

20 FOUR PARTY PEOPLE

A savage journey to the heart of Mount Aspiring. By Oliver Metherell.

It was eight in the evening and we still had more than 300 metres to go. They would be tough metres. Very soon we would all be completely twisted. But there was no going back and no time to rest. We would have to ride it out. The teacher, the director, and the road test editor had gone silent. The director stared into the setting sun. The teacher un-holstered his axe and climbed.



A few days earlier we had arrived at Wanaka with a few bags and some ropes. James Edwards also had a bothy sac. It was for a storm, he said. The next day he would be attempting one of the hardest mixed pitches in New Zealand. Apparently we needed a bothy sac. I wondered how often he used it. A lot. He said. It turned out that big routes often took longer than expected. On the last attempt to climb a new route up the South Face of Mount Aspiring he'd walked in with the flu and had one hour of sleep in the hut. Then him and his partner battled in through waist deep snow and made it to the crux of the route when he ran out of steam.

In the words of Mark Twight, it was like having sex with death.

At least the weather forecast was good, we thought, although that turned out to be a premature judgment. The weather was wildly unpredictable. A local climber told us that Mount Cook had only been climbed once in the entire season. Mount Aspiring is just the most beautiful mountain. It's got this amazing primordial shape, like the back of a sleeping brontosaurus. Small wonder it is known as the Matterhorn of New Zealand, the Stradivarius of mountains. When we



reached the col there were birds all swooping and diving around the mountain. They were all going round in circles. So were we. Eventually we asked two trekkers the way, and set off down the right path. Oliver's map reading made Christopher Columbus seem like a honing pigeon. Some time before midnight we made dinner.

A while back we'd dropped in on a hut in another valley. We noticed a fully customised four wheel drive with a rooftop air intake, a number plate that read "Jim" and tyres that wouldn't have looked out of place on

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a Massey Ferguson tractor. In the hut were a couple of hunters. One of them had a semi-automatic shotgun, and the other one was shooting with a bow and arrow. He could take dead aim and spear a frog from 50 yards. "I smoke 'em," he said.

Early in the morning we'd got caught in a field of death-yawn crevasses. We just made it to the

route alive. On the route there was madness in every direction, at every hour. Welcome to pitch one, with its diadem of fragile mammoth dripping icicles hanging over you with a deafening silence. "Keep moving upwards," said the teacher, "if one of those comes off of it'll go straight through your helmet and penetrate your brain."

"It'll be alright," I reply. "No," he says, "it won't." We had two ropes, one hundred and twenty five jelly babies, nine litres of water, and five turbo-express ice-screws. Terrible things were happening all around us.

To the right a huge ridge snaked off into the horizon. To the left the sun came ominously close to the fragile ice we were attempting to climb. We felt like gnats crawling up the back of a gigantic sleeping white dinosaur. In the words of Mark Twight, it was like having sex with death.

"Climb faster," I whispered to myself. "Otherwise, we'll never get out of this place alive. Jesus, look at the ice! Have you ever seen so much choss? No wonder no one has ever





climbed here before." The ice had this deep crust on it. If you were lucky, you could find a placement where it thinned and embed your points into the hard ice behind. This didn't make it a relaxing place to be. You had to keep your senses alert, constantly, for the slightest hint that one of your points was about to break free. And then think what you might try to do about it.

We had been climbing for 36 hours and were in no mood for tea and biscuits. We wanted strong drink.

Sometime after one am we finally made it to the summit ridge. There wasn't much of a view. It was a sort of a desolate place. Did I like Hunter S. Thomson? Yes. But the teacher liked Ian Banks, and would entertain us with the occasional paragraph. "We're going to climb Mt Aspiring," we would shout manically at each other, "and infect it with our scent and power".

When you finally get to the top you have to get off the mountain. You know that when you get there, you're

toasted from 16 hours non-stop climbing on one hours sleep. You approach the turn-off leading down to the Colin Todd hut and you know that when you get there, you have to get it right or the hill won't let you down, but when you get there, everything goes wrong: it is gusting eighty, you misread the map and you blow it. There we were, alone in the darkness on the

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summit of Mt Aspiring, completely knackered and on top of everything else, a gigantic goddamn storm to deal with. How would Mark Twight

handle this situation?

But the teacher was there to point us towards the correct descent route for tonight: The Ramp. This is an infamous, stomach-churning evil 40-degree descent slope of doom. Every placement of the axe brings you close to that unknown nastiness hundreds of metres off the edge of descent slope. At the sides of The Ramp lie faded pieces of climbing gear and rope, the remains of a lost battle fought by climbers with blunt crampons and tired legs. We descend with care and two hours of solo front-pointing later we are in the bothy bag. "It's surprisingly warm," I say through clenched teeth. What was I doing here?

What was the meaning of this trip? Was I just shivering to death in a mountaineering epic of some kind? Or had I really come out here to New Zealand to work on this story? Why is the wind gusting under the shelter and hunting through my clothing like a savage animal?

Look at the state of us; we look like caricatures of alpine climbers, stick-thin and shivering, emerging into the pale light of the New Zealand pre-dawn. After our rest in the shelter, we're down climbing the normal route up the hill. But after 30 hours on the go, our leg muscles are dead meat. Ah, sleep deprivation and dehydration. It makes you behave like the village drunkard in some early Irish novel. Total loss of all basic motor function. Pain behind the

eyes, no balance, numb tongue. The mind fogs up, unable to communicate with the spinal column. The descent lingers on, with the grim relentlessness of the last guest of the party.

We all had different approaches to training for the route. The editor moonlighted as a rickshaw driver in a hilly city. The teacher ran until his legs didn't work any more. The director just climbed. We had been climbing for 36 hours and were in no mood for tea and biscuits. We wanted strong drink. We were, after all, the absolute cream of the Antipodean climbing press. Finally we staggered into the hut at nine in the morning. The editor's words were slurred and we got a glimpse of how we would look in twenty years time. We were

