

## The Bridge Climb

By Esther C. Baird

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"Pretend you are on the Beverly-Salem Bridge," I thought to myself. "You're just jogging over the North River. It's not a big deal, you've done this before." Except I hadn't done this before, because it wasn't the Beverly-Salem Bridge. It was the Sydney Harbor Bridge: the world's largest (but not longest) steel arch bridge held together by about six million little rivets that have a propensity for falling into the shark infested waters below. Further, I was not on the sidewalk that ran along the bridge, but on the actual arch structure about one and a half football fields up in the air.

I am irrationally afraid of heights. It's not a choice, it's a phobia. But my husband had set his sights on the Bridge Climb, a professional tour that guided people up the steel girders to the highest point in the arch, and I agreed to join him in a fit of delusional bravery.

The climb began in a dressing room where we were handed jumpsuits that covered our clothes. We then removed all earrings, watches, barrettes, head bands and any other loose paraphernalia that might fall onto the cars below. Dressed like kids in pajamas, we were ushered into the gear hall where we met Rhys, our guide for the day. Rhys was a tussled, blond, barely twenty-something, who talked in the affected way that many Aussies do by ending everything with a question.

"Hey, I already led a 4:30 am dawn tour over the bridge, yeah?" He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "I'm dead beat, hey?"  
I stared at him and wondered how I could get a new guide.

But Rhys was ours to keep, and once in our safety harnesses he led us through the door that led to the catwalks. The catwalks ran beneath the highway from the land, out over the water to the bridge pylons, and then up a series of ladders to the lowest point of the steel arch.

Rhys paused and looked at our group.

"How you all going, hey?"

The group, mostly excitable adventure sorts, let out a cheer. I remained silent.

"Anyone scared then?" Rhys asked. My hand shot up.

"Right. You'll need to come in front, yeah?"

I was horrified. What was Rhys thinking? But before I could wonder what he was thinking, I had to first wonder, where had he gone? Fleet-footed Rhys was off and running.

My husband reassured me. "He's up there, just start moving." So I had no choice, with the whole group behind me, but to plunge out onto the catwalk and follow Rhys.

But I wasn't happy. What sort of guide ran off? What if I froze? What if I spontaneously whipped myself over the railing in a deer-like panic? I continued to walk (and inwardly fume) when suddenly we were at the halfway point of the catwalk. Rhys, the Incredible Vanishing Guide, stepped from behind a steel column.

He glanced at me and laughed. "You look like this, yeah?" Hunching down he did an impersonation of a person freezing in fear. Everyone laughed and I started to splutter when I actually found myself laughing too. But only for a minute, after all I was very scared.

Everyone had said climbing the arch was easy; it was the catwalks to the bridge that were hard. I had my doubts until I saw the actual path up the bridge. Why I could jog up that I thought. It was a wide path with a solid floor. We couldn't see straight down, only out, out and further out. All of Sydney, with its prominent Opera House and sparkling harbor, was laid out below us. Rhys pointed out various places of prominence and architectural points of interest while giving us lots of time to enjoy ourselves on the walk to the top.

Crossing the bridge at the summit meant another catwalk - this one at the top of the arch - right over the highway

Rhys didn't run off again, but as I started across he said, "Esther, you're doing this again." Crouching down he grabbed the railing with both hands and made a bug-eyed face. "You really should just look down."

I allowed myself to peek over the edge. I could not believe how high up we were: 1,337 stairs and 1.5 football fields above the water to be exact.

"Look," said Rhys. "You've let go with one hand and you're standing up straight."

"Huh," I said. He was right.

I felt like an old pro on the walk back down, though I never was fond of the catwalks. I also know that this summer when I jog over the Beverly-Salem Bridge I'll be happy to wear shorts and a t-shirt instead of adult-sized pajamas.