

DON'T LOOK DOWN...

When desperate times call for desperate measures, **Alice Hansen** takes a leap south

At any cross roads, a good friend will sit by your side and tell you 'the only way is up'. I'm telling you, the best way is straight down. I had been suffering a serious case of writer's block for months – not fun when income is attached to hitting creative pen to paper. Finally, I found myself in a desperate state: I couldn't keep going like this. Not if I didn't want to spend the rest of my days living on noodles.

My invitation back into the land of the living begins with a small hand gesture.

Tap tap, goes his hand on the rail, followed by a very casual, "up you hop." It is as relaxed as a Blackjack player tapping the table for another card but it signals something far more ominous.

I look down at the rain-splattered rail and wonder, again, why the hell I'd thought this was the answer. In the sideways misty rain of south-western Tasmania, my new-found mate – a Kiwi instructor with impenetrably dark sunglasses – is asking me to literally swing a leg over a near-shoulder-high guard rail at the Gordon Dam.

My next task? To abseil 140 metres down the world's highest commercial abseil. It's a few metres higher than standing atop Sydney Harbour Bridge, and holds back 50 times the amount of water than the harbour itself.

Moments earlier, I'd watched an American boldly climb over the rail. Moments before that, he'd shared the story of his fight with a shark in the waters off Mexico, in which he lost half his calf – I'd reckoned the Gordon Dam Abseil would be a walk in the park for him. But as I bid him farewell and he went over the edge, the fear in his eyes was like nothing I'd ever seen. Giant round saucers stared ahead, a mix of focus and fear, as expletives flew. Then... he was gone.

For some reason, I feel compelled to declare that I won't dare swear. I step up.

Significant instructions of how to release the rope in my right hand on descent are met with my nervous but misinterpreted nod: they think I'm ready to do this. All of a sudden I'm on the wrong side of the rail. Then I do something incredibly foolish: I tilt my head southward.

"The one thing you mustn't do is look down," one of the instructors, a young Scottish girl, had warned as I climbed over. As for the promise of not swearing... the Gordon Dam has suddenly become the best amphitheatre for every bad word I can muster.

My lovely New Zealand pal is telling me to take my feet off the wall. Sitting in mid-air 140 metres up, staring at an 11-millimetre thick 'life line,' I reach a new point where even naughty words can't pass my lips. I fall silent with terror.

I'd heard one lady had completed the journey from top to bottom with her eyes closed. Apparently she was terrified of heights (can't understand why). As I cinch my way down, centimetres at a time with my eyes on the wall, her method suddenly seems quite appealing.

But the moment I clench them shut, a cheery, "ah, look! You're spinning around," comes from above. "Take a look at the glorious view." I open one eye and to my distress, see that I have full view of just how horrifically high up I am. Yes, the view is spectacular – rocks... trees... water and stuff... but I am focused on survival.

By this stage I am so terrified that my hands are shaking uncontrollably, unable to control my speed – I have to rely on my mate upstairs for that. He seems to be enjoying my shrieks as he gently controls my descent. Because of the curvature of the dam, I'm dangling about 15 metres out from the wall. It's a lonely life midway down... and eerily silent.

It's amazing what goes through your

mind at times like this. I am soaked to my skin. I am near tears. I start imagining that I'm an ambulance officer, forced to do this to save someone's life. It makes more sense to be suspended from a life-ending height for some better purpose.

But while the weather and dread is bleak, it is equally beautiful. This is the south-west in one of her wildest moods – a mix of relentless rain, unforgiving cold and foreboding fog. As the rope decides to spin me round again, revealing the breathtaking panorama, I realise this moment is incredibly special.

I look out to the craggy cliffs, the dense forest, look up to the encouraging instructors, and I feel a sense of pride. I've accomplished something. I am in careful, trusted, safe hands. I have conquered fear. It is time to enjoy the journey.

And it is spectacular. For a moment, I breathe in some of the freshest air on the planet. For a moment, I absorb the beauty of the surrounds, and the manmade commitment to this region. For a moment, I feel more alive than I've felt in years. For a moment... hell, I am still far too high to survive if the rope falls short.

But when I do finally touch down there is that American, still as wide-eyed as I'd left him up top but this time with a sense of rush and bewilderment. We would have had a congratulatory handshake, but contact is difficult when your hands are still shaking so immensely you can't unhook yourself from the soggy, nappy-type contraption we're both still wearing.

Was it worth the guide-rail leap? More than anything. Would I be caught climbing it again? Not likely. But one thing is for sure – those 11 millimetres of rope will send you on a journey that will test your spirit, challenge your courage, and leave you buoyed with the knowledge that you can tackle anything... even a blank page. ■



Scaling Gordon Dam wall



Abseilers preparing for the 140-metre plunge

The Details

Getting there

Allow one day for the abseil. The drive from central Hobart to south-west Tasmania takes approximately 2.5 hours each way (the drive is exquisite and is included in the cost). But if time is limited a helicopter can be chartered taking approximately 45 minutes each way. rotorlift.com.au

Need to know

Aardvark Adventures is the only company that operate abseils from Gordon Dam. The cost is \$210 per person and includes guides, ropes, equipment, safety gear, insurance, photography package and a certificate to prove your bravery. Bring warm clothes as weather can become moody in the south-west wilderness. Trips run all year round and require a minimum of just two people in order to go ahead. aardvarkadventures.com.au

Hot tip

Lake Pedder is well worth a visit en route. To walk around this once glacial lake and pink quartz beach has been described as 'walking with the gods'. Protests erupted worldwide when the lake was flooded to create a hydro-electric scheme but it's still very beautiful.