



THE LADY OF THE LAMP

She's taken the Olympic torch underwater across the Great Barrier Reef; now relay organiser Di Henry plans to take the flame to the top of the world. By *Glenda Korporaal*.

Photography Philip Gostelow

Ain't no mountain high enough: Di Henry, pictured in Beijing's historic Hutong district, with one of the safety lanterns that will house the Olympic flame. This year's Games bring new challenges, such as vast distances, crowd control, potential flooding and the summit of Mt Everest.

Di Henry can still remember holding her breath as she watched the Opening Ceremony of the Sydney Olympics on the night of September 15, 2000. “It was very emotional for me to watch the torch come into the stadium after all the time [we spent] on the torch relay,” recalls Henry, who masterminded the organisation of the Sydney event.

The passage of the torch through the stadium, from one of Australia’s top female Olympians to another, took much longer than planned as the six sportswomen became swept up in the emotion of it all and hugged each other at the changeovers. By the time Debbie Flintoff-King had handed the torch to Cathy Freeman, Henry was on the edge of her seat in the stadium. She knew exactly how long the fuel in the torch would burn, that the world was watching and the torch was about to go out: “We had our hearts in our mouths because we knew there were only a couple of seconds of gas left. We could see the flame dying as Cathy put it into the ring just in time.”

Today, Henry is advising the 2008 Beijing Games organisers on their epic 130-day torch relay. She will have cause to hold her breath yet again as the Chinese Olympic torch makes its historic passage to the summit of Mt Everest (or Mt Qomolangma as the Chinese call it), fulfilling a promise made by China when it was awarded the Olympics in 2001.

Taking the torch up the Tibetan side of the world’s highest mountain, part of Chinese territory, is the ambitious goal of organisers of the relay, which officially begins with the lighting of the Olympic flame in the ancient Greek city of Olympia on March 24. “It’s challenging but if anyone can do it, the Chinese can,” says Henry, who has carved out a successful – albeit unusual – career as an organiser of torch and baton relays. The Beijing Games are her seventh such project.

Henry and the four other Australians in her team are among a handful of foreigners hired by the organisers of this year’s Olympics, which will open with the lighting of the cauldron in Beijing’s National Stadium on August 8. The 2008 relay will be the longest and most complex of any Olympic torch relay, with almost 22,000 bearers carrying the torch in 134 cities. It will travel through 19 different cities on every continent (including Canberra on April 24) before its 97-day journey through all 31 Chinese provinces, autonomous regions and Special Administrative Regions.

Henry will be there when the flame is lit at the historic ceremony in Olympia, just as she was in 2000 for the lighting of the flame for the Sydney Olympic torch. Then, on March 30, when the Chinese officially receive the Olympic flame in Athens, Henry will be among the group on a chartered Air China jet carrying eight safety lanterns bearing the Olympic flame to the Chinese capital. One will head out the next day to the other continents, leaving Beijing for Almaty in Kazakhstan, and thence to Istanbul, St Petersburg, London, Paris and 14 other cities on its way back to China. The domestic leg of the relay begins in the the resort town of Sanya on Hainan Island in early May.



The baton stops here: Henry (centre) is one of five Australians plotting the 2008 Olympics torch relay from an office in Beijing. This year’s 130-day relay is the most complex yet, involving 22,000 bearers, Tibetan mountaineering experts and meteorologists.

Another three lanterns will stay with the relay as back-ups, lit with the “mother flame” to ensure the original Olympic flame will arrive at the Opening Ceremony. The remaining four lanterns will be taken to the Everest base camp and kept there safely while four different climbing teams await the best moment for the historic ascent. Henry expects this to be some time in May, when she will be on the road with the torch relay in southern China. “When it is good to go we will stop the action on the torch relay to allow the climbers to make the ascent,” she explains. “Only one Olympic torch is lit at any one time.”

Just one of the four mountaineering teams will go to the summit. The first team to get closest will be the one chosen to take the flame on its final leg. “The torch will be taken to the top of Mt Everest by one climber, where it will be exchanged and another person will bring it back down the other side,” says Henry.

The Chinese have a team of more than 100, including Tibetan mountaineering experts and meteorologists, working on the complex plans needed to take the torch to the top. Apart from the physical challenge of the climb, relay organisers must cope with extreme physical conditions such as low temperature, low oxygen and air pressure, and strong winds – as well as China Central Television broadcasting the whole thing live. Nothing is being left to chance. A test run of the Everest climb was held last May but success all depends on the day – the lighting of the Sydney cauldron was timed and rehearsed but on the night things didn’t follow the script.

Eight years ago, a less-experienced Henry was cutting her teeth on her first Olympic torch relay. She was hired as a result of her extensive

event-management experience. She’d had stints as artistic director of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras; events manager of the Royal Agricultural Society, which stages the Royal Easter Show in Sydney; and events manager for the City of Sydney Council. Her expertise in staging parades was what brought her to the attention of another Olympic “gypsy”, director of ceremonies for the Sydney Olympics, Ric Birch.

Henry had decided not to be involved in another parade but that was before Birch stepped in, and of course the Olympic torch relay is the parade to end all others. Henry was hired and started in time to assist on preparations for the 1996 Atlanta Games and torch relay.

The Sydney 2000 relay fulfilled Australia’s pledge to involve the nations of Oceania in its Games. After leaving Greece with the flame, Henry went island hopping with the torch across to the participating nations of the Pacific (overflying the coup in Fiji) before it flew from New Zealand to start its Australian journey from Uluru.

She broke new ground when she arranged for the 2000 torch to be carried underwater across the Great Barrier Reef. Taking the Beijing torch to the summit of Mt Everest is the only trick in her arsenal to top that. “We’ve taken it from under the water to the top of the world,” she laughs.

After the Sydney Olympics, Henry and several other veterans of the event were hired to help with the relay for the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester. “That was fantastic to work on,” she says. “They were such easygoing people. It wasn’t a capital city so they didn’t have politicians breathing down their necks.” And being a baton relay made it easier as there was no flame to worry about.

Afterwards, Henry worked on the True »

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Blazing a trail: Beijing to Almaty in Kazakhstan is the first leg of a journey that will see the flame travel through 19 cities before arriving in Macau. The 97-day Chinese leg begins in May.

Colours lead-up to the 2003 Rugby World Cup in Sydney – a rugby roadshow that went around Australia for 100 days. Then life became more complex, not to mention peripatetic. Henry and her team (they now operate under the corporate banner of Maxxam International) started work on the baton relay for the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, but before the job was completed she was recruited to work on the torch relay for the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin. Henry moved to Italy, leaving the rest of the team to finish off the plans for the Melbourne relay.

After Turin, she and her team were hired to help organise the torch relay for the 2006 Asian Games in Doha, before moving to Beijing in June that year to join a team of more than 20 Chinese working on the 2008 relay – today that number has grown to more than 160 people.

The five Australians on the team work from the headquarters of the Beijing Olympics organisers in the city's Haidian District. All are foreign experts – advisers to the Chinese Olympics organisers, who are determined to conduct these Games their way. Henry keeps out of the politics. Plans for the torch to go to Taipei were scrapped after organisers on both sides could not agree on the details. The original plan was for the torch to travel through Taipei before going on to Hong Kong and Macau, then mainland China.

But the Taiwanese balked, saying the timing made it look as if Taiwan was part of China.

“Each relay has its challenges,” says Henry. “You have the building blocks, but these can be put together very differently. There are cultural sensitivities and norms you have to put around them.” In Italy, for example, where everyone loves food, the relay team had to have three-course meals every day. Part of the planning involved checking out where everyone would have lunch. And there were problems getting large convoys down the narrow Italian streets. In Muslim Doha, there had to be stops for prayer.

Henry says the Chinese torch relay will be challenging because of the huge distances involved. “In Australia [for the Sydney Olympics] we hugged the coast, with a few regional visits, but in China there are so many large cities. It’s about finding the smartest logistics to get to these places. There’ll be a lot of flying – more than 20 plane legs are planned for inside China alone.”

She adds that the roads in some remote areas of China could be difficult. There’s also the prospect of flooding during the time scheduled for the torch’s trip around the southern provinces. Crowd control is another issue, given the huge numbers of people in China and mounting excitement about the Games.

It was Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Australia

in 1977 that triggered Henry’s love of parades. She vividly recalls lining up to see Her Majesty in Sydney. “I love the festivities and the pomp and ceremony,” she says. “It’s all about people coming out for something significant and enjoying themselves. With a parade, you have to get involved. You are engaged. It’s about participation, which is missing a little from our daily lives. With torch relays, there’s nothing as much fun as driving behind the torchbearer and seeing the look of delight on the faces of the little kids – they’re all beaming,” says Henry, whose nirvana would be Carnivale in Rio de Janeiro.

She admits to bracing herself for a tough journey with the Beijing torch. “After 97 days going around China, I’ll be looking pretty ragged. I may even have learned Chinese by the end of it,” she jokes. But she knows the ups and downs of the process. “The second time you do it, you know what’s around the corner so it’s easier. You try to assure people everything will be all right.”

Post-Beijing, she has no definite plans. Henry and her staff are just some of the scores of games and events management professionals who move around the world from one major event to the next. There are plenty of big events looming, including Olympic, Commonwealth and Asian games. “Hopefully,” Henry says, “someone will let us come and play.”

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