

Caged Rabbits: An introduction to the art of sandbagging*

Mark Colyvan

I was interested to read Greg Pritchard's articles 'Civilised Lands' in past issues of your magazine. In general, I think he gave a good overview of places of interest and tips for an overseas visitor on a climbing holiday to Australia. He failed, however, to warn visitors of the Australian pastime of sandbagging (which, I might add, Mr. Pritchard is a deft exponent of himself). I don't know what state sandbagging has reached in your country but in Australia it has become a refined art form. It is for this reason that I feel compelled to write this article, so as to warn otherwise unsuspecting English climbers of the possible pitfalls (or perhaps ground-falls would be more appropriate here) they may face on an Australian holiday. Firstly, an outline of what sandbagging is.

The basic aim of the game is for the bagger to get an unsuspecting victim (also known as a baggee or sometimes a bunny) to do a climb (which, in the context of the game, is known as "the bag") which they (the baggee) will not enjoy for one or a combination of three basic reasons. The first is that the climb may be positively dangerous, either loose and/or unprotected. Secondly, the climb may be much harder than either the grade or appearances indicate. Thirdly, the climb may be simply repulsive; for example, it might look like a nice diagonal layback flake and yet turn out to be a smooth flared overhanging off-width. The baggee, naturally enough, has a really miserable time and of course this gives the bagger great delight—in perfect accord with Toadie's Law of the Conservation of Happiness ("happiness can be neither created nor destroyed").

Now, different baggers operate with different emphasis on each of the three basic bagging criteria, and have as their goal different levels of baggee misery. For example, there are those extremists, operating largely on criterion one, who are not completely happy unless they have witnessed a ground-fall from a reasonable height, in which case, if you are the baggee, your Australian holiday may consist of a few weeks in traction in Natimuk Bush Nursing Hospital. As it turns out, however, criterion one is the one that should concern English visitors the least, as your idea of "a good route", from what I can gather, corresponds roughly with the Australian idea of an unprotected horror show. I should mention here that baggers' ethics require that the climb in question has been led by the bagger at some stage, although be warned: there are unscrupulous baggers around!

Amongst the ethical baggers, a favourite ploy is the "party-piece" routine. Typically this involves recommending a climb which has a trick to it (such as a secret hold) and so seems much harder than the grade would suggest. When the trick in question is known it makes the climb significantly easier. The bagger, of course, knows the trick, while the baggee, of course, does not. The rest of the story is obvious: the baggee fails on the climb and gets depressed, the bagger then demonstrates how it is done, making it appear childishly simple. This makes the baggee even more depressed, while the bagger can barely contain his or her delight.

Any new-comers to an area (especially overseas visitors) are particularly susceptible to bagging, as new-comers

usually rely on a friendly local to show them around and to put them onto a couple of classics. Don't take such courtesies for granted in Australia! I remember one Japanese climber who could barely speak English coming over to our campfire at Araplies one night and poking a guidebook and pen out of the darkness to one of us and said: "you tick?". He apparently wanted someone to tick recommended routes for him. Scott, who had managed to grab the guidebook and pen before anyone else, asked the Japanese climber what grades he wanted to climb, and the Japanese climber replied "sixteen to twenty five". Of course at this stage I was desperately trying to snatch the guidebook and pen from Scott but he had a vice-like grip on them. Situations like this are what all baggers dream of, although personally I find more satisfaction in a challenge.

Those most at risk from baggers are not so much the top climbers—their idea of an Australian holiday usually just consists of hanging off *Punks in the Gym* for a month or so, or until they get a suntan, then return home. It's the middle- to upper-grade climbers that baggers mostly prey on, since this is the group that most baggers themselves belong to. The reason being that most good climbers are too busy getting good to concern themselves with learning how to bag, and baggers are too busy bagging to bother about getting good. It is necessary, however, for baggers to have a certain level of competence in order to fully enjoy their bagging (or at least they must have a good repertoire of party pieces).

It may be that sandbagging has reached the same heights (or sunk to the same depths, some uncharitable types might say) in your country as in mine, in which case all of this is old news. In case it's not, though, or for those who have not encountered a bagger before, here are a few catch phrases baggers usually use when in the act of "selling a bag", and which you should be on the lookout for: "It's a classic"; "It might *look* like an off-width but you can face climb around it"; "It's just your style"; "You can't see the bolts from the ground"; "It's easier for someone your height"; I know it *looks* like a big loose block but ..."; "Don't worry about putting runners in, you'll only tire yourself out and it gets easier towards the top"; "You should go to Kaputar".

Now one question remains: why should a self-confessed bagger such as myself be giving away trade secrets to a bunch of foreigners? The answer to this is simple. As I said earlier, I enjoy a challenge. Bagging someone who knows they are being bagged is the essence of it for me. After all, anyone can shoot caged rabbits, but where's the fun it?

Biographical Details: Mark Colyvan is one of Australia's leading baggers. He has edited a number of guidebooks, none of which sells due to the total lack of reliable, factual information found in them. His local crag, Kaputar, is almost never frequented by outsiders, partly because it has been compared to a vertical gravel road and partly out of respect to his reputation as a bagger.

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