Carstensz Pyramid
Clandestine forays on one of the 7 Summits

BY MANDY RAMSDEN

Mention Carstensz Pyramid and the conversation invariably becomes a geography debate. Although many would find it difficult to pinpoint its location on a map, those who seek to climb the Seven Summits are likely to find themselves arguing over the merits of its inclusion on this list and the controversy surrounding access.

Widely credited as the first man to reach the highest point on each continent, Texan businessman Dick Bass argued that his list included the highest mountain on each continental land mass, and chose to amble up to the summit of Kosciusko in Australia at 2,333 metres. Canadian Pat Morrow, however, looked beneath the ocean's surface towards the continental plates and proclaimed the island of New Guinea as home to the highest mountain in Australasia, becoming the first man to complete the Carstensz version of the seven summits 15 months after Bass.

The mountaineering world is divided on the issue of Kosciusko versus Carstensz, with Morrow supporters arguing against the former on the basis of both geography and limited testosterone quotient.

In contrast to Kosciusko, which can be summited on a Sunday afternoon stroll, Carstensz rears out of the jungles of South West Irian Jaya, bounded by dense jungle on one side and the inaccessible Grasberg Mine, one of the largest opencast mines in the world, on the other.

First climbed by Heinrich Harrer (of Eiger North Face fame) in 1962 and described in his book “I come from the Stone Age”, Carstensz has seen limited climbing activity due to political and tribal conflict, as well as haphazard co-operation from the authorities at Grasberg. Many of the earlier expeditions to Carstensz involved a five-day trek from the north, employing Dani tribesmen as porters, but this was stopped after foreigners were taken hostage to draw attention to the call for independence from Indonesia. For a time, Indonesian authorities banned all visits by foreigners, thwarting many a mountainer's goal of following in Morrow’s footsteps and resulting in the resurgence in popularity of Kosciusko.

Because of this isolation and inaccessibility, reliable information on Carstensz is hard to find and is generally out of date, and expedition anecdotes are littered with tales of secrecy and subterfuge around the issue of access. More recently, the rigid stance adopted by government and the mine appears to have been relaxed, and several guiding companies report successful, legal expeditions.

Controversy aside, Carstensz presents a very different mountaineering challenge in a fascinating and remote corner of the world. The combination of jungle, equatorial glaciers and technical climbing was
appealing so a place in a South African commercial expedition was an opportunity not to be missed.

At 4884m, Carstensz is the lowest of the seven summits (for Morrow disciples) and distinguishes itself as the only one that is a technical rock climb, which although not severe, is sufficiently vertical and exposed to require the security of a rope for most of the ascent and descent. Lacking any real experience in this department, a few lessons at the climbing gym equipped us with the basics of jumaring and abseiling, and, on 1 October 2007, armed with little information and even less climbing skill, we assembled at OR Tambo International to launch our assault on Carstensz Pyramid. After two nights in a smoggy and motor-cycle infested Jakarta, it was time to move closer to our target. Only we were bound for Timika, a town that had not featured on either of the potential itineraries previously circulated. Unbeknown to us, this was a taste of things to come.

Established in 1969 to support Grasberg, Timika shows little evidence of having benefited from the vast wealth being excavated from beneath the nearby Sudirman mountain range. The local populace is predominantly Muslim and a melting pot of Oriental, Indian and Aboriginal origin.

The Timika Sheraton lies a short distance from the airport, a first-world oasis amidst third-world squalor, where we were to spend two days and nights in the lap of luxury, lounging by the pool and looking forward to the impending helicopter ride into base camp.

And this is where it all began to unravel. After a hushed conference amongst the guides, news came that the scheduled helicopter ride was off and that we would be travelling by road to a drop-off point, from which we would walk in to Base Camp. This development was greeted with mixed feelings as the excitement of a first helicopter ride for most of us fizzled with the admission that it was a bit of a cop-out anyway and that real mountaineers, in search of a proper dose of suffering and misery, trekked to the base of their peak.

That we were to set off at sunset should have been a clue to the night of drama that lay before us. An hour of nervous twilight circumnavigation behind tinted windows preceded nightfall, when it appeared safe enough to disgorge our bewildered group at the army barracks on the edge of the jungle. Boarding the
staff bus commandeered for the night, we paid close attention to the tersely issued instructions of our armed military escort regarding behaviour at checkpoints: lie down and be quiet.

A change of vehicle at the police barracks on the mine and the addition of reflective jackets and hardhats completed our disguise as mine employees.

Over the next ninety minutes it would have been easy to imagine that we had stumbled onto the set of a science fiction movie. The mine operates continuously and we jiggled our way past the guts of its operations and through the maze of its underground tunnels in awed silence, occasionally dwarfed by giant tipper trucks filled with ore, their tyres a full storey high.

Altimeters indicated an ascent of almost 3,700 metres and this considerable altitude gain was confirmed by popping ears and mild headaches all round. But our excitement was short-lived when, finding the road blocked by a cluster of vehicles and mine personnel, our driver retreated hastily without explanation. Confusion turned to dejection as we returned to the police barracks to learn that a landslide and resultant accident had drawn the attention of mine management and that it would take some time to clear. How long, no-one could tell, but we would have to return to Timika and review our options from there.

Not from first world, five star comfort of the Sheraton, it transpired, but from the grotesquely pink confines of a small village motel.

A nap, shower and several beers later, the anxious and exhausted team received news that the landslide had been cleared and the logistics were in place for a replay of the previous night’s proceedings. This time, we knew the drill, and the sense of adventure and excitement that we had felt 24 hours before gave way to nervous anticipation of another “unofficial” journey ahead. It was doubtful that a third chance would follow failure this time.

Our second passage through mine property was completed efficiently and, some-
where around midnight, we were hurriedly deposited, together with our gear, at the base of a giant slag heap that marked the border of the mine and the Lorentz National Park. We established camp a short way down the hill, beneath Zebra Wall, a beautiful, overhanging rock named for its patterns formed by the constant flow of water to its base 20 metres below. Jostling for the driest section of bog on which to pitch our tents, we settled down to a fitful slumber, the insomnia of high altitude camping encouraged by irregular drips of water from the wall above and the rasping snores of one team mate in particular.

The morning was heralded by an icy droplet to the head. Everything was damp, but it was hard to stay miserable as the sun hit the tent and the sound of boiling water on the gas stove indicated an imminent cup of tea. We were greeted by breathtaking scenery under sparkling sunshine and clear blue skies (a rarity in this corner of the world, as we were to discover over the course of the expedition) and the angst and fatigue of the previous two nights quickly disappeared.

A three-hour trek along a rocky path and up narrow, stony gullies brought us to Base Camp, established beside one of the icy aqua glacial lakes fed by the rapidly diminishing Meren Glacier that perches upon the neighbouring peak of Ngga Pulu. A plaque nearby in remembrance of three Indonesian students who went missing, presumed eaten, presented a bleak reminder of the culinary preferences of a certain tribe in whose domain we were trespassing.

As with most mountain expeditions, much attention is focussed on the weather, particularly the forecast for summit day. Rarely the case on other mountains, the weather on Carstensz is completely predictable. At the very least, it will rain and you will get wet. It may even snow, in which case you will get both wet and very cold. Nonetheless, we hoped we would be wrong on both counts when we were greeted by a clear and starry sky in windless conditions as we slid from our tents on summit morning.

Setting off at 3am, the team trudged through the darkness, headlamps lighting the way, the silence broken by the occasional breathless curse issued amid the jangling of jumars and carabiners. We located the start of the fixed rope on the first pitch and, in single file, hauled our way over the bulging rock and headed upwards, a pair of gardening gloves offering protection from the razor-like surfaces of the mountain’s limestone face.

Several hours later, the sun made its welcome appearance, enveloping us in warmth and beauty as the glowing hues of dawn reflected off the nearby icecaps, the constant workings of the mine the only blight on the horizon.

The nine to ten roped pitches were broken by a few less vertical scrambles and loose scree slopes and, with a laboured but steady pace, we found ourselves at the base of the final challenge before reaching the summit ridge: a vertical and seemingly featureless wall of limestone of thirty metres. Worse still, the enormity of the next hurdle was, as the notched summit ridge came into view. Having our way up the final pitch, we had all looked forward to topping out on the relatively horizontal summit ridge, in the misguided belief that the hard work had been done. It came as a nasty surprise then that the challenges that lay before us would push us beyond the boundaries and comfort zones of novice climbers.

The first obstacle is a 10 metre wide chasm over a dining room table-sized plateau some 15 metres below. It is crossed by pulling oneself across a Tyrolean traverse that was recently rigged as an alternative to abseiling onto this plateau and juming up the other side, an option that is time-consuming and considerably more dangerous. It is not, however, for the faint-hearted and all witty banter evaporated as each team member took their turn at the edge of the abyss, nervously eyeing the 400 metre drop into the thick jungle at the base of the south face.

A slightly more subdued group advanced upwards, clinging to the safety line, its slackness offering no comfort as we carefully picked our way along the exposed path towards the final challenge: the crossing of a small pinnacle of rock seemingly suspended in mid-air, placed firmly in the path of summit glory.

A series of inelegant moves, interspersed with some equally inelegant language, and I was across. Some final heaving up the short last pitch and, at last, the summit rounded into view, colourfully strewn with the debris of previous successes.

A summit always evokes a variety of strong emotions: exhausted euphoria of success after struggle, relief at not having failed, kinship with one’s team mates, but this time, unlike the other ones, the anxiety of the return journey weighed as heavily as the storm clouds rolling in. With just enough time for a few proud summit photos, the team clipped on to the safety line and commenced a careful descent amid the first flurry of snowfall.

Hours later, after seemingly interminable slippery abseils on icy ropes, a jumble of body parts in shredded gortex and sodden boots stumbled into Base Camp. Peeling off my tattered summit gear, I crawled into my sleeping bag with a steaming cup of tea, the rigours of the day fading further with every sip, content in the knowledge that palm trees and pool-side cocktails were only a day away. Landslides and logistics permitting, of course.

Irian Jaya continues to live up to its reputation as a volatile and frustratingly unreliable destination for mountaineers. In November 2007, shortly after our return, Timika was closed to foreigners after tribal tension became violent following the death of a former local police chief, placing an American expedition in jeopardy.

In December 2007, a group of climbers attempted to access the mountain illegally, hiking in with no permits and leaving through the mine, resulting in arrest by Grasberg personnel. Another group trying to access Carstensz via the seemingly predominant "unofficial" passage through the mine, being smuggled through by the military, was stopped by mine officials and had their kit confiscated.

The resultant storm cloud over access has led one American-based guiding company to cancel its Carstensz expeditions for now. However, it seems that progress is being made towards the re-opening of a trekking route to Base Camp. The trek from Iлага has been largely replaced by a shorter trek from Sugapa, which is a four day hike to Base Camp. In addition, missionaries are in the process of constructing an airfield at a village located two day’s hike from Base Camp, so this will hopefully be the preferred access for future expeditions.