

# PEAK BAGGING

PAT MORROW



I became a “collector” of peaks quite by accident. Until the early 1980s, all the mountain adventures I had been on were expeditions with solitary and self-sufficient goals: Each trip was dedicated to climbing one mountain, with the single summit being its own reward. By 1982, without any broader goal in mind, I had climbed the highest peaks in North and South America and I had summited Everest as a member of the first Canadian team.

Then, curiosity got the best of me. I had climbed to the summits of three continents and this naturally led me to wonder about the high points of the remaining four. On my walk out from Everest’s south base camp, I realized I had already taken several steps on what could prove to be a very interesting journey, and I committed to completing what seemed to be a natural adventure: the first Seven Summits project. This project was the beginning of my career as a “collector,” and, in the eyes of some people at least, was one of the sparks of the modern trend of “peak bagging.”

When I set out to try to climb the highest peak on each continent in the early '80s, there was no precedent to follow. I had to find my own financial and logistical means to reach the Seven Summits, each in a very different geopolitical corner of the map, but this was, of course, one of the most important elements of the adventure for

me. I realized that I was seeking the adventure and challenge of the project, and that the summits themselves were simply a vehicle through which to live those adventures. If I was collecting, I was collecting life experiences; the peaks simply became high-altitude stepping-stones.

The project came at the right time in my career as an adventure photographer, and it ultimately set the stage for my life’s work: to see and document the world from high and savagely beautiful places. As my story on the Everest expedition went to press, James Lawrence, publisher of Canada’s *Equinox* assured me that he would help me out with assignments to document the remaining four peaks. While the Seven Summits project was initially just a personal challenge, it was soon apparent that I was not the only one with the goal in mind. By the end of 1984, I realized I was inadvertently locked in what could be called a media race with two wealthy American businessmen.

Someone had shown me a story in a *Fortune* 500 magazine announcing that American business magnate Dick Bass and Hollywood CEO Frank Wells were also after the Seven Summits. All of a sudden the project looked like a David and Goliath showdown, with me, the dirt-bag Canadian “frostback” climber, up against the might of the U. S. dollar.

The major hurdle was reaching and climbing Antarctica’s highest peak. When I put in a call to Frank Wells to see if I could piggyback on their

flight to Mount Vinson Massif, he asked me curtly, "Do you have \$250,000? No? Well that's what it'll cost you to launch your own flight." This set the tone for the duration of the project. Although a certain amount of competition among climbers is to be expected, my experience of camaraderie and *esprit de corps* in the climbing community was shattered.

Wells eventually backed out of the game because of family pressures, but Bass persisted, getting Everest on his fourth try. Bass's precedent of bringing mountain guides to lead him up the Seven was, ironically, a precursor to the professionally guided disasters on Everest in 1996. By demonstrating that a relative newcomer to the sport could buy his way to the top of Everest, and somehow survive a near disaster during his descent, Bass unwittingly inspired dozens of others with even less mountain experience.

The Seven Summits "Competition" involved tensions and pressures that surfaced in the form of public quibbles that have lasted to this day. One of the most obvious twists was Bass's inclusion of Australia's Mount Kosciusko on the highest points list. Kosciusko is little more than a ski hill, and because there are a dozen or more real climbers' objectives in the Australasian region—which includes Australia, New Zealand, and New Guinea—I chose the highest, Carstensz Pyramid, in Irian Jaya (western New Guinea), for my seventh summit from the outset. And so, we have been left with two versions of the Seven Summits, two differing historical claims, and two standards for parties interested in repeating the project. Now that many of the logistical problems have been solved, a number of other adventure seekers have followed in both Bass's and my footsteps, with parties using whichever definition of the project best suits their own needs. As of February 20, 2000, 52 climbers have completed the project choosing Carstensz as the seventh summit, while 45 have done Dick Bass's Kosciusko version.

Although the Seven Summits project has been criticized as the beginning of an apparent modern trend in climbing toward peak bagging and tick-lists, it's important to see that in reality the

collecting of peaks has been around for virtually all of climbing's history. While the reasons for collecting the peaks may be different over the centuries, there is ample evidence of people heading into the mountains with tick-lists for much of civilized time.

The Chinese, for example, long ago recognized the cosmic connection of nine mountain peaks to a shamanic, Taoist, Buddhist, or Confucian heaven, and they lined up to ascend these mountains and receive some form of spiritual blessing. They are not high by mountaineers' standards, ranging from only 6,560 to 9,840 feet; however, the devout use a different yardstick by which to gauge their mountains and measure their own worship. Not only did commoners and priests alike climb the peaks, but as a significant precursor to today's dubious act of chipping holds, they carved thousands of steps into solid granite to help them reach their lofty goals.

In the rest of Asia, there are many other peaks of importance to the indigenous peoples, most notably the Tibetans. Mount Kailas (in Tibetan, Kangrinpoche—"Precious Snow Mountain") is generally regarded as the holiest of Asian mountains. This handsomely symmetrical 22,028-foot peak lying on the desolate western reaches of the Tibetan plateau is on every Buddhist, Bon, Hindu, and Jain pilgrim's tick-list. Tibetan Buddhists don't climb so much as circumambulate their holy peaks, and peasants and well-heeled alike ride, walk, or prostrate themselves for thousands of miles to the mountain's base. Once there, they do the *kora* around the base in an effort to bolster their karma. It takes a long day for a Tibetan, fueled by a bag full of *tsampa* and a head full of dharma, to hike the strenuous 34-mile-long trail, which includes a crossing of the nearly 18,500-foot-high Dolma Pass. It took me and my companions, loaded down with camping gear, three days.

To up the ante, those who initiate themselves by completing the outer *kora* 13 times are entitled to embark on the *nangkor*, or inner *kora* route, which involves encircling Nandi, the pyramidal peak that stands directly below Kailas's south face. It is said that those who make the *kora* of Kailas 108 times will be guaranteed entry into Nirvana.

Dozens of other peaks throughout the Himalaya have accumulated religious significance and have drawn climbers as a consequence.

Nearby, on the islands of Japan, there are hundreds of major sacred mountains; the minor ones remain uncounted. With the introduction of Buddhism from China in the sixth century A.D., the practice of climbing the sacred peaks all the way to their summits, and thereby communing directly with their resident gods, became popular. This practice embodied the Taoist path of seeking freedom and immortality in the highest and wildest reaches of the mountains. As a consequence of their deep reverence for sacred mountains, the Japanese have one of the oldest traditions of climbing—and of peak bagging—in the world.

Climbing has also played a significant role in the religions of the Western world. The earliest collectors of mountain experience in the West were religious zealots, who, despite the Western penchant for monotheism and prescription against animism, had been inspired to seek out the mountain gods and icons so present in Western and Near Eastern mythology. This involved pilgrimages to the summits of Mounts Olympus, Ararat, Sinai, Hermon, and many others from scripture and myth. In the East, a panoply of gods was said to live in several different mountains, thus encouraging the pilgrim to tick peaks on a list of godly abodes. In the West, God was not meant to “live” anywhere, and so, ascents by Christian/Islamic pilgrims were not felt to be journeys directly to God. Mountain pilgrimages in the West thus tended to seek out singular peaks with historical significance. There was also an extended period during the Middle Ages when mountains were taken out of the religious experience in the Christian West. The all-powerful

clergy warned their superstitious flocks to stay away from mountains they believed were inhabited by evil spirits, and this restrained European mountaineering for several centuries.

By the early 1800s, however, mountains came out from under the shadow of the Christian church and collectors came out of the woodwork. With the development of organized guiding in Europe heralding the beginning of the “Golden Age of Mountaineering” in the 1860s, wealthy clients were certainly aware of the “must-do”

climbs of the Alps. Even if the names of these climbs weren’t publicized as a list in the October 1866 issue of *Outside*, had there been one in those days, they were surely on the lips of every climber and spurred races and competitions not too different from mine with Dick Bass.

I’d like to argue then that finding patterns in the mountains (such as the Seven Summits, the 8,000-meter peaks, the Grandes Courses of the Alps), listing these patterns as personal or public goals, and striving to “tick” these experiences off a list, is a completely natural human tendency and is as old as climbing itself. As natural and historic as the practice might be, however, some modern

variations on how the collecting game has been played have been drawing considerable criticism from both within and outside the climbing community. A look at some of these criticisms might be illuminating:

The accusation that is most often leveled at modern “peak baggers” is that their lists are sometimes nothing more than an artificial concatenation of insignificant objectives, and that the completion of lists has somehow risen to have higher value than individual objectives themselves. In the worst case, peak bagging seems to involve linking a series of easy scrambles that have no



*Pat Morrow rappelling on the summit ridge of Carstensz Pyramid, the most technical of the Seven Summits normal routes.*

~ The collecting project that has loomed largest over the past 20 years, and hasn't diminished in reputation or import, is the ascent of all fourteen 8,000-meter peaks.

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natural or valid relationship save for the fact they are on the peak bagger's list. While some of these lists are indeed natural and valid, more than a few these days seem to be fabricated collections with ulterior motives. Some critics have suggested that these types of lists are nothing more than ways of making a name for oneself or of securing funding for what are essentially personal vacations.

In the very worst case, "artificial" lists are sometimes seen to be the brainchildren of peak baggers with limited talent, who are condemned by climbers for apparently seeking the easiest (and least-justified) route to fame. Most notorious in this group—at least among mainstream climbers—are those who appear to make the tick-list more important than the climbing itself, and thus give themselves permission to act in ways that orthodox climbers might consider unsporting, unethical, or disrespectful of the sport itself. This includes such things as being guided up the peaks (without developed talent); reworking the list to make it more personally possible (the Kosciusko phenomenon); using questionable methods (using oxygen on peaks that have been climbed regularly without, or using mechanized access); engaging in blatant self-promotion (especially in forums where uninformed listeners lionize

the promoter); and having no apparent long-term interest in the sport after the peak has been bagged.

The problems that result from peak bagging are not restricted only to less-experienced or questionably motivated climbers. Even among "real" climbers, being driven by lists and by "firsts" can lead to behaviors that others feel are harmful to the sport, to the environment, or to the public interpretation of climbing. There are legendary stories about some appallingly bad behaviors by climbers who are intent on a goal, and this kind of behavior can be greatly amplified by a race that involves several years of effort. The years that I put into the Seven Summits project, for example, had me thinking in ways that were distinctly different from my usual personal approach to climbing.

In terms of environmental impacts, the very existence of lists is enough to generate or amplify people's interest in going to places they wouldn't ordinarily venture. Carstensz Pyramid, the true high point in Australasia, for example, would likely never be on any climber's project list if it weren't on the Seven Summits tour. Its inclusion on that list has meant that this environmentally and culturally fragile peak has seen multiple ascents. When the fact of a "race" is added to the

mix—as when several climbers get close to completing a list at the same time — the extra pressure can sometimes impel otherwise environmentally respectful people to cast aside their normal practices in order to grab the prize.

I want to emphasize, however, that in no way is all modern “ticking” and “peak bagging” unhealthy, invalid, or unnatural. Instead, in many ways the renaissance of peak bagging might be seen as a remarkable reflection of the amount of healthy, challenge-oriented free time we have in our lives these days. The fact that there are a significant number of climbers seriously pursuing goals such as summiting all 8,000-meter peaks is a sign of the current level of talent in our sport just as much as it is a sign of the dangers of overcrowding in the great ranges.

It’s also imperative to acknowledge that completion of any of the more “valid” tick-lists in a respectful and honest style would be a significant accomplishment in the lives of most climbers. Also, the completion of some of the “lighter-weight” lists (e.g., all the 4,000-meter peaks of the Alps) would be significant exercises in endurance and commitment even if they weren’t the greatest technical climbing achievements.

Many of the people who have ticked all the objectives on one of the major lists may have climbed the peaks simply because they love climbing. As was the case for me on the Seven Summits project, some of the collectors have accidentally stumbled into a position where completing the list is the natural thing to do, even though they initially had no intent of embarking on such a project. Despite the prevailing stereotype of the bumbling, untalented, and often rich climber being dragged up easy ticks by guides, many persons who embark on these projects are talented and committed climbers who are simply the types of people who are driven by bigger goals.

With all this in mind, let’s take a closer look at some of the collecting, good and bad, happening today. One sees a huge number of variations on the practice: Some people create (or follow) lists and set out to collect all the items on the list (e.g., the Seven Summits); some people want to tick off single, once-in-a-lifetime experiences (climb Kilimanjaro

but never climb again); some people want to collect experiences in several different domains (climb Everest and ski to both Poles); some people want to collect firsts (first ascents of a peak, or first by a route); some people seek firsts distinguished according to some stylistic parameter (first oxygenless ascent) or personal parameter (first female ascent of Big Ben on Heard Island); some people want to set records (e.g., fastest ascent of El Capitan); and some people collect numbers (e.g., the most 5,14s by an American).

At the core of the process is the keeping of records or lists and some community consensus that such things matter. In the history of climbing there have always been individuals or communities who have eschewed records of activity or accomplishment, but there always seems to have been far more people who have been attracted by records.

Without a list to follow, a peak bagger would not know where to turn, but there is no shortage of material to guide projects. The available lists (in various formats, from guidebooks to Internet sites) engender just as much praise—and wrath, depending on your point of view—as the collectors themselves. The most famous of the tick books—Allen Steck and Steve Roper’s *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America* (or “Fifty Crowded Climbs”); *Sivalaya*, Henri Baum’s guide to the 8,000-meter peaks of Asia; *High Asia*, Jill Neate’s guide to the 7,000-meter peaks; Willi Burkhardt’s *The 4,000-meter Peaks of the Alps*—can be viewed either as invaluable resource and planning guides, or as Bibles of the Antichrists, responsible for desecrating the sacred tenets of exploration and discovery in climbing.

In the best of all worlds, the lists themselves would simply be neutral catalogues of peaks and history, but it’s important to realize that this isn’t always the case. Stylistic, personal, and political agendas often influence lists. This is especially obvious with a book such as *Fifty Classic Climbs*, with its personal and seemingly arcane selection of climbs, but agendas also influence records or lists that purport to be neutral. The keepers of the lists that motivate the collectors have a very powerful, and not necessarily objective, role in determining the nature of the climbing game.

And what of the content of the lists? It is interesting that, at least as far as the inner circles of the climbing world are concerned, the Seven Summits quest has been demoted to the status of a goal for more amateur climbers. Though the project requires some degree of skill, it seems that the climbing fraternity has decided that cash and connections are the more fundamental requirements of the project. As far as climbers are concerned, a far more interesting and worthy Seven Summits project still awaits completion—climbing the second highest peak on each continent. In almost all cases, from a climber's standpoint, the peaks are more difficult and dangerous, with a completely new set of access and logistical difficulties as well.

The collecting project that has loomed largest over the past 20 years, and hasn't diminished in reputation or import, is the ascent of all fourteen 8,000-meter peaks. Even if negotiated by their easiest routes and surmounted by outdated siege techniques that are still being used, most notably on Everest, all the peaks offer a true mountaineer's challenge because of their ultimate elevation. By the spring of 1999, more than 3,000 individual ascents had been made of the 8,000-meter peaks; of these, 1,052 ascents had been made by 764 men and 44 women on Everest alone. But only seven people have collected all 14 of them. The famous Tyrolean climber Reinhold Messner first grabbed the prize in 1986 and did so in remarkable style, climbing oxygenless and completing most of the peaks alpine style.

A tick of Everest alone was long considered the greatest tick of all, though some of the shine of the mountain has dimmed in the past decade. Everest as a lodestone has spawned a wide range of accomplishments, driven by motives that range from curiosity and exploration all the way through to national pride and an unabashed desire for fame. The "first" ascents of Everest didn't stop with Ed Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's historic accomplishment. Since then, we have seen the first married couple to summit together (Andrej and Marija Stremfelj of Slovenia); the first walk from the Bay of Bengal to the summit (the Australian Tim McCartney-Snape, who managed another accidental first when he estab-

lished a new route, White Limbo, on the North Face in leather telemark boots because his regular boots were lost in an avalanche); the oldest (Lev Sarkisov of Georgia at 60); the youngest (Shambu Tamang of Nepal at 16); the first father and son summiteers (Pete and Ed Hillary of New Zealand); and the first to ride a bike, unsupported, from Sweden (Göran Kropp). The list goes on, sometimes with criticisms about the extent to which "firsts" are construed to gain financial support: In the ever wry words of humorist Tami Knight, "Help fund the first One-Legged, Polo-Stick Summiteers!"

Perhaps the most impressive set of statistics surrounding the ascent of Everest comes from Ang Rita, the most famous Sherpa since Tenzing Norgay. Thus far, the Solu-Khumbu native has managed to scale Everest ten times (and climb several other of the 8,000-meter peaks multiple times as well). To fully appreciate the level of his accomplishment, it's important to note that he hauled oxygen-guzzling Western clients to the summit and back while carrying regular sherpa loads of 44 to 88 pounds without the use of oxygen.

Two up-and-coming young climbers, Apa Sherpa and Babu Chiri Sherpa, have recently recorded their tenth ascents, also as working sherpas. These kinds of numbers make the accomplishments of most proudly boasting peak baggers seem absurd by comparison.

The consequence of Everest being on the peak baggers' tick-list, has of course, been an inevitable demotion of the experience and some profound environmental and cultural impact.

Setting records is another form of collecting. As technical and training standards have risen dramatically in all forms of climbing, speed climbing has been a natural consequence. The Russians were the first masters of the game, running speed competitions on big peaks since the 1950s, but the speed bug has caught on around the world, including on the Himalayan giants. On Everest, for example, the remarkable Swiss climbers Erhard Loretan and Jean Troillet started the race in 1986 when they sprinted up the North Face in just over 40 hours; they carried only light sleeping bags and took no tent. Hans Kammerlander hammered the record on the north

side in 1996 when he made the climb in 16 hours 45 minutes, and in 1998, Kaji Sherpa shot to the top from the Nepal side in a relatively scant 20 hours and 24 minutes, only to be bested in May of 2000 by Babu Chiri, who breezed it in 16 hours and 56 minutes.

Ticks of speed ascents have also been changing the face of big-wall climbing, especially in Yosemite, where unbelievable times on single and multiple walls are getting racked up regularly, and where records sometimes last less than a day in the heated atmosphere of competition. The climbers playing this game have essentially created an entirely new form of climbing.

It's important to realize that while some collectors have a very public face, attract much media attention, write books about their achievements, and perhaps open themselves to criticisms regarding the integrity of their projects, there are also many climbers who are peak baggers with perhaps cleaner hands.

These include talented individuals who are ultracommitted extreme alpinists, pushing standards while racking up a quiet list of remarkable accomplishments that few of the less-talented peak baggers are ever likely to consider repeating. Climbers such as Catherine Destivelle, Peter Croft, Voytek Kurtyka, and the late Anatoli Boukreev have each formed personal tick-lists that bear no resemblance to the other mountains or practices already described. Desperate routes on peaks such as Gasherbrum IV, Cerro Torre, the Moose's Tooth, and Baintha Brakkh are sought after by only a prescribed few. Those who attempt these climbs need to do so largely for themselves, because only a valid and rich personal motivation will bring success on these climbs.

The motives of these individuals are understood only by their rare peers in the climbing world.

And there is another kind of equally pure collector: This person is the mountain nomad who collects ascents of peaks, very often silently and joyfully, simply because he or she loves being in the mountains exploring. The wilderness possibilities of my native Canada have permitted the existence of many such nomads, even in this age of roads and airplanes. People like John Clarke, John Baldwin, David Williams, Markus Kellerhals, and John Martin each head into the mountains every year with a drive to explore that naturally, but not necessarily intentionally, creates remarkable tick-lists.

My personal heroes, the famous British climber-explorers Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman, bagged 26 peaks over 20,000 feet on the 1935 reconnaissance of Everest. At the time, that was as many mountains of that height as had been climbed in all of history. Shipton, Tilman, and four others—plus a keen 19-year-old porter then known simply as Tenzing Norgay Bhotia—were just out looking for adventure. They prided themselves on being able to organize a Himalayan expedition in half an hour and on the back of an envelope; now, we take months and use a spreadsheet. Perhaps it's important to remember some of the beauty of simplicity and validity of their approach when we begin to consider committing ourselves to complex, expensive, competitive, and loud collecting of peaks, deserts, Poles, and oceans.

The last word remains with the late American superalpinist Alex Lowe, who clarified the point of it all: "The best climber in the world is the one having the most fun."

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*For Pat Morrow, Canadian photographer, writer, climber, and videographer, being a collector meant traveling the globe in search of high adventure and the wisdom of mountain cultures. Following an ascent of Everest in 1982, he went on to complete the Seven Summits, recounted in his book Beyond Everest, Quest for the Seven Summits. For this achievement, he received the Order of Canada, the highest honor given to a Canadian citizen. At the 1990 Banff Mountain Film Festival, he was honored with the Summit of Excellence Award for his work in documenting the mountain experience.*

*Together with Baiba, his wife and partner of 15 years, Pat continues to spend at least half of every year on expeditions and forays to the great ranges of the world. Their latest book, Footsteps in the Clouds—Kangchenjunga a Century Later, was published by Raincoast in September 1999.*