

WE CAME, WE SAW, WE WERE CONQUERED

The East Face of Mt Geryon

BY MARK PATTERSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLOS CORREA GREZ AND MARK PATTERSON

ABSEILING should be a basic task. But it also requires a fair bit of concentration and isn't tolerant of mistakes. Many climbing accidents occur while abseiling because it is so easy to get complacent. I was far from casual abseiling down into the Acropolis–Geryon saddle. It was late in the morning, 11am; I was tired from minimal sleep and frustrated from our previous day, which proved less than successful. The rope was a clusterfuck and it was taking forever to sort out. Not surprising really, considering it had been thrown down moderate and bushy terrain. I should have known better, but trailing 50 metres of rope off my harness hadn't appealed to me up top.

I worked my way down slowly while sorting out the tangles. It was slow going and I had to be mindful of the rope above me—already I had one close call earlier with a dislodged rock tumbling past me. Pausing again, I did yet another leg wrap to sort out the noodle soup two metres below. As I pulled up the rope, I stopped, puzzled. The rope in my hand was cut to the core.

Rewind to the start of the trip. Along with Carlos Correa Grez, Ivan Gonzalez and Marcella Gonzalez, I set out to climb the East Face of Mt Geryon, a big cliff in Tasmania.

Adventure has been at the heart of rockclimbing since its birth. In Victoria Mt Arapiles offers world-class climbing, but lacks a sense of adventure found in broader challenges. Many years ago I spent time climbing in Yosemite, and that gave me a taste for and hunger for bigger and more remote cliffs.

A 400-metre cliff that is a four-hour walk from camp and at 2000-metre altitude encompasses vastly different challenges and dangers from anything faced at Arapiles, the Grampians or the Blue Mountains. At Arapiles, unprepared or slow climbers generally suffer embarrassment at camp in the evening, whereas on cliffs like Mt Geryon, situations can quickly become life threatening, as I discovered researching the climb.

To quote one guidebook: "Climbing [at Geryon] is a serious undertaking. The approach is long and strenuous and

navigation in the bush is difficult at times. The lengths of climbs demand early starts and full days on the cliff. A trip should only be attempted in a window of three to four days of fine weather.”

To quote thesarvo.com, a Tasmanian climbing website: “The cliffs of Mt Geryon and The Acropolis provide absolutely exceptional climbing ‘on the wild side’. Many of the routes have had few ascents, so obviously take appropriate precautions—the seriousness of accidents is high, with help a good day’s walk away. The downside of the climbing in a twosome. Firstly, expect the usual foul weather. Multiple trips before even laying chalk to rock are hardly uncommon (no joke). Secondly, packs full of camping and climbing gear are good ‘fun’.”

With camping, climbing, photography equipment and supplies for a week, I carried a pack that weighed about 32 kilograms. This is part of the reason why I chose Mt Geryon (as opposed to a two-day mud slog to Federation Peak). The other reason is that its East Face was first climbed by MUMC members Bob Jones and Bernie Lyons via a route called *East Face of the Foresight* (11/16, 370 metres) in 1961. Our ascent would be the 50-year anniversary.

Our predecessors had a challenging climb, an exciting fall and a difficult descent, and returned to their bivvy at 11.30pm. Being a little developed cliff with limited route descriptions, I didn’t expect the challenges for us to be much different (only we would have more modern equipment, of course!). There are no tracks, no rappel points and limited descriptions of the descents. This is pristine rock.

Climbing a long grade 17 here is not comparable to climbing a long grade 17 even at Arapiles.

On Wednesday evening I picked Carlos up from Rathdowne Street and headed off to the airport, excited about our long-planned trip. We met up with Ivan and Marcella that night in Hobart and enjoyed our last sleep in a bed for a while. It was a busy morning in Hobart. We shopped for food and stove fuel—making time for a decent bacon and eggs breakfast—before rushing off to Lake St Clair in the Central Highlands. Lake St Clair is at the southern end of the Cradle Mountain – Lake St Clair National Park. It is a tourist destination and also the end of Australia’s most popular hike, The Overland.

The 10-kilometre walk-in was on good tracks, and should have been easy despite our overloaded 32-kilogram packs. The hike in took two and a half hours. I was in my own world of pain with a borrowed pack and hips that started complaining after 10 minutes. I was fit, but my hips weren’t used to the weight. The benefit of this was that I wanted to minimise the time I was carrying it, so it forced me to walk fast. That evening

we arrived at Bert Nichols Hut, the \$1.2 million Parks & Wildlife Service Tasmania extravaganza.

The views to Mt Geryon from the hut were perfect; the access less so. Mt Geryon is traditionally accessed from the back, since the West Face was pioneered first. I hoped to track an access route to the base of the East Face, and we had all of Friday to do so since heavy rain was forecast.

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I AWOKE EARLY and was presented with a stunning morning view of the cliffline before the heavens descended and obscured the peaks. We had a leisurely breakfast before setting out late morning as the rain lightened. Ivan and I trekked through thick and difficult brush for hours in an attempt to navigate an approach to the base of the cliff. After two hours we were quite close, but still not close enough for this to be a practical route to the base. It was an enjoyable and beautiful bush bash, but we were quite glad to get back to the hut that afternoon.

My plan to explore a new approach was ambitious and I should have known better (the traditional approach is normally the ‘traditional approach’ for a reason!). Carlos expressed his doubts earlier, but was happy to let me try my route. I was driven by the quest for adventure as well as the contrasting luxury of Bert Nichols Hut. That afternoon I floated the idea that we pack up and do an evening walk to the Pine Valley Hut so that we had the full advantage of the fine weather the next day. In retrospect it was probably the best thing to do, but we were all tired and none of us relished the possibility of a tough walk that evening.



THE NEXT DAY, with a morning walk of 10km carrying heavy packs, we didn’t climb that day. Instead we decided to scout and haul in some gear. Neglecting a proper alpine start, we woke up at 7am and left at 9am. The weather was perfect and the walk was beautiful. Pine Valley is a lush mossy valley with gentle criss-crossing creeks and ferns, and we meandered our way up the obscure track to the back of the mountain...

During the descent was when I found myself abseiling down into the Acropolis–Geryon saddle. In a way the damaged rope was a slight relief. There was no decision about whether or not to climb to be made; it was made for me. My nagging concerns about my hurting right shoulder and climbing after so little sleep were now irrelevant. There would be time later for annoyance. At the moment I was potentially hanging by a few exposed threads. Inspecting the cut I could see that the core was largely intact, so it was still mostly safe for rappelling, but climbing was definitely out.

I started the day angry—both at myself and my party. We had allowed time and good weather to pass without taking advantage of it. I also over-estimated the ground the group of four could cover, and I allowed a day to be wasted thanks to my attempt at forging an alternative approach. The climb was over, and with bad weather approaching there would be no opportunities left. It was a disappointing end to a trip that I had high hopes for. ☹️

