

Way Down South

by Ross Weiter

In his 1969 hippie anthem "Hey Joe", Jimi Hendrix asks: "Hey Joe, tell me where are you gonna go?" and answers: "Well I think I'll go down to my favourite place, Mexico....well I think I'll go down to where a man can be free." Well, if Joe was a Sandgroper then he would be going way down to Albany. That is just about as far south as one can wander in this state without a boat or gills. And with most crowds heading to yuppie Margaret River, freedom is still to be had.

The South Coast has many attractions for Joe Climbers. Firstly, and undoubtedly most importantly, there is a lot of rock. Granite cliffs rear up everywhere, up to 70 metres at West Cape Howe, 100 metres at Mermaid Point Slabs and 200 metres just a bit further north at Gibraltar Rock. A veritable Mecca of three star classics, grungy cracks, insecure slabs and scary sandbags with virgin potential for many new routes to come. All this girt by the never-ending sea, lashed by freewheeling winds and set in a landscape second to none in the world. Fancy coming along on a wee after-Christmas trip? We did.

Boxing Day probably received its name because by then, the supposedly idyllic annual family gathering disintegrates into fisticuffs and quarrels. A good time to leave! Jon and I have embarked on the journey to Cheynes Beach, stopping for a few classics at Castle Rock in the Porongurups (see the updated guide elsewhere in this issue). We warmed up on the unpronounceable "Guinevere" (15), a classic 20 metre crack set in a corner, then upped the ante slightly on the very short "Merlin" (18) before going full bore on the massive "Karma" (24). Unfortunately full bore was not good enough and we both took four hangs on the strenuous top section. Here the holds are so thin and smears so marginal that it takes a prayer as well as clenched teeth and assholes to stay in place with a mouthful of slack rope while clipping bolts. Jono did well, a failure more honourable than many easy successes. I seconded to the top and reached it severely constipated with sheer effort.

For some reason Castle Rock seems to be a heavily promoted international tourist destination. Earlier in the year we were ogled by some Taiwanese, this time by Swiss and French tourists, amidst amusing remarks like "Oh my God" and "Be careful". Huh! A multicultural experience then.

We arrived at the overflowing Cheynes Beach Caravan Park just before sunset and met Richard "Riccardo" Wainwright and Tom "the Tank

Engine" Blackburn. Shane Chalwell arrived soon after, all the way from exotic Nannup. Before too long we all pretty much fainted from the tiredness caused by climbing, travelling and Christmas mirth induced lack of sleep.

The next day dawned cloudy, with threats of rain. Could it rain here, again? Does this part of the country never get one whole complete wholesome goddamned sunny day? I have memories of getting blasted out of West Cape Howe by a Force Four gale, with the tent flying about our ears and Jon and me scampering for the ute at midnight. I have other memories of walking into Peak Head for a Sunday Times photo shoot, only for the sky to open and dump a waterfall onto the cliffs. Or the day when we bush-bashed up Bluff Knoll only to be drizzled down, without climbing a thing, again. We demanded a clear day. We deserved a clear day! Magically, the clouds parted.

We drove in toward Mermaid Point, the ute momentarily baffled by a boghole but then overcoming it after a brief violent struggle. We parked some two kilometres from the crag and Riccardo, Shane and the Tank Engine continued on foot. At MP they apparently did valiant battle with the "Long Run" and "Laurie's", but details of their day will remain untold as I was not there.

Jon and I headed for the area designated as "slabs" on page 54 of Shane Richardson's South Coast guidebook.

I am not sure who first explored this vast expanse of rock, but would be surprised if the Albanites who developed MP itself did not happen by in the late 80's and early 90's. Funnily enough, no climbs were recorded. I became aware of the place when our esteemed Editor El Gordo the Second and his Scottish brother-in-crime Deri Jones, of "Nessie" (21) fame, moseyed around in March '98. And I mean "moseyed" in a purely romanticised sense of the world. In reality, the east and south faces of the slabs are flanked by nightmarish jungle, impenetrable to all but the maddest of Scots or dumbest of rock climbers. El Gordo and Deri being the former, Jon and me of the latter sort.

We were lured by reports of hundred-meter slabs and a tiny tucked-away cannabis plantation. Senses jilted, we explored the area in September and noted potential for at least four naturally protected climbs, all requiring access by abseil from the top. The easiest one of these "Run From The Jungle" (45m, 14) fell on that trip just before, you guessed it, we got rained off again.

The first route we did this time around was "Kaleidoscope" (90m, 19R) named so because it has everything. Easy slab climbing, 15 meters of bomber flake, crossing of a gully, some great protection and some scary run-outs (see New

Routes). A small bush even provides a crucial foothold near the top of the first pitch. This route is well worth visiting for a confident leader climbing well within his/her ability.

We then top roped a chimney/off-width at a pillar in the north-east corner of the slabs. Yep, a genuine off-width with chicken-wing moves, insecure jams, bruised shins, the works. Unfortunately we did not have the monster cam required to protect the top 10 meters so this remained a top rope effort. "Human Missile Testing Range" checked in at 30m, grade 20 (off-width !). On the opposite side of the same pillar is another, shorter crack, composed in two parts divided by a ledge at one third height. This obstacle was far more sociable and quite good fun except for the last five metres with crumbly rock, no protection and the disheartening prospect of breaking bones on the ledge below in case of fall. Anyway, I sweated my way to the top and "Maniac" came to be at 15m and grade 18R. If you have a number 5 Camalot (I did not then) the route is totally safe and protectable. If you have a number 4 then you will have the same scary experience as I did, and without a large Camalot,well, there is a big chockstone half way up. It may hold, you never know.

We met the other lads back at the ute. None looked as petrified or wide-eyed as we did which was good, because we were all going to "the Point" the next day. Just to make me insecure again, it rained slightly in the evening.

A new day and another romp down the six-kilometre 4WD track from the caravan park to Mermaid Point. Tom and Richard boldly disappeared into the abyss of "Holey Cheesus" and were not seen again. For quite a while that is. Shane gathered our cameras and became the official photographer for the morning. Jon decided to go shopping on the three-star "Deli Shop" (35m, 22), however, in the maize of slopers, flaring cracks and suspect hand jams he lost the plot a couple of times. An eternity later, as measured by belay time (which is inversely proportional to the comfort of one's stance), he arrived on the top, later declaring himself officially "buggered". Unfortunately for him I remained relatively fresh.

For the last year I've had my eyes on a line that goes straight up the middle of the pyramid. Starting from the belay of "Deli Shop" it goes directly up to the top. I knew what I was in for, having top roped it three months ago. Back then I figured that a top rope was required, as I was puzzled why this, to my eyes the most obvious line on the whole cliff, had not been done yet ? What off-width weirdness lay in wait here ? Fortunately the whole problem can be solved by layaways and by far the most difficult aspect is

placing gear while hanging off slopers with one hand, with the collect-me-not ledge waiting hungrily below. "Hellbound" (30m, 21) was born with pumping biceps and a shrivelled brain.

But, by far, we were not the only ones having "fun". On the wall to the right Shane was crying sandbag on the Rosenstein-Nevin route "Rose Water" (13). Riccardo had valiantly led the route moments before, leaving a long blood streak in one particularly carnivorous crack. The reader will be well advised to make a Yosemite glove from tape before committing to climbing here. It will eliminate most of the pain.

On the evening of the 28th we moved the show to the Panorama Caravan Park near Albany. We were joined by Robert Cook of Manjimup plus Chris and Sue Swain.

In the evening, games of "eucre" and "black bitch" erupted at one location while Richard the Android was battling the Swains elsewhere, engaged in a South African game the like of which I have never seen before. Dared I tell his soft pink fleshy victims that their analytical opponent was making a living as a programmer of industrial control systems ? Were an architect and a geophysicist up to the challenge ? And who the hell am I to judge people by their jobs ? I did not inquire into the status of this clash of Titans as I snuck away to ponder those vexing questions. As far as I could see from the chits in front of them, it was as clear to me as coffee to a turkey.

29th arrived. I have decided to take a break and not climb. The rest of the crew were off to the Amphitheatre and thereabouts. In the mean time, I had a crisis to resolve: my happy little world had inexplicably run out of four wheel drives. I only had one ute and how the hell was I going to get gear for eleven people to West Cape Howe with that, huh ? Shane's Pajero was still getting patched up in Fremantle by his unreliable brother and Rob's personnel carrier was, well, at home. I was trying to dissuade Rob from attempting West Cape Howe in his (undented) Subaru, so far without outright success.

I spent the morning making phone calls to Wayne and Chloe in Perth. Wayne possesses the greatest 4WD in all of CAWAdom, a genuine Land Rover answering to the name of "Esmeralda". Unfortunately, he also selfishly tore his Achilles tendon while climbing with me in the Stirlings and thus was unable to drive it. Enter my girlfriend Chloe and our honourable president Mel, who both had perfectly well working tendons, yet no 4WD. A match made in heaven ! Satisfied, I then settled down to read a disturbing book about American foreign policy and otherwise loafed around. Yet, amidst a sense of organising achievement, I felt a growing unease about the girls driving Esmeralda.

This car is a tribute to a by-gone era of no nonsense British engineering. No good sense either. No power steering, no power brakes, no aircon, no nothing, this truck requires two hands to turn and a horse's kick to stop. I couldn't decide whether I was being incurably sexist or genuinely worried, as I waited with baited breath for the evening of the 30th when Wayne & Co. were scheduled to arrive.

30th December, Peak Head day. For a while Jon & I had both been lured by the folklore surrounding "Power of the Old Land (102m, 21), a huge line on the South Face. The folklore started when Mike Smith, the legendary trad "merchant d'chimney" explored this line during his efforts of "On the Lee Side" back in 1979. He retreated from the landmark arrowhead at the start of pitch two. When we did the route it was easy to see why, there is a convenient cam placement at the crux but in '79 there were no cams (and crap shoes). One can put a sling around the arrowhead itself, but if you fall, you could impale yourself somewhat....Anyway, the end of pitch one is just as hard, with a very insecure and somewhat runout traverse which is every bit as good value as the arrowhead. Beside these two six meter sections of harder climbing, the rest of the climb is easier and very, very enjoyable. The easterly wind was blowing like buggery and we were getting blasted and even showered on the very last pitch. We finished the climb in a direct line for the summit cairn, not up the chimney as in the guidebook. This seemed a lot more pleasant.

While we were sitting on the top, the other CAWA troops were walking away below us, having done the wind-in-your-hair-and-nothing-under-your-feet super classic "Albatross" (105m, 15). Everyone loved it. Jon and I finished this perfect day on "Baylac Direct" (96m,18), where I pulled a telescopic stretch past the crux, much to my shorter climbing partner's wry amusement.

What can be said about Peak Head to wrap up ? How does one describe paradise ? The intimidating South Face with its flaring chimneys, screaming winds and soaring walls, the more "civilised" West Face, sheltered from winds but not from the need for courage and technique, which is required on nearly all of its routes. It is good that places like that exist. Places which had been preserved in the No Bolting Zone, free from weenie crowds, where a climber can still look into his or her own soul and find what's there.

Go to Wylliabrup for your education and to Peak Head for your graduation.

Wayne and his fan club arrived late at night while I was asleep. On the morning of New Year's Eve the weather did what ? It did drizzle, that's what !

Bloody hell !! So we all got together and went for a stroll up the Quararup-Posession Point trail. If you are in Albany and are looking for a rest, this is quite a good two hour walk along some dunes and long beaches, albeit somewhat marred by the sight of huge silos in the nearby Albany. Later on we checked out the dilapidated whaling station, re-incarnated as a museum. Later still we were off to West Cape Howe to welcome the New Year !

Good grief, I have written far too much....is anyone still reading this ? Well, you don't really expect me to give you a blow-by-blow account of our three days at West Cape Howe, do you? Because you should have been there, like Zen Buddhism says, some things cannot be described or put on a photograph. How do you record the feeling of on-sighting a grunty trad 22 ? Or capture the 360 degree views from the top of Torbay Head on a camera ? Or describe Ed Bumbleez' huge circus tent which took up most of the Dunsky's Beach campsite ? (hint) Or his insane laughter ? Perhaps the sparkling blue ocean at the Golden Gate swimming hole ? How about the perfect stone walls that just go on forever ? These things must be experienced, surely.

Leeanne lounged around the camp, Chloe took her first insecure steps on real rock, Jon and Mel together found that some things are "Better Than Chocolate" (75m,19), Diggers took a winger and broke his thigh bone at the hip, later rorting the Medicare system at the Albany Hospital.

The Tank Engine prowled around the camp site, dressed only in a drover's hat and looking like a sex pot that he is. Wayne hobbled around on crutches in between acute bouts of calculus. Shane terrorised all with his Eric Cartman tee shirt (It's all a bunch of tree hugging hippie crap !) and Steve Mansfield crooned on the guitar throughout mellow evenings. Pommy import Nikki discovered and savoured the great Aussie outdoors and in return the great Aussie outdoors discovered and savoured all of us, in the shape of mossies, ants and lots of sand stuck in every body part.

There is a point up to which one can write and read about life. Beyond it, you have to live it.

Oh, and a quote of the trip comes from Steve Digwood, who reported exhaustively on his bone crunching plunge: "I was going all right until I hit the ground !"

So go way down to where a man can be free. Way down south.....to Albany.