

Recharge

ARTS AND LEISURE

Travel

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POSTCARDS
FROM THE
edge

History

A daring jail break revisited in a new exhibition ...page 70

Motoring

Mazda's clever hard top convertible ...page 72



“IT’S WHAT’S BELOW VICTORIA FALLS THAT HOLDS THE MOST APPEAL FOR TOURISTS. MEGA RAPIDS”

Swimming with hippos in Africa or trekking among rebels in India beats five-star safety for those travellers who want a little risk on the side.

EXECUTIVES WEARY OF THEIR DESK-bound lives are seeking an adrenalin rush come holiday time and will pay big money to enter the danger zone.

They are likely to bypass the groomed slopes of Colorado and instead head to Gulmarg in Kashmir to dodge the rebels as they go back country. And why take a leisurely cruise down the Danube when you can hang on to inflated rubber for dear life on the hippo-infested Zambezi?

There are two types of adventure travel, hard and soft, rated on the likelihood of a brush with death: the higher the fatality rate, the harder the adventure. Tramping New Zealand's prehistoric glacial Hollyford Track would be deemed soft despite having to walk 17km in a day. The trek peaks at a mere 141m above sea level and cosy lodges deep in the forest provide hot showers and three-course meals. There isn't even a poisonous snake.

Trekking the army-infested forests of the Congo to hang with the gorillas would be considered hard adventure because the possibility of death by bullet is in the mix, along with death by silverback. Climbing Everest, on the other hand, is considered extreme. Death is a definite possibility, along with the loss of fingers and toes to frostbite.

Perception is reality and no more so than in the world of extreme sports and adventure travel. The perception is that death is waiting at the next rapids, the bottom of the bungee rope, the end of a parachute jump. In reality, reputable adventure tour operations know what they're doing and are well up on safety measures, reducing risks considerably.

Most people baulk at the idea of stepping out of a plane in mid-air and hitting terminal velocity in a free-fall before the chute opens. Yet the fatality rate in the US is one death per 100,000 jumps, or 10 per million. You're

more likely to die while swimming in the US, where in 2004 the drowning rate was 54 per million. You don't get boasting rights in the office on your return for snorkelling in the baby pool, however; you get it for swimming with whale sharks in Western Australia.

Compare this with Everest, where the fatality rate is 3.8 per 100, and you can see the difference between doers and viewers. For \$US65,000, you can climb Everest with Alpine Ascents (www.alpineascents.com), but this doesn't include airfare, personal gear, expensive equipment or medical insurance. That's a lot to spend to experience almost guaranteed alpine trench foot, altitude sickness, wounds that don't heal, frostbite, hypoxia and fatigue, hypothermia and broken bones. All for a few minutes on the summit, if the weather doesn't turn you back before you make it, with no refund.

The appeal of hard-core adventure travel is biologically hardwired. Stimulate the adrenal glands with life-threatening activities and release a mix of hormones such as cortisol and noradrenaline and enjoy a heightened pulse, increased blood flow and finer-tuned physical performance. A rush of adrenalin usually stimulates endorphin activity, which reduces pain by interacting with the brain's opiate receptors and is connected with feelings of euphoria. In a word? It's addictive.

Successful tourist destination marketing has put some towns on the map purely for the endorphin factor. AJ Hackett and Henry van Asch created the first tourist bungee operation in 1988, with a licence to operate for just 30 days from Kawarau Bridge in Queenstown, New Zealand. The pretty town became an adventure tourism epicentre that now services more than a million visitors a year. Queenstown is filled with folk whose pockets have been lined with the proceeds of of bungee jumping, skydiving, jet-boating, and heli-skiing.

South Africa has always been a major adventure tourism

FEAR AND FLYING
Eastern lowland gorilla in Zaire, left, and boarding a helicopter to ski with avalanches in Russia, below



destination for its wildlife alone. Step outside the safari tent and risk being breakfast for a big cat. Slip into the river for a refreshing dip and hope to make it out alive once Africa's biggest killer of humans, the hippo, spots you. If that doesn't raise the hairs on the back of your neck then step inside the great white shark-infested waters of Dyer Island near Cape Town.

For around \$250, bloodthirsty types lower themselves into a submerged cage surrounded by great whites which have been lured in with buckets of blood-laden food (www.white-shark-diving.com). If it's any comfort, the steel bars are guaranteed not to break when these curious giants nudge or ram the cage.

Further north sits the mighty Zambezi River, which runs through six countries from Central Africa to the Indian Ocean. It's home to Victoria Falls, where tourists can bungee jump from the bridge (www.shearwateradventures.com) but it's what is below the river that holds the most appeal for adventure travellers. Mega rapids. Grade-five rapids which, in the world of white-water rafting, are considered the big kahuna.

These turbulent waters are classified just below grade six, which are illegal for commercial rafting. When riding the steep drops, narrow gullies and whirling pools named after The Terminator, you may think grade five is likely to kill you, too. If the crocs don't get you first.

Even gently schussing down a groomed corduroy slope offers different levels of adrenalin. A novice may consider the Friday Flats beginner slopes at Thredbo to be extreme terrain but may think again if witnessing the off-piste action of heli-skiing. This activity in the crisp alpine wilderness of New Zealand's Wanaka Region (www.heliski.nz) costs \$600 to \$900 a day depending on the number of runs. It's beautiful, serene and oh so safe, but if you want extreme heli action, head to Russia or the Himalayas.

Those ahead of the pack are sussing out Caucasus and Kamchatka in Russia (www.vertikalny-mir.com). Heli-ski this volcanic region and find yourself cruising the sky in an old Russian army plane holding on for dear life. Any sport that involves carrying avalanche beacons has got to rate highly on the adrenalin scale. The rewards? Untouched virgin snow and no lift queues.

Then there's Gulmarg in India. With a politically tumultuous history, the area once overrun with gun-toting rebels, Gulmarg's slopes are ungroomed, wild and devoid of crowds, providing serious kudos for those who make the trek to the sub-continent (www.skihimalaya.com). However, the arm graze you come home with may be from metal, not branches.

If your adrenal glands still aren't responding, become the first private tourist to walk in space. Space Adventures (www.spaceadventure.com) offers commercial space flights – for a price. At \$US20m (\$26.60m), the traveller can spend one week at the International Space Station orbiting the Earth (food and board included). For a mere \$US102,000, take a sub-orbital flight for five minutes of weightlessness beyond the edge of space.

The appeal of spending your annual leave tackling the Kokoda Track, the Sydney-to-Hobart race, Mount Kilimanjaro or the Amazon has as much to do with personality type as spending. Extreme adventure travel focuses on goals and requires training, but the many rewards include a great sense of achievement. You can't always get that from the office computer screen. ●

