

Stepping into Space

"The greater the initial terror – the feeling you're going to hit the dirt – the greater the resultant joy when you realise you're going to make it after all!" That from Hamish Emerson, with a mischievous grin, the co-owner behind Queenstown's latest and maddest freefall experience. The Shotover Canyon Swing began life nicknamed "Not Your Average Backyard Variety Swing". At 109 metres above the river, where the participant can reach speeds of nearly 150 kph – this is not your average Queenstown thrill ride either.

Queenstown is becoming synonymous with adrenaline. But what sets Shotover Canyon Swing aside from the rest is not only the intensity of the experience (the highest swing in the world) but the personable, intimate way you are led into terror. After all, it was devised, engineered and now operated by guys passionate about their sport.

The creators of this masterpiece of rope technology were both avid rock climbers. Hamish Emerson and Chris Russell spent years reconnoitring rock faces through every inch of the Wakatipu Basin, climbing, abseiling and swinging – fixing the rope some distance out from the point of departure so that at the last minute its natural arc lifts you away from the rock face.

But when they discovered the Shotover Canyon the question was begging – whether anyone else would have the gall to join them. What followed was a testament to kiwi ingenuity. Three years of hard labour later (they built everything by hand) their gamble has paid off. Visitors are flocking – like lambs to the slaughter.

You do think you're going to die. Stomach meets mouth, brain goes numb with terror, the scenery – the spectacular Shotover Gorge – becomes a blur (if you haven't already shut your eyes), and just when you're preparing yourself to meet your maker - suddenly you're on the end of the rope, swinging wide across the gorge. Now this is bliss. You admire the rapids below (disarmingly close), and the cathedral like walls of the Lord of the Rings ramparts above - and the smile erupts.

Finally you're winched back up to safety. Incredibly, many choose to do it again. This time you know (in your conscious mind at least) that death is not part of the package. The launch is of your choice – back flips, head first, Elvis cutaway ,the "Gimp boy goes to Hollywood" (don't ask), or simply stepping off into space.

What also sets the Canyon Swing apart from the rest is that here no-one is pushing you through at breakneck speed. You've time to admire your surroundings, enjoy the "garden walk" through native bush to and from the platform (replete with garden gnomes, Buddhist prayer flags and rest stops); chat with the launch master (who will do his utmost to push the fear factor as high as possible - always with good humour); and simply soak in the surroundings – one of the most spectacular valleys in the region.

This is one experience that is truly born out of both "kiwi can do" in terms its conception – designed and built by guys enthusiastic about sharing their sport (in total safety) – but also good kiwi hospitality. And then there's the resultant "joy factor" – it certainly makes up for the terror.

Peta Carey

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