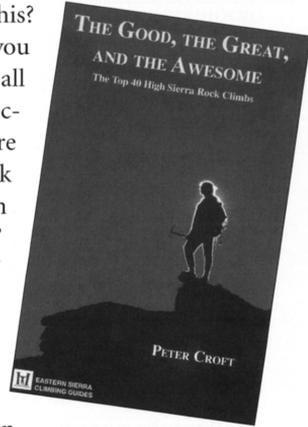


The Good, the Great, and the Awesome: The Top 40 High Sierra Rock Climbs. PETER CROFT. MAMMOTH LAKES, CA: MAXIMUS PRESS, 2002. 243 PAGES. \$30.00.

How would you feel, having invested in a guidebook, reading in it this? “Above looms THE corner. If you or your partner are getting whiney you better go down now, this is no place for wusses! Otherwise, remove all jewelry, roll up your sleeves and launch off into the crux.” Or, as a recommendation for predawn starts: “You’re all by yourself, the stars are out, and you get to see those nocturnal critters with the glow in the dark eyes that scare the crap out of you.” Or “Climb fast! If you get down early you get to have french fries and beer at the Whitney Portal Café.” My reaction to such playfulness depends on the author’s knowledge of his mountains and the accuracy of the information he provides. The author being the foremost climber of these mountains—the Sierra Nevada—I feel I’ve gotten expertise, an evocation of the Sierra’s beauty, and a celebration of being in the Sierra. Peter Croft’s *The Good, the Great, and the Awesome* is sold as a guidebook, and is an authoritative, informative guidebook, but what I believe it really to be is a celebration.



I admit the price caused sticker shock; 75 cents a route must be a record. But this must be the first guidebook to real mountains whose author knows all the routes firsthand. And some of the routes are traverses of as many as 16 peaks (Minarets), which would be 32 routes in a normal guide. Plus the book is loaded with photos—the preponderance by Croft’s close friend Galen Rowell—maps, and topos. While no more than halfway up the scale of guidebookiness on which the Ortenburger/Jackson/Secor/Yours-Truly type of scholarly tome sets the (dubious) standard, the route descriptions are as detailed, accurate, and helpful. Croft’s prose may be more informative than conventional guidebookese, as when he mentions the possibility, on Mt. Russell’s Fishhook Arête, of going up left, then back right: “This is what I did and it was the only part of the route that I didn’t like. Everyone else that I’ve talked to says that straight up the arête is the way to go.”

The Good, the Great, and the Awesome stands apart for its author’s original thinking. Croft bases his selection of routes and his recommendations (* = good, ** = great, *** = awesome) on his own experience, not on the traditional Sierra canon. A Croft innovation is that he rates routes according to how difficult he found them. Secor seems to have taken ratings from Roper, Roper from Voge. Voge was faced with Norman Clyde’s proclivity for soloing, in hobnailed boots, up to what we now call 5.6. Class 4, Croft warns, is “a grade to watch out for.” He has encountered “up to 5.8 climbing on ‘class 4’ routes” and does some upgrading. Not even your summit snack escapes his unrestrained scrutiny. He recommends “the type of food you would eat at home,” likening gorp to the Halloween candy your parents warned you not to devour en masse and, when you did, gave you a bellyache. “Environmental Concerns” is not the usual 100 feet from this and 200 feet from that, and does not contain the phrase “fragile ecosystem.” It is a multiple-choice quiz, with you imagining yourself camped in your in-laws’ backyard. (Would you admire the flowerbed by (a) tromping through it in lug-soled boots or (b) viewing it from the porch and complimenting “Dad” on his green thumb?)

A man who treats a traverse of nine Palisades peaks or nine Evolution peaks as one route, who solos three IVs and a V on Temple Crag—in a day—can’t be expected to smell the prover-

bial flowers. Then what is Mt. Agassiz's class 2 Northwest Slope doing with two stars? "Although I meant to only include technical routes...I just couldn't blow this one off... The hike...is famously beautiful and, after an easy scramble to the top, the views are just jaw dropping." Also included are two class 3 routes—the East Ridge of Mt. Russell and the East Face of Middle Palisade. "I think that Middle Pal is perhaps a bit prouder. It may be an intimidating sight from miles away but when you get there...it's even worse."

Don't worry that a man who covers as much ground as Croft expects you to do climbs car-to-car in a day. Each route description comes with the approach's mileage and uphill component ("5 miles, 3 on good trail, 1 on easy X-country, 1 on rough X-country; 2,200 ft. of elevation gain")ædata that lets you to decide for yourself, with no subliminal prodding, whether to camp or go for it in a day.

I got the sense throughout that Croft finds the Sierra beautiful, but when I searched for a passage as an example, the best I could find was "long sweeping buttresses and arêtes, swarming with face holds and studded with sudden sharp pinnacles and airy notches" (Temple Crag). Perhaps describing beauty outside the context of humans rambling through the mountains is not possible, since the only language available is that of postcard clichés. That the guy notices so much during his rambles says enough.

G, G, & A will influence my guidebook-writing; I hadn't realized how much joy it is permissible to impart. I'll never again find myself writing, "Follow the crack for 130 feet and step left," without thinking, "I remember it being more fun than that." But it is Croft's stature as a climber that allows him to be playful. If I wrote the following, people would think I was writing a parody: "Originally they called the route [Whitney's East Buttress] Peewee, which just happens to be the name of my dog. Without getting overly misty about it, I think it's a really good name." If playful is the right word: "You end up groping for fist jams behind a big detached block that PROBABLY won't fall off."

I winter in Bishop but head to Jackson Hole around June 1, intending to return by October 1 but habitually finding Wyoming's Indian summer irresistible. The highest compliment I can pay G, G, & A is that it has me contemplating migrating west earlier, or even forsaking Wyoming for a week in summer, to try a few Awesomes that aren't feasible when days are short and cold or approaches are snow slogs.

JOE KELSEY, AAC

Under the Midnight Sun: The Ascent of John Denver Peak and the Search for the Northernmost Point of Land on Earth. JOHN JANCIK, STEVE GARDINER, JAVANA M. RICHARDSON. *Colorado: Stars End Creations, 2003.* 200 PAGES, 126 COLOR PHOTOS, 4 BW PHOTOS. \$29.95.

Under the Midnight Sun chronicles two expeditions by largely identical teams to find the northernmost point of land in the world and to summit unclimbed peaks in North Peary Land at the northern tip of Greenland.

The 1996 expedition sought to cross the undulating sea ice on foot and reach Oodaaq Island, a small island about 2.3 miles north of the coast believed to be the northernmost point of land in the world. Though it sounds like an easy enough proposition, Oodaaq is a 2,600-square-foot island only three feet above the mean sea level. It is easily lost among the pack ice's pressure ridges of greater height. The converging longitudinal lines this far north play with the