

A head for sights

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Climbing: the Harbour Bridge climb is open every day except December 30 and 31. Choose a dawn, daytime, twilight or night climb. From \$179 for an adult, \$109 for a child aged 10-16. There's also the the Discovery climb, launched in 2006, which takes climbers to the heart of the bridge using a catwalk and stairwells previously open only for maintenance. As well as climbing to the summit, climbers will see the spot where the arch was joined.

more > www.bridgeclimb.com



Royal highness: Princess Mary and Crown Prince Frederick.

Vertigo doesn't deter Rachael Oakes-Ash from a big Sydney adventure

» world winner

WE HAVE a birthday philosophy in my family. Well, I do. Birthday presents must be shared experiences, which is why I'm taking my 14-year-old niece, Ashleigh, on the Sydney Harbour Bridge climb.

I'm sure she'd probably prefer the latest shade of lipstick or a fetching frock, but I know what adventure travel can do for a teenage girl wrestling with value systems, body image and peer pressures.

The Sydney Harbour Bridge Climb is 10 years old and since its launch two million people have completed what the company calls "the climb of their lives".

Make that two million and two. It was a wise move, allowing folk to climb one of the world's icons over the world's most recognisable harbour and Opera House.

The climb takes three hours, and it is 1439 steps to the crest. If Crown Prince Frederick and Princess Mary, Martina Navratilova, Cathy Freeman, Will Ferrell and Kylie can do it, so can I.

But first, I must confess I am a fully fledged acrophobic. I am terrified of heights and suffer severe vertigo when anywhere near a ledge with a free fall. My niece, thankfully, does not, and I warn her I shall be holding on to her for stability should I hyperventilate half way up.

The staff are trained to deal with climbers like me, but still, I make sure I am in the front of the group of 10 because once clipped on to the safety rail, you remain clipped until the end of the climb.

It's the guides who make the trip (well, it sure isn't the fetching grey, all-in-one

jumpsuits we are forced to wear to "blend into" the bridge).

There is nothing else about the bridge, from how many people it took to build it to the number of rivets and the exact shade of grey used to paint it.

We're taken through our paces at the base building, where a mock-up of the climbing ladders helps to settle our nerves and ensure our safety. Then it's game on as we clip in and walk out underneath the bridge, suspended over the Rocks heritage area and under the six-lane highway that takes commuters from north to south.

My niece is loving it and lapping up the view. We're blessed with a stunning blue-sky Sydney Harbour day — not that I'm taking it in as we reach the part of the bridge that goes over the water. I look straight ahead and breathe deeply as my guide talks me through negotiating the metal walkway. I know it's one ladder up and I'll be above the road, where the solid, manmade ground psychologically will make me feel safer, but you try telling my buckling knees that.

The rest of the crew are whooping and hollering, thrilled to be out in the fresh Sydney air above the urban masses, with views to the Blue Mountains and Pacific Ocean.

BREAK through to the roadway on the vertical ladder and feel my fears drop away. Then comes the arch. This is the best bit. It's wide, really wide, so you never feel close to the ledge. For folk like me this is a joy, a walk in the park. I feel like bounding to the top, skipping one, two, three steps at a time, but there is a protocol. Unless I want to be escorted off the bridge by men in white coats, it won't be happening.

It's a genius experience that anyone with moderate fitness and mobility can do, and our group is a mix of ages from six to 60, from New Zealand to Idaho.

Walking across the arch is a highlight. It's hard to believe the workmen on these beams worked without safety harnesses.

Now all I have to do is negotiate that platform at the bottom of the ladder and I'm home. It's far easier the second time and I wonder what I was so fussed about.

Teenage girls are difficult to read, but even I know Ashleigh has had a ball by the smile she is sporting, more long-lasting and attractive than the latest fashion.

Two million and still climbing: (above) celebrating the 10th anniversary of the bridge climb.

Bolted on: (below) the author and her niece in their fetching jumpsuits.



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