

Sydney Harbour Bridge

This story has had the distinction of being ignored or rejected by seven newspaper travel sections throughout the country – so far. But my wife liked it, and I liked writing it (and doing it).

A VIEW FROM THE TOP...

Story and Photos by Ralph N. Fuller



“The Coathanger” – The Sydney Harbour Bridge

Sydney Opera House. To their right, Circular Quay - where Australia's British settlers first landed in 1788 - bustled with the ferry terminal that seems to be the nerve center of Sydney. To its right, The Rocks, site of the low cliffs where the convict settlers first lived, revealed itself as a market, restaurant and shop area. Beyond the bridge lay Darling Harbor, a mix of shipping facilities and museums. The 2002 Olympic village was down the way.

And while the 12-foot height thing had been weighing on me in the days before the climb, the bridge itself was firmly underneath our feet. From the ground the arch may look like a spindly girder from a giant erector set. In reality our walkway on the arch was well-protected. Our spindly girders turned into solid, massive structures with a steel stairway, sturdy guard rails and a fail-safe tether-line connected to them all the way through. For those of us with height problems, it was a cinch.

The facts of the bridge are that it opened in 1932, following eight years of construction. The roadway level sits 194 feet above sea level, the arch reaching to more than double that.

Both guides and guidebooks like to note that construction involved six million rivets and 53,800 tons of steel. Visually the structure dominates the harbor and it quickly became an icon for Sydney. Its citizens, the guidebooks say, nicknamed it "the Coathanger." BridgeClimb, the tourist activity, opened in 1998, growing from Australian entrepreneur Paul Cave's experience with a private excursion for a business group nine years earlier.

On our first night in the city, we prepped for our participation in Australia's hottest adventure by going to one of its coolest restaurants - the Summit, located on the 47th floor of the Australia Square skyscraper. The minimally-retro Summit rotates, making a complete circuit every 90 minutes or so and offering a panoramic view of the city skyline.

Sydney, NSW, Australia – Here are two important things learned from standing atop the soaring arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, elevation 440 feet:

- There isn't a more exhilarating way to see Australia's largest city than by climbing the ladders, catwalks and massive steel girders that support its signature bridge structure.
- Standing on steel girders 440 feet above the harbor surface isn't nearly as scary as going 12 feet off the ground on an aluminum ladder at my home in Massachusetts.

From the top of the single-span arch bridge, which crosses about a third of a mile of water, the harbor was laid out in a 360-degree view. Below us were the gull-winged roofs of the



The Sydney Opera House from the Bridge's Observation Pylon

Sydney Harbour Bridge - continued



A group goes up the eastern arch

In the Summit, we actually were much higher than the Harbour Bridge. Night had fallen by the time we got there, so when we sat down at a window-side table we had an eagle's-eye view of the night-lighted harbor - the bridge outlined with white lights, the dramatically spotlighted Opera House, lit-up ferries plying the water. The food matched the view with superb two-course dinners for about \$45 US per person.

Bridge Day came two days later. Climbing the bridge is not simply a case of striding to the nearest pylon and going up. In a setting that resembles an Army induction center, in groups of a dozen or so we were oriented, measured and issued nylon jumpsuits to wear over our clothes - designed in a taupe color so as not to startle motorists as we clambered up ladders past the traffic lanes. We signed a release that said that anything that happened wasn't their fault. We each took a breathalyzer test for alcohol - a 0.05 percent reading would have barred us from climbing.

And we couldn't take anything with us - no backpacks, cameras, videocams or even hats. Instead, BridgeClimb issued us everything we need (but not cameras), all tied down. These included BridgeClimb baseball caps, eyeglass straps, radio receivers with earphones and fanny packs that held plastic ponchos in case of rain, each attached to us with some kind of cord.

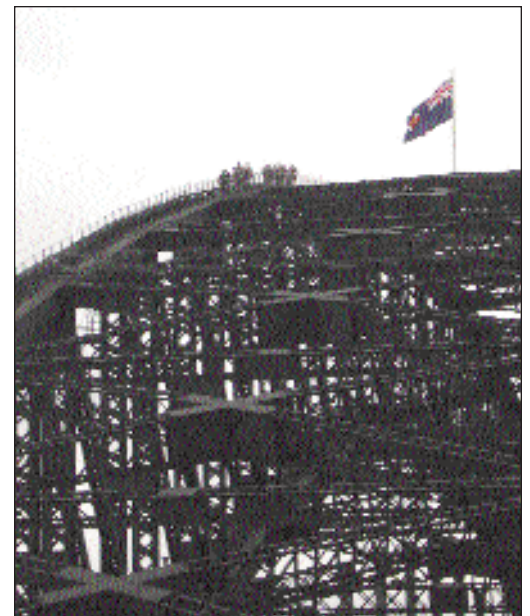
As it turned out, the most important things to be tied down were us. Our guide, Darren Moore, fitted us with the around-the-waist harnesses that we were to wear throughout our climb. The tether lines, with an ingenious roller-ball socket at the end, connected the harnesses to a rigid, half-inch-thick guidewire that followed guard rails every step of the way along our route, up and down. The tether and its rollerball were designed to stay connected while passing over the brackets that kept the guidewire in place. If we had wanted to jump, we'd have had to really work at getting out of the harness first.

Right there, in the indoor induction center, we practiced connecting our tethers to a guidewire, climbing up an eight-foot ladder and walking along a catwalk. Nobody fell off. Next, we moved in single file down a ramp to head for the bridge. At one of the pylons we climbed up a conventional interior stairwell.

Finally, one after another, we stepped through a little tunnel onto the catwalk, hooked our tethers to the real guidewire and began a long walk on a grate-type walkway underneath the bridge's main deck. Here, we were perhaps 100 feet above streets and grassy areas at the edge of the harbor. Compared to my 12-foot ladder nerves, it was easy and secure.

Then we came to real ladders - a series of them, about 15 steps at a time, always with the continuous guide wire leading along our right sides. There was probably a gorgeous view here as well but going up and down ladders, even sturdy ones you're firmly attached to, wasn't conducive to taking it in. I focused on gluing myself to the ladder, although I was aware that at one point I was passing the roadway level, with automobile traffic whizzing along right beside me.

Then, we were on a platform above the roadway deck and at the start of the arch. The climbing route went up the eastern arch, crossed over and descended on the western side. All told, we passed 1,439 steps.



Room at the top

Sydney Harbour Bridge - continued

All along, Moore, our climbing guide, gave us facts and stories through our headsets of bridge, harbor and city. He's Australian. He says "Mate," a lot, as in, "Look over there, Mate."

He told us of the First Fleet that settled Australia in 1788, the six million rivets stuff and the average prices for the outrageously expensive condominiums on Kirribilli Point across the harbor. He pointed out the concentration of high-technology high-rises near the bridge on the harbor's North Side, the naval dockyard at Garden Island and the small hotel below us on Sydney Cove whose waterfront rooms sometimes rent to rock stars for thousands of dollars a night.

It was a vision. Sydney is like San Francisco in that, in iconic terms, it's a small world based around the harbor – a relatively compact district of skyscrapers, historic buildings, museums and other landmark structures punctuating a much larger, flatter city spreading out in all directions. Below us, the Opera House stood out on Bennelong Point but the Sydney Aquarium and National Maritime Museum on Darling Harbor were easily identifiable. Early government buildings, warehouses and modernized tourist plazas unfolded below us.

From our vantage point this world was all alive. Yellow-and-green ferries and tiny yellow-cab-colored water taxis continually came and went. The large, white passenger ferry Spirit of Tasmania made its way in, arriving from that island-state. A giant yellow freighter, a car ship called Asian Beauty, entered the harbor helped by tugs, glided under the bridge and eventually docked over near Darling Harbor.

At the top of the arch, near two Australian flags flying in the wind, we stopped and Moore took group photos. In one, all 12 of us lined up in two rows and, at his urging did a kind of "Tah Dah!" movement with our hands as he shot. A little later he shot more sedate shots in smaller groups. Then we crossed over and worked our way down the western arch – steel stairway, ladders, catwalk, still tethered. And then we were back on Planet Earth.

Untethered and divested of our jumpsuits and paraphernalia back at BridgeClimb headquarters, we were ushered into the gift shop, where we were given a copy of the "Tah Dah" photo and issued a certificate confirming that we did, in fact, climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Remember that we weren't allowed to take cameras? Here, we were offered the chance to buy their photos, including the smaller group shots Moore took, and a plethora of hats, tee-shirts, magnets and commemorative mugs.

BridgeClimb statistics say that since 1998 more than 1.4 million people have made the climb, including celebrities ranging from Al Gore to Cameron Diaz to Prince Harry. The oldest climber was a 100-year-old woman. More than half have been tourists from outside Australia, most notably from Great Britain.

Americans who want a climbing experience but don't have Australia in their plans may only have to wait. Moore told us that Paul Cave, the BridgeClimb founder, is working on a proposal for a BridgeClimb on the Brooklyn Bridge in New York.



Circular Quay – the colonists' first landing point, today Sydney's Ferry Hub



BridgeClimb's photo of us at the top