).

The Tawonga Huts were the site of morning tea and the campsite for the evening (left).

Deb having a fantastic time around the giant fire (top).

PHOTOS: JAZ MANABAT (ABOVE, LEFT, TOP); RICHARD SOTA (MAIN).

BY EGG (ENG WU ONG)
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIAN PALSTRA

TIME TO CHILL, LITERALLY:
ICE CLIMBING AT WYE CREEK, NZ

"Shit, that's a long drop", I told Egg, trying to calm him down. I stared down at my last ice screw about 3 m below me, and wondered how strong ice screws really were. The thought of taking a 6 m fall did not appeal to me, who was already half-shitting in my pants. My calves were getting pumped as they started to shake more than Elvis doing *Jailhouse Rock*.

"How ridiculous", I thought. Images of the muscular and chiselled ice climber, like those on the cover of Rock & Ice magazine fearlessly climbing pure vertical pitches, started to fade away as my level of anxiety shot through the roof. I removed one foot at a time, which left my body precariously hanging on the front points of the other foot, and gave them a good shake out. Like how rock climbers shake out their forearms when climbing, I was shaking out my calves.

"Shut up and focus on screwing you idiot!" I said to Egg as he struggled to get the next ice screw to bite into the diamond-hard, dark blue ice. "Turn turn turn turn turn. Why won't this thing drill any faster?" Time seemed to dilate while I meticulously fiddled with the screw through my thick gloves. The slow winding motion of the screw and the ejection of the ice core almost seemed meditative. The focus was intense, yet seeing the ice screw go in had a calming effect. It almost felt as though I had achieved something significant! Alas all this "intense energy" is just a big distraction, to keep the climber oblivious to the fact that he is going to take a 6 m fall if he loses concentration or panics.

"Clipped!" A sense of relief overwhelmed me, if only temporarily. I looked up and saw that I had about 10 m left to go, but I could only afford to place one more screw. So this was ice climbing. Left pick: "Hack, Hack, THUD." Right pick: "Hack, Hack, Hack, CRACK! ROCK!!! (a chunk of ice the size of a laptop goes airborne), Hack, Hack, THUD". Left foot: "Kick, Kick, Chink!" Right foot: "Kick Kick, Chink!" REPEAT. As Stu Hollaway told me before I left, "Luckily, ice climbing is pretty straight-forward." He seemed so enthusiastic about it that he must have forgotten to mention the scary bits.

The process repeated until I placed my last ice screw, then I ran out the last 5 m all the way to the top, carefully negotiating some very thin white ice, where you could clearly see water running underneath it. I placed my front points as tenderly as a ballerina, trying to ensure that I didn't fall through the 5 cm thin ice as the terrain became gentler. I topped out and rigged up the anchor. It's not as complicated as a rock anchor. Just two screws, a sling and BOOM! Anchor.

"On belay!", I shouted to my partner, Julian. It was only the first pitch, but I was already feeling knackered. It's not so much the calf pump I mind, but the mental strain of dealing with the long run outs and exposure. For a 25 m with five ice screws, that averages 5 m per screw! *"Luckily, ice climbing is pretty straight-forward"*. Well I guess Stu has a point. Ice climbing isn't as complicated as rock climbing. Straight up, left, right, left, right, screw and repeat. No funny smearing, mantling, side-pulling, under-clinging or high-stepping. No funny business at all.

I like ice climbing. It looks cool, and it is cool, quite literally. It's dangerous. Ice chunks flying everywhere, the occasional block the size of a television, dinner plates shearing off, and of course my favourite: the threat of collapsing pillars and curtains, which sends tonnes of ice crashing down to the ground, wiping out anyone who would be unfortunate enough to be standing in its path.

A cautionary tale: I was told by one of the Adventure Consultants guides who was with clients in the Wye Creek area, that two weeks prior to our arrival, a group of climbers were climbing a vertical waterfall curtain. Half way up, they heard a loud cracking sound, and so they immediately lowered off the climb. As they moved away, the whole curtain came crashing down! Luckily nobody was hurt. Imagine climbing stuff that breaks! Always treat ice with suspicion. I was too chicken to climb any vertical pillars or curtains for that trip. Having said that, I am still alive!

So what did I not enjoy? Well, I hate being cold. It was -5 degrees Celsius in the tent, and that causes all your clothes and gear to freeze up. So be careful about where you place your gear. I missed the hot showers, and would have given almost anything for my partner to have one after five days.

Julian and his Chinese sherpa... Note the wind-blocking wall (above).

Hack, hack, hack. Egg leading a steep ramp (opposite).

Want to start ice climbing?

After reading this article, there are people bound to ask me how to get started into ice climbing. So here's how. The easiest way is probably to take up a guided instruction course with one of the many guiding companies in New Zealand. Most of them run for four or five days, and cover everything from the very basics to leading on ice. I did my instruction course last winter with Aspiring Guides, which is based in Wanaka. All the guiding companies are just as good, so it doesn't matter who you learn from. It's only important that you have fun, and learn as much as you can from the guides. After you've done a course, you will need gear. Most climbing gear can be rented from our Mountaineering gear store, for a small fee. The only thing you will need is your own crampon compatible boot, which you could potentially rent in New Zealand. Now the hard part: finding a competent climbing partner. You can ask around the club, or advertise on the MUMC website like I did (and get picked up by strange older Frenchmen from Sydney).

The next step would be to plan your trip. There are a few major ice climbing areas in New Zealand, such as Wye Creek (with snow camping!), Black Peak (Black Peak Hut) and Fox Glacier (Pioneer Hut). There are also other smaller climbing crags that form depending on conditions, and the best people to ask would be the local guides. Make sure you get all your gear together, and a warm jacket and sleeping bag! When you get to the crag, practice placing ice screws at ground level and top-rope some climbs first before jumping into lead, especially if you are out for the first time without a guide. Also check in with the local guiding companies and the Department of Conservation (DOC) for the snow and ice conditions around the area, and hire an avalanche transceiver if you have to. You can't put a price on safety!

Getting to Wye Creek

Take a flight to Christchurch and then a bus (cheapest) or connecting flight to Queenstown (cheap). Alternatively, fly directly to Queenstown if you can afford it. A two-way Melbourne to Christchurch flight costs about AU$350-400, if you book in advance. A bus ride from Christchurch to Queenstown is about NZ$25, and a domestic flight from Christchurch to Queenstown costs approximately NZ$100 one way.

Once in Queenstown, you can check in with the DOC office based in the "Outside Sports" store, along the main street in town, and stock up on supplies and other equipment. From Queenstown, catch the ski bus to The Remarkables ski field for NZ$5. Once at the ski field, remember to sign in with the ski patrol office. Walk up the ski field past Alta Lake, over a saddle and down onto a Plateau. Walk along the Plateau and further down into the head of the valley where you will find a large flat ground, suitable for camping. There are plenty of crags around the area, and there is an old "Queenstown Rock and Ice" guidebook which is now out of print. In my opinion, the guidebook isn't very useful since the ice changes every year. Just get out there and explore! Remember to bring a few metres of extra 6 mm cord for you to build Abalakov anchors to abseil off.

Other tips: get a map, compass, GPS (if possible), a snow tent, plenty of food, shovel (to level out the camp site and build walls), extra fuel, snow camping experience, poo bags to carry out waste and lots of hot drinks!

Have fun and climb safely!

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HIKING IN THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK

N.B. In the dry season. Think sunburnt country, sweeping plains, ragged mountain ranges ... flooding rains.

Jessica on the Larapinta Trail, with the MacDonnell Ranges extending into the distance (top). PHOTO: DANIEL KLESS

Surrounded by ancient rocks in King's Canyon (recognise it from Priscilla Queen of the Desert?) (above). PHOTO: MAY ARMIGOS

The flooded Stuart Highway, stranding the group overnight on the roadside (opposite). PHOTO: MAY ARMIGOS

BY JESSICA TREVITT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAY ARMIGOS, DANA FORCEY & DANIEL KLESS

If you're going to be an Australian hiker, leaving out the Larapinta trail is not an option. It would be like a literature student skipping Patrick White; it's a mammoth task to face up to, but this is far outweighed by what you get in return. The Larapinta makes the outback accessible without spoiling its natural beauty or isolation, and it is a very rewarding walk to have organised and to have achieved. In fact, I'm going to go so far as to suggest it become a yearly MUMC pilgrimage.

Ten of us landed at Alice Springs, staring dumbfounded at the rain. Our walk was forecast to be dry and cloudy, but we hadn't thought to check the weather for the preceding week: in the middle of the dry season, when you can expect one rain shower every ten days, the rivers of central Australia were overflowing. What's more, we had already managed to lose track of a sleeping bag, a fuel bottle and a mobile phone, all before collecting our luggage.

But we're a resilient lot. The plan was to see Uluru, Kata Tjuta and King's Canyon in three days before five of us returned to Alice to meet up with the rest of the Larapinta walkers, and the other five continued on a leisurely car tour. We would do it come rain or shine. Hearing this, the rain scurried away so by the afternoon we had ten MUMCers in two rental cars bowling down the Stuart Highway with wide blue sky, red sand and a ridiculous amount of food.

Then we saw the flood.

Two hundred meters wide and 40 cm deep, the river coursing over the highway had brought at least twenty vehicles to a halt on our side, and closer to fifty vehicles to a halt on the other. It's one of those moments when you laugh and put your hands in your pockets, because you don't know what else to do. In our Ford Falcon we were unable to risk either the unsealed road or the flooded highway to reach Yulara by sunset, after which time we were liable for any car damage anyway. Rental car companies have a huge monopoly over central Australian tourists.

A new requirement of all club trips: doing the ***MUMC!*** (above left).
The flooded Stuart Highway, stranding the group overnight on the roadside (below left).
Walking east from Mt. Sonder (shaped like a woman lying on her back) (above).
About to tackle the flooded Finke River, one of many river crossings (below).

PHOTOS: MAY ARMIGOS (ABOVE LEFT, BELOW LEFT); DANIEL KLESS (ABOVE); DANA FORCEY (BELOW).

But like I said, we're a resilient lot, so we camped on the side of the highway. A communal bonfire with the other stranded souls helped us forget the four-carriage roadtrains that continued to speed past our tent flaps. The flood abated and by morning, we had ten MUMCers in two rental cars bowling down Lasseter Highway toward Uluru with wide blue sky, red sand and still a ridiculous amount of food.

Then we saw the dinosaur.

Well, it was a cycad actually, a fern-like plant that we were told has been around since the dinosaurs. Luckily, it posed no great threat to our trip, and the rest of our three days passed smoothly. Our destinations were spectacular, though we all found King's Canyon a more rewarding sight than Uluru. We climbed the ridge of the former at sunrise and spent the day scrambling at will across structures that had been worn into shape over billions of years—no trespassing of sacred sites involved. The day was completed with a camel burger, a visit to an underwear tree and a disco party held in the back seat of the car - just to pass the time.

Back in Alice Springs, five of us joined our missing trio, and the revised group of eight MUMCers took over the local tourist pub, Bo's Saloon. If anyone was listening to the local Sun FM that night, you will have heard the dedication to the "Larapinta Walkers"—"I Love the Nightlife" from Priscilla Queen of the Desert. I found it entertaining that a few days later, amidst the beautiful isolation of Waterfall Gorge, we came across two campers who identified us as "that rowdy lot in Bo's".

Now for the serious bit: note well, future Larapinta organisers, that there is a fair amount of logistics to be worked out for this trip. Having everyone in "Alice's Secret" hostel (highly recommended) was the easy bit. Depending on which section of, and in which direction, you choose to walk the trail, there is the option of having a shuttle bus take you out and bring you back, and of having food drops await you at various points. We had "Tailormade Tours" (again highly recommended) organise both for us, including a food drop at our final night's campsite, where we stored clean clothes and chocolate ripple cake. Whatever you do, don't be silly like us and forget to include the celebratory alcohol.

The Larapinta trail starts in the Alice Springs township and shoots west along the MacDonnell Ranges for 223 km toward its highest point, Mt Sonder, which is the triumphant daywalk at the end. We, however, turned it upside-down to walk east from Mt Sonder, and covered exactly half the trail. The upside-down approach is recommeneded: not only did we avoid walking into the sun on the hot afternoons, but we had Mt Sonder as a point of reference behind us for how far we had come.

Day 1, the daywalk to the summit, was Daniel's birthday. He awoke to sparklers, banners and party hats twinkling in the dawn light. We bagged the summit in our shiny cardboard sun–shields, drew the OXO man at the top, and shared chocolate cake in the evening. It wasn't until Day 2 (six days after leaving Melbourne) that we finally shouldered our 20 kg packs and began the eastward trek. As at the start of any long hike we were a delicate lot, all soft feet and rigid packs, so we threw ourselves into a 21 km walk. With a 400 m ascent that was devoid of shade, and a 400 m descent that was a vertical rockscramble, the massaging and the blister popping began that night.

On Day 3 we reached the Finke river. This is called by Aboriginals "Salty River", or "Larapinta". It reaches as far south as Lake Eyre, and when it floods, the current is strong enough to tear pieces of asphalt off the road and carry them away. One week earlier it had been overflowing and we had heard stories of hikers having to swim across. Some of our group laughed heartily as you do at something safely outside your expectations.

Then we saw the river banks.

Normally a river crossing wouldn't constitute a major point in a hike report: they come with the territory, so to speak. But hiking in the outback in the dry season, you really don't expect to be up to your knees in muddy water. We followed the bank until we found some shallow rapids to cross, and chuckling at our success, continued on with dry feet. But the trees were hiding the next river; the original one had forked into two just before the point at which we crossed. We ended up crossing with water half way up our thighs.

Luckily, as you know, we're a resilient lot. What's one (or two) river crossings, when you could have three or four? Hell, make it seven. Leaving Ormiston Gorge on Day 4, we went to great pains to cross one at the rapids, only to find that the track on the other side was swallowed by water and we had to cross back, then finally cross again, knee-deep, to continue. Descending steeply into Waterfall Gorge on Day 5, we had to slide along the wet rocks to come to our campsite, and coming through the Inarlanga Pass on Day 6, we had to scramble up the steep ravine walls as the only way of avoiding a full river bed. In the end, our desert walk was being measured by the number of rivers we were wading. But we still had a trick up our sleeves. At Ellery creek, our final night's campsite on Day 7, we would take revenge by giving in to the wetness and swimming in the water hole. Irony of all ironies: this one was infested with dead fish. (A natural phenomenon caused by protozoa on the gills which suffocate them when low temperatures cause stress; this means that when the time is good for hiking, it's not good for swimming. We were undeterred by rain, floods and river crossings, but up against protozoa, we had to admit defeat).

As I said, I think there should be future MUMC trips to the Larapinta. Budding Australian hikers need to experience the most unique of our local environments: a desert which, 500 million years ago, was a Himalayan mountain range, 350 million years ago was an inland sea, and today is a stunning red and green panorama of ridge lines. But more than this, what we really need is to see a trip report which is true to Australian weather patterns. Yes we are a resilient lot, but this is supposed to be because we fight drought and inhabit a sunburnt country. I can claim I've survived eight days in the outback in the dry season, but at mention of my wet boots, the image of a land which challenged its natives, killed many western explorers and fought back against an expanding civilisation could well be tarnished. MUMC, it's in your hands: you need to right any false impressions that we may have a green and flowing Garden of Eden at our infamously hostile Red Centre.

Stunning Inarlanga Pass (above right).

The group with Mt. Giles in the background (right).

PHOTOS: DANA FORCEY (ABOVE RIGHT); DANIEL KLESS (RIGHT).

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