

The Locals Love to Jig: A baggee's guide to New England climbing*

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The recent publication of a couple of guidebooks to some of the many crags around Armidale (in the New England area of northern New South Wales) has resulted in a bit of interest from out-of-towners. (So far guides have been published on Dome Wall and Moonbi, arguably the best two crags in the district.) This article aims to give a bit of inside information on some of the climbs and, hopefully, entice some new blood (and splintered bone) to the area. Fortunately, however, from your point of view as baggees and potential baggees, Armidale is a very good place to be—there are no scary routes and everything is fairly graded (particularly if you are in the back bar of the Wicklow Hotel). This, naturally enough, makes my job as bagger very difficult; however, I'll do my best.

Coming from the south, your first port of call should be Moonbi, in the heart of chicken country, where you can visit the Big Chook (the local tourist attraction) and then go climbing on Ant-eater Buttress—superb granite slabs about five minutes drive from the Big Chook. Although a fairly limited area, it is infested with quality routes such as *Cock and Pullet* (17), *Snakeskin Flake* (13), *Head Over Heels* (20) and *Buck Buck Bacaw* (21)—and not even a sniff of a bag, as there are just so many bolts you get sick of clipping them. Take, for example, *Slow Fade* (22), often referred to a “The Big Chook Slide” (get it while it's still 22). With 11 bolts in one pitch, it looks more like an ad for BBC hardware than a climb. Just clip the first one with a stick then pad your way up the slab past nine more to a comfy little bolt belay. Another route you won't get scared on, unfortunately, is *New Romantic* (21), with six bolts and chains on top and, again, fantastic padding up a featureless black slab. You may get a little concerned on the sister route *Fashion Conscious* (22); a few people do, but they are usually the nervous types anyway. I can remember one self-confessed traumatophobic (a person who has an unnatural fear of slamming into rock platforms at high speed) looking ill at ease as he shook and bicycle-pedalled his way up this route. He managed to complete the route and then suggested that it was overgraded because someone like him could do it.

Having ticked everything at Moonbi, move on to Dome Wall—undoubtedly New England's most popular cliff with 70 climbs of all grades and

styles, and too many good ones to possibly mention here (buy the guide!). In the crack department, *Bang Bang* (21) is a must—an elegant diagonal finger-crack across a low-angle wall to a chain belay. Also worth doing is *The Gremlin* (21), a two pitch route. The first is an undercling/layback flake out to a stance on an arete; the second, up the arete past a couple of bolts to a belay chain on top. Nearby is *Post Modern*, one of the first bolt-protected face climbs to be done at Dome Wall. Consequently, it had a bit of a reputation, especially after hurling Al Stephens into the nearby off-width *Conditional Discharge*—the only thing between him and a 60 footer . . . but no . . . what am I saying? He jumped! They all do. Anyway that's all water under the bridge now. As a local recently said to a visitor, “it's a classic and you should do it”.

Visitor: “But will I get scared?”

Local: “No, it's an old route; you know, soft touch 21. Evan Bieske's done it.” (A lie)

Visitor: “What will I need?”

Local: “A six hex and two RP, that's all.” (Another lie)

Visitor: “OK.”

Local: (Does Baggers Jig¹)

Unfortunately, it doesn't happen like that very often. It's been a very hard bag to sell since Giles Bradbury had his little accident on it. So hard in fact that before he would even put his harness on, I had to buy Animal a pizza and a dozen cans and agree to write a letter of explanation to his mum, should anything happen.

That's enough about Dome Wall; I've said too much already. Other nearby cliffs worth looking at are Reality Wall, where *Iron in the Soul* (21) and *Rant and Rave* (23) are the best routes, and the Persian Carpets where there are many good routes, the best of which is probably the sustained two-pitch slab route *Wolf Tracks* (22) (often mistakenly called “Bagger's Delight”).

So, if you're heading up New England way, I'm sure you'll find plenty to amuse yourself and, more importantly, the locals. In fact, it's not a bad idea to get hold of a local or two. Firstly, to make sure that, despite having the guide, you don't accidentally stumble across a good, well-protected climb and, secondly, because the locals love to jig and they don't get nearly enough opportunity these days.

¹The little dance of joy a bagger does when the bag has been bought.

*From *Rock*, 1988, pp. 17–18.