



TASMANIAN
HIGHS

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LOCATION: TASMANIA

I'm no longer scared when I highline. When placing one foot, then another, onto the webbing strap my mind is almost clear. I feel emotion, of course; I tingle and bristle with excitement as I step into my climbing harness, nerves fire in expectation as I make my way to the edge. This isn't fear. Fear brings with it negative feelings; these are wholly positive reactions to my situation. I am torn between focusing on the physical task of maintaining my balance as the highline sinks under my weight, and appreciating my current position: poised in mid-air, strung high above a calm sea. I keep moving forwards, and make micro-adjustments as the line moves under my feet. I allow my knees to rise towards my chest as the trampoline-like bounce of the strapping lifts me. It sways gently in the ever-present sea breeze. These movements are barely conscious now, yet they must take up much of my mind. I rarely think of anything else while I am out there. It is a quiet place.

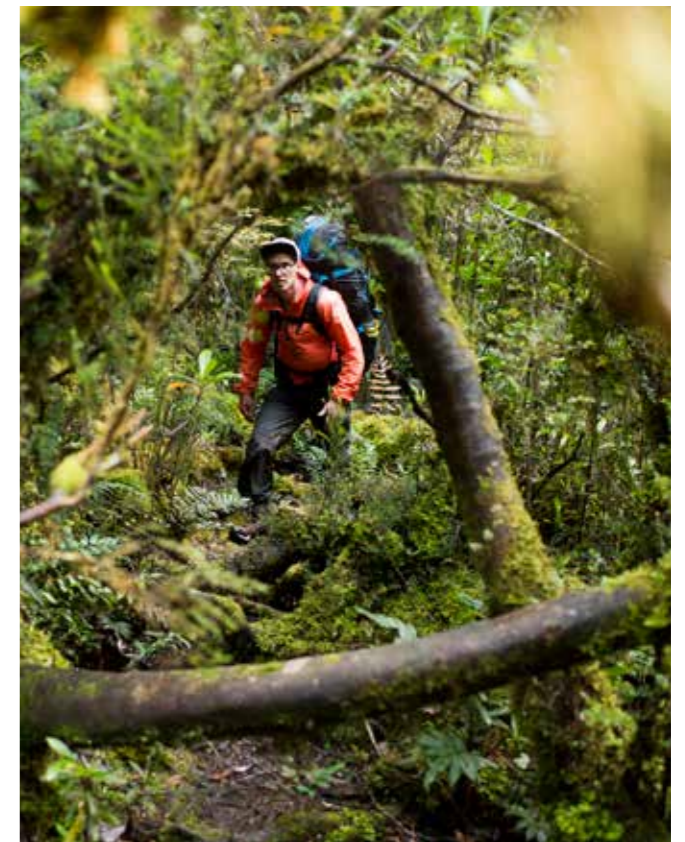
Reaching the centre point, I pause, and then deliberately bounce on the line, inducing a swinging effect. My focus tightens further as I work with the swing, playing with physics, or just simply playing. At the dead spot, in the middle of a swing, my mind loses focus. A rush of stimuli floods in: the exact shape of the pinnacle that I have maintained my fix on since stepping onto the line; the lighter patches of the sea below, where it passes over barely covered bedrock; the gulls swooping below me; my friends dotted along the cliff edge; the sound of the breeze pushing around the fabric of my jacket; a million and one other signs that define exactly where I am. This isn't a slackline, slung between a couple of trees in the park; this feels like exploration. Realising what is happening, I try to snatch back my focus, but it's already too late. Despite my harness and

safety line, my heart leaps as I fall. Instinctively, I grab for the highline and swing around it in a single clean movement. But I don't hurry back into position. Instead, I allow myself a moment, savouring the simple joy of where I am, relaxing and laughing at my mistake. The location is, after all, what draws me to these remote places. With a well-practised heave and flick, I am back upright with my sights locked on the top of the sea stack. Life continues around me, but I am barely aware of its presence and place one foot carefully and deliberately in front of the next.

It is only minutes after I climb on to the highline that I step off, leaving the line still trembling behind me. For all the intensity of emotion while I am on the line, the physical and mental focus, the sense of aesthetic in this incredible place, I find these to be fleeting sensations. There are places in the world where these packages of perfection can be found only a short walk from a car. Why, then, have we spent the last several days hacking through Tasmanian jungle to get to the coast? Why have we spent hours rigging for such a short experience? On the face of it, the logic doesn't quite add up. Yet, during our three-week trip, we will repeat the process again and again.

I've reached a point of acceptance. As much as I crave the rush of highlining, I need the sense of adventure and, yes, the hardship that comes with true adventure, just as much. Somehow, somewhere, highlining became the reason for adventure, its delivery vehicle, rather than adventure itself.

I remind myself of this as I thrash through yet more dense foliage, en route to another sea stack. My pack is weighed down with camera gear, ropes and rigging, food for a few days, and as minimal a camping setup as I dared risk given the notoriously changeable Tasmanian



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weather. Despite a frugal approach to packing, our packs tip the scales at 30kg each. After a day or two of rest and recovery in Hobart – our base for the three weeks that we plan to stay – we would strike out again. Not all of our trips have been as challenging. We rigged a highline across Gordon Dam, where the smooth, concave walls have a different kind of beauty to the wild coast. It is hard to believe that humans can create something so huge. We also turned our sights inland, keen to experience the alpine terrain of the Tasmanian interior. After walking for a day, Max was injured and we had to turn around and retreat. There were times when it felt like luck was against us, but these moments were as much a part of the adventure as the times when things went according to plan.

On paper this walk in should be easier. The cliffs are little more than 18km from the road, but while the map clearly shows a path, there is scant evidence of it on the ground. It is hot, sweaty, and deeply uncomfortable work. The undergrowth is so tightly packed that it grabs at our large packs, yanking us back. We repeatedly have to take them off in order to pass them through tight gaps. The ground is muddy and slippery underfoot; everything about this place seems intent on making progress as unpleasant and tiring as possible. Oh, and this being Australia, there are the insects and creepy crawlies. Not just the kind we find back in Germany, but big ones, ones that play on your mind. In reality though, the small creatures are the most unpleasant: mosquitos infuriate us; leeches feast on our blood. It's the kind of

environment that wears you down.

In many ways, the oppressive and claustrophobic walk in is the polar opposite of what attracts me to highlining. Yet, here I am. It would be easy and wrong to say that we are suffering; there is little true suffering going on. This is enjoyable too, in its own way. I take pleasure in discovering what is around the next corner; the hardship feels like payment, like we are earning what is to come. We wouldn't be here were it not for highlining; we would not choose this as a pursuit in itself, yet given a purpose we embrace the adventure.

Reaching the coast, the view opens out in front of us. After two days of barely being able to see a few metres in front of our feet, the light and sense of open space are invigorating. Our body language reflects our environment. Backs straighten, our chests stretch, and we drop our packs to the floor. That night, we sleep in hammocks open to the sea breeze, and stare up at the stars, chatting and laughing at first, then in silence as we each quietly contemplate bigger questions.

Rigging a highline in these conditions requires patience, meticulous attention to detail and, once again, hard work. It is not something that can be rushed, and we each enjoy the process, as if solving a puzzle. A fishing line is pulled across the gap, bringing across a thicker line, then the webbing strap that will eventually support us. Anchors are built and equalised, redundancies put in place. Once set up, I watch the others take their turn, crossing back and forth, finding their own flow.





The sun hangs lazily in the sky, and begins to stain the sea orange; the wind dies down and calm descends. We keep playing, not wanting this evening to end. Not long after the sun has dipped below the horizon and the last of the daylight has bled out of the sky, I notice subtle greens teasing my view, barely perceptible in the darkness. The aurora gradually grows stronger, shimmering and ephemeral, always threatening to switch off. Once again, we discover that the unexpected is everywhere, but more so if you go to the effort of looking for it.

I watch Max walk out to the middle of the highline, the aurora firing behind him and the Milky Way above, and I can't help but feel thankful for what highlining gives me. Not just the experience, but the reason to come away and have these adventures; the friendships, the natural wonders and aesthetic gems – be it landscape, body, or the meeting of the two.

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