

GERYON WINTERS

Winters in Pine Valley, Tasmania, 1981-82.

by Grant Dixon



We had just rugged up for the cold trip up Lake St Clair and sweat was appearing on my brow when, on the twenty-third pull, the Seagull outboard motor spluttered into life. Thankfully, I took up position hunched next to the motor and, with Kim reclining on the packs, we left our little cloud of petrol fumes to be dissipated by the breeze and headed northward.



The memory of the previous year's shoulder-tearing struggle up the lakeside track carrying nine days food, climbing gear and skis was fresh in our minds as we watched the forested slopes of Mt Olympus drift past. The peaks were wreathed in cloud but the rain held off, and our little boat made Narcissus Hut in two hours.

Now the real work started; after helping each other with the unwieldy packs we staggered off towards Pine Valley. Muscles, unused since the summer, soon tired, and a rest was proposed before the halfway point. However, it was not easy to find a log of sufficient dimensions on which to deposit the ski-bearing packs, to save undue effort shouldering them again.

Tiring of skis and trees we opted for the valley track, and in my case, wet feet from an unplanned excursion into the creek. Open going gave way to a crawl at Pine Valley Hut, as the skis continually caught in the branches overhanging the track to Geryon campsite. This little clearing in the forest was indeed a welcome sight — packs thudded to the ground, back muscles stretched, and the tent set up.

The rain arrived at nightfall. However, we were content - still dry and in position for an assault on the peak that had taken us almost three days to reach the previous year. The rain was of no consequence, as there had already been more fine weather than in eight days during 1981.

Dawn came damp and misty, but, determined not to waste days as on the previous trip, we climbed the greasy scree towards our mountain. The lack of snow was worrying — in 1981 we had been able to bum-slide back down to our camp; now it was virtually all rock. Scrub-bashing, rather than snow-swimming techniques, was used to gain the gully leading up towards the Foresight. The ice axes were used for the first time as we kicked steps up the hard snow which remained in the shade of the surrounding peaks.

The chimney was icy this year. Perhaps the lack of snow was a blessing. In 1981 it had been a waterfall. Finding the peg remaining from the previous year's attempt, Kim clipped into it and grovelled upwards. I followed soon after, with no more finesse. Kim belayed at the 1981 high point and we stood there for a few moments, gazing upwards at the icy Foresight and our proposed route. I glanced towards North Peak. It was dark and foreboding now but the memories of the abseils down that wall of ice and snow, spindrift filling the air, were as vivid as if it were yesterday.



Kim pronounced the belay “adequate” so I proceeded upward, bridging of icy holds, to the notch. The massive east face dropped away beneath my feet. The slabs to the left looked slick and uninviting, so I selected a harder but better protected alternative to the right. I had cause to question this decision 30 minutes later as I hung from two slings beneath a small roof, and hoped the chockstone was solid and not just frozen in place. Kim made it look easy as he swung up after me.

Kim studied the icy corner above as I strengthened the belay. I stood for 45 freezing minutes as he worked his way upwards. Things happened slowly — the scrape of boots on rock as he scrambled up the initial section; the ring of a well-placed peg; a gasp, as for one heart-stopping moment he slipped ; the scrape of metal on rock as ice was cleared from a tiny foothold. A grunt and he was up — the rope running out faster as easier climbing on the dry east face was encountered. I followed, pausing at the top of the corner to admire the view. The weather was improving. The mist was thinning, allowing glimpses of the surrounding peaks with sunlight above. I had been too involved with the climb to notice these things earlier.

I removed my gloves, experiencing a few minutes of pain as circulation returned to my fingers. Having donned mittens for the easier climbing above, I traversed across and up towards the summit. The mist had gone and the sun was warming my numb toes by the time Kim and I stood together on the isolated summit. The cold wind detracted not at all from these few moments.

We lunched - chocolate, peanuts, cheese and sardines (the tin opened with an ice axe in lieu of a can opener) - then left the summit to the elements. After four dubious abseils we again stood at the base of the chimney.



In 1981 we had descended to find our tent crushed by melting snow, and spent a cold night followed by a day drying out in Pine Valley Hut. This time dry sleeping bags welcomed us, and Kim's meal tasted good.

An overnight frost made the scramble up the scree treacherous, but hardened the snow beneath South Peak. The approach was loose and icy, the ramp wet and slippery, but the final gully was filled with pleasantly hard snow. We hurried across the wind-swept summit of South Peak and gazed across at the ramparts of North Peak and at our climb of the previous day. Swirling mists, which had been gathering over the Labyrinth, periodically obliterated the view. Back in the valley, the afternoon was spent "experiencing" the forest.

It was raining at dawn. The isolated snow patches in the upper Labyrinth seemed even less inviting now. Apparently the skis were to be ballast only on this trip. The previous year an over-night snowfall had dumped more than a metre of snow in the Labyrinth. The dream of a white, tree-covered plateau glimpsed through a hole in the mist was to remain just that, a dream.

Predictably the weather improved down the valley. We lunched in the weak sun before chugging off down the glassy lake. Kim trolled a line hopefully, but unsuccessfully.

We gained the frosty summit of Mt Ida the following morning. The mist-covered Central Plateau looked somewhat incongruous compared to the sunshine elsewhere. Our rapid descent through rotting forest preceded a "surf" back across Lake St Clair.

With Geryon winters we were now content. The next annual excursion would be elsewhere.

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