

Australian **Wild**

*bushwalking, ski touring
canoeing and climbing magazine*

SPECIAL FEATURE
**Himalayan
Trekking**



Heard Island adventure
Ski touring: getting started, and more
Australian canoeing championships
Ropes survey

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Photo Chris Baxter

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Fire and Ice



Stormy oceans, penguins and an Antarctic volcano; the Australian expedition to Big Ben's remote and steamy summit was everyone's idea of an adventure, by Meg Thornton and Jonathan Chester.

● THE HEARD ISLAND EXPEDITION SAILED from Fremantle on 31 December 1982. Aboard the expedition yacht *Anaconda II*, were 20 people bound for a three-month journey to Heard Island, a remote Australian territory that lies below the Antarctic Convergence. The island is dominated by sub-antarctic weather patterns and is sheathed in glaciers. Ice cliffs form the greater part of the coastline. An ascent of Mawson Peak, the volcanic cone atop Big Ben, at 2,758 metres Australia's highest summit, was one of the main objectives of the expedition.

Heard Island is a remote speck in a very large ocean. The journey, all 4,000 kilometres of it, was a major element in the expedition plans. The idea of sailing in *Anaconda* gradually became not just a mode of transport but a summit, a goal, an adventure in itself. The lure of Heard Island was only one element in the excitement.

Anaconda is one of the largest yachts in Australia, but our strange load of climbing gear and tents, skis and snow shoes, scientific equipment and medical kits soon filled her to the limit. We looked forward to three weeks of sailing from Fremantle. Three hours on watch, three hours below, hot bunking, a cycle repeated relentlessly all day, all night, for three weeks. This system strained us physically; there was never quite enough sleep, certainly no time for writing, discussions and reading which it was hoped would be a focus of the voyage.

The early going was balmy, with sun-filled days and starry, starry nights. We gradually became familiar with the spider's web of rigging, the intricate choreography of sail changes and the odd tricks such as sleeping in the hammocks formed by the sails tied down on deck, or hiding behind the main mast during the skipper's tirades.

When we hit 40° the whole balance of weather and ocean was tipped. Waves came crashing over the bow, we were heeled right over, mains'l reefed, staysail and No 3 Yankee up. The sudden crack and whiplashing as a sail ripped became a familiar sound, initiating another sail change and long hours at the sewing machine. Heavy wet weather gear over fibrepile was essential, and the sail changes became exercises in endurance. It was tough, working in bare hands on the wet sails and sheets as the bow rose five metres and then crashed down into the next wave. We called this 'revelling' — up on the foredeck, rain, crashing waves, on your knees tying down the acres of wet sail, and the skipper yelling from the cockpit, his voice carried away by the wind.

After leaving Fremantle we sighted no other ships and the rest of the world may

On the lower reaches of Long Ridge with its frighteningly loose volcanic rock. Above, King Penguin rookery: magnificence amidst an overpowering stench! Chester

not have existed. We were a complete and closed microcosm, carrying all water, fuel, food and gear; very conscious of our meagre supplies of each. The black market dealings in Violet Crumbles and Gauloise cigarettes thrived during the midnight watches, and a hot drink on deck became the most craved luxury.

The potential for exercise and training was, however, limited. Unlike most Himalayan expeditions where the walk-in is a steady build-up and acclimatization period, the short bursts of activity on the yacht did not keep us fit. But we became

become all too familiar with in the previous months. The first encounters with King Penguins and slothful Elephant Seals were coloured with the childish joy of discovery. We also rediscovered the benefits of a whole night's sleep, the ease of cooking on a horizontal stove and eating from a horizontal bowl.

While the amateur radio operators set up at Atlas Cove, *Anaconda* took us to the eastern end of the island, sailing beneath the massive glacial cliffs, but there was still no glimpse of the elusive summit through the clouds. Skua Beach offered



fully acclimatized to wind and wet and cold.

It was in that state, with a cloud ceiling at about 300 metres that we first sighted Heard. It was not the 'giant iceberg' that Captain Heard described in his journal in 1853, but a line of black cliffs and jagged

The sudden crack and whiplashing as a sail ripped became a familiar sound.

ridges dropping out of the cloud to the waterline. Strange rock formations stood on these ridges like sentinels, marking our approach. Darkness and cloud descended as we dropped anchor in Atlas Cove. Cracking a bottle of rum in the aft cockpit, the island's features assumed a strange familiarity derived from hours spent studying them in two dimensions on the maps.

The next days were a blur of unpacking, moving, loading, sorting ... tasks we had

a rare sandy landing and soon our little city of coloured tents became a tenuous refuge from the squalls and gusts that sweep the island.

During the next two weeks, the route to Long Ridge was established. Field trips around the coast were made to explore and document wildlife, and samples of plants and rocks were collected for our scientific programmes. Extremes of weather and snow conditions made all these tasks difficult. The one reliable and predictable aspect of Heard Island weather was constant change, and it was against this background that Jonathan Chester and Martin Hendy made a bid for the summit.

At a few hundred metres below the apparent rim of the volcano the route ahead looked straightforward, but the weather was not so auspicious. Cirrus cloud was gathering by the hour, and one certain lesson of mountain experience is to heed the signs. Jonathan related the story of the climb.

Frozen waves of wind-blown snow rimmed the volcano's caldera like extravagant icing on a giant wedding cake. Safely belayed by Martin, I climbed gingerly up to the edge of the caldera. The



sustrugi structures fanning out round the rim were astounding. Perfectly formed tunnels of ice, like pipelines in the surf, had been sculptured by a prevailing wind of unimaginable force. We wasted no time in fixing an anchor of ice screws and abseiled down off the rim, across a bergschrund, and into the caldera basin — the inner sanctum of the volcano. The central summit cone of Mawson Peak was just visible through the mist. In the shadow of the 'hogsback' clouds we traversed several kilometres of the basin in rapid time. Arriving at the base of the summit cone we felt weary but optimistic: ascent of the upper slopes of 'Australia's highest peak' appeared eminently feasible.

Work towards the achievement of this position had begun 12 days earlier when Rob, Martin and Mike made a preliminary

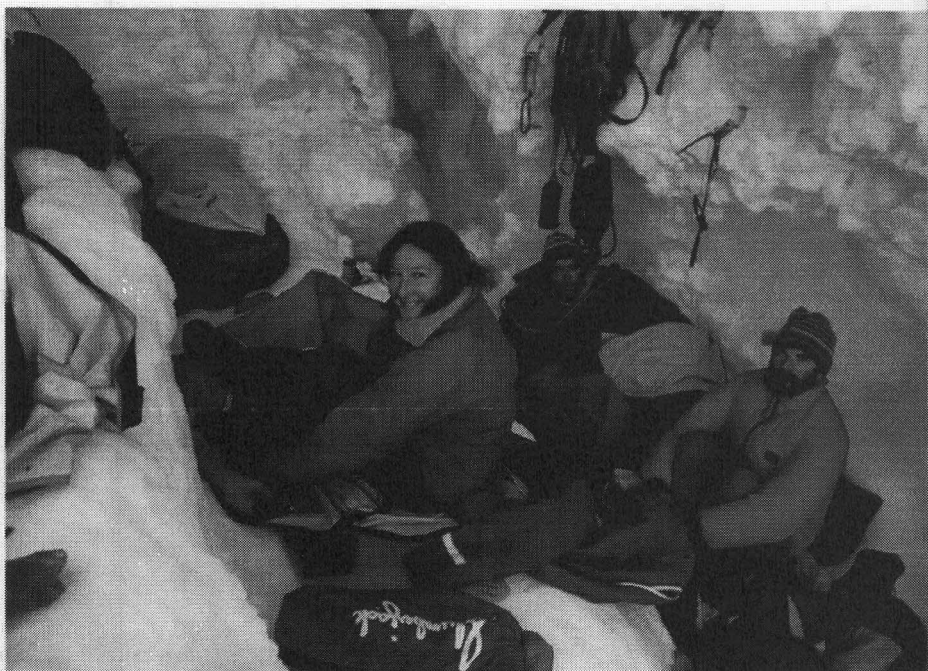
The first encounters with King Penguins and slothful Elephant Seals were coloured with the childish joy of discovery.

foray on to the mountain and had a grim initiation into the fickle extremes of Heard Island weather. They made camp after a day of reconnaissance, and built a wall of snow blocks round the tent to break the wind. As a storm developed, falling snow turned to driving rain which steadily eroded the snow walls. By three o'clock in the morning they were struggling to support the alloy wands of the tent against lashing 60 knot winds. The shredded tent was eventually abandoned and the remaining hours of the tempest were spent huddled in the lee of a nearby rock ridge.

This experience confirmed our conviction of the necessity for more secure accommodation and, as is often the case in the mountains, a snow cave proved to be the best refuge. In preparation for the assault on the summit, several days were spent excavating a cave that boasted three bedrooms, a walk-in kitchen and separate vestibule. Ross and Steve toiled to dig storage and other amenities, and this lavish dwelling was a stable springboard during the five-day search for a practical route up to the crest of Long Ridge.

The planned line of ascent, worked out

Anaconda II from halfway up the mizzen. Top right, bivouac in the caldera bergschrund in temperatures of down to -20° C. Right bottom, one of the expedition's inflatable boats below Heard Island's formidable coastal ice cliffs. Photos Chester, and right bottom, Bill Blunt





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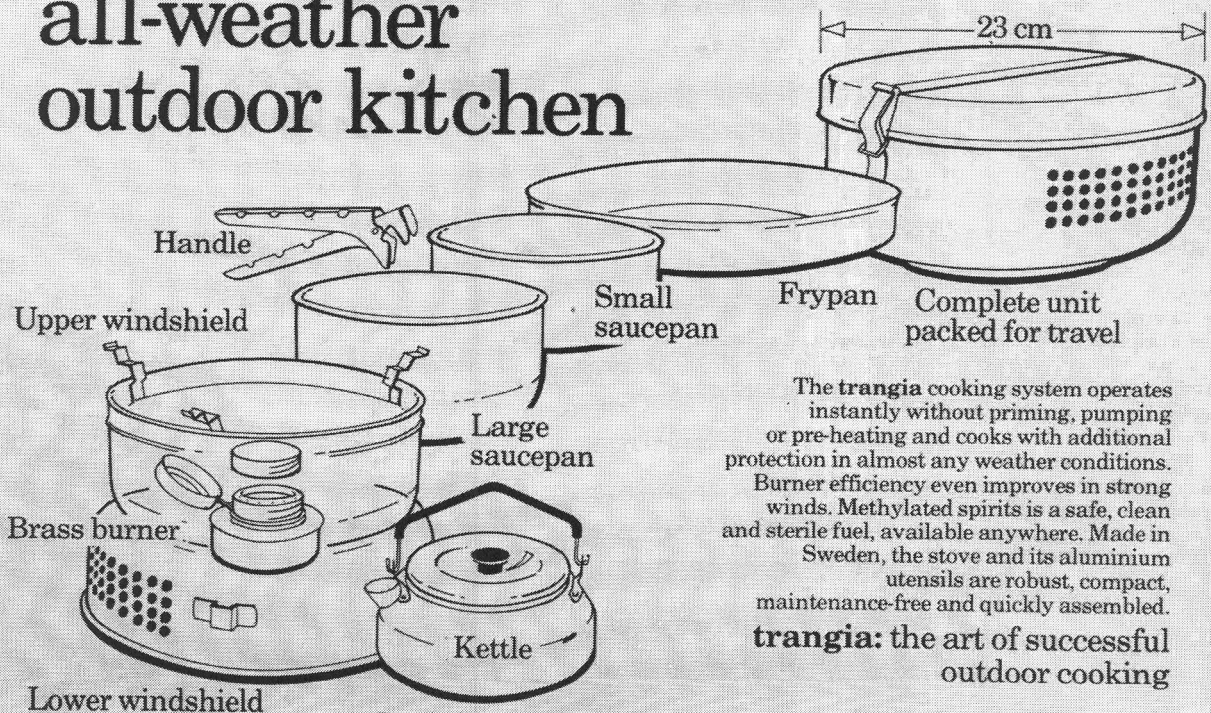
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on aerial photographs back in Sydney, proved impassable. The barrier was a 50 metre band of vertical choss. To use this treacherous wall of loosely connected volcanic cinders as a load-carrying route was out of the question. Long before arriving on Heard Island, Bill and Ross had decided that it was no place to risk an Alpine-style ascent. The likelihood of storms that rage for a week or more, and the acute isolation of the island, were key factors in deciding upon siege tactics for the climb. This approach required the selfless commitment of everyone to the labours of load carrying, establishing camps and route finding, and beyond this team effort there was the extended family of many hundreds who had worked tirelessly, and given generously, to make this expedition possible.

The final line of ascent avoided the unhealthy rock band by skirting along the base of the ridge, and an intricate route weaving up among crevasses and steep ice cliffs brought us at last to easier ground. This passage negotiated unnerving country: glaciers move with uncommon speed on this castaway island. In the course of fixing ropes and placing food dumps, whole slopes could change overnight. After the dangers of the approach, the environment above was relatively free from objective hazards.

Finding the true summit was quite perplexing. Far from being an unequivocal Big Ben, showing the line of ascent, Long Ridge, on the right skyline. Steve Tremont

apex to the mountain there was a jumble of depressions and waves of ice abutting snow-free rocks. Eventually a small tunnel through a bergschrund gave passage to the very top of Australia. Ice caving was rather an unusual way to make the summit, but then this was quite an unusual mountain. Sulphurous gas assailed our nostrils as we scrambled up the volcanic choss, and steam issued from a maze of small openings. The

surrounding rocks were quite hot to the touch — a chocolate bar laid on one such vent turned soft and sticky.

A swirling mist obscured any view, but just being there was enough. An Australian flag was unfurled and we celebrated with appropriate photographs. It was the first time either of us had taken part in a display of summit patriotism but it seemed the only fitting acknowledgement of a unique situation. ●

