

Volunteer overseas

There comes a point when you want to contribute more than buying a few woven purses in a developing country. Join the club. The percentage of travellers who planned to volunteer on holiday in 2007 nearly doubled from the previous year, according to a poll by travel website Travelocity. Here, tips to plan your give-back trip successfully:

BOOK AHEAD

Sure, it may be possible to just rock up and help build houses in India. But going via a reputable organisation is more ethically sound as volunteers are recruited based on the ongoing needs of a community.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Ask the organisation you choose a lot of questions, eg, will you need visas, training, insurance? How will they protect you in a volatile country? How will the assignment they offer benefit the community in the long run? Will they help you deal with reverse culture shock when you get back?

GO WITH A REPUTABLE COMPANY

Check out go-mad.org and Global Volunteer Network (globalvolunteer.network.org) as a starting point. If you're a teacher, lawyer or healthcare worker, Volunteer Service Abroad (wsa.org.nz) organises longer placements for skilled workers.



Left to right, clockwise: Penny takes flight; our intrepid writer; a new (kind of wrong) perspective on the world; a brave smile masking terror

ARE YOU GAME? FOXY LADY

PENNY JONES, 31, HITS HER STRAPS ON AN EXTREME FLYING FOX OVER THE RANGITIKEI RIVER

"If you're scared of heights, don't look down." I contemplate this astonishing piece of advice as I dangle head first in a full body sling 175 metres above Mokai Gravity Canyon, Manawatu, with nowhere to look *but* down. And boy, it's a really, really long way down...

I must admit I've never been interested in doing a bungee jump – I think it's the violent snap of the recoil that puts me off – but I did fancy doing something a little extreme. After all, Aotearoa is the land of throw-yourself-off-stuff sports. So, after weighing up all my options, the Flying Fox at Mokai Gravity Canyon, just south of Taihape, appealed to me the most. I liked the idea of being gently cradled while soaring into an abyss.

"Smile for the camera," Liz, one of the operators, says.

I manage a weak smile that plainly screams, "*What the hell am I doing in this bright blue death trap?*"

SPEED DEMON

I get a grip on my butterflies (which have lost all sense of direction and are crashing into my stomach walls, oesophageal tract and bowels with complete abandon) as we go through the final safety checks. I don my goggles, take a deep breath and wait.

"Ready?" Liz asks.

There's a hefty clunk as I'm released, then I'm suddenly hurtling at 160km/h above a gaping ravine. It takes a few seconds for my stomach and mind to realise that I must be breaking my personal land speed record! I open my mouth to scream but the words are snatched out of my mouth by the galloping air. I gulp and try again. This time I manage to catch a fly that thwacks into the back of my throat.

WITHOUT WINGS

After my next realisation – that my sling appears to be holding up well and I'm not about to die – I relax and fling

my arms out to pretend to fly. The jostling muddy waters of the Rangitikei River get ever closer but I leave it for dust as my careering shadow and I continue our flight. Over the river and over some trees and less than 25 seconds after I set off, I'm a full kilometre away from the launching pad slowing... slowing... then I stop – but just for a millisecond.

Gravity plays me like a puppet as I'm tugged backwards but now the first speed shock has gone I'm actually able to enjoy my surroundings. This is the gentle feeling of flying I'd imagined and for the next few minutes I glide back and forth along the wire appreciating the vertical mudstone cliffs I whooshed between, the dramatic wall of ferns on one side and most of all, the sheer audacity of human imagination that dreamt this experience up. Jeez, I feel lucky to live in these times. Would I do it again? Abso-bloody-lutely! Mokai Gravity Canyon, which also offers bungee-jumping and a bridge swing, is 20 minutes from Taihape (\$110, gravitycanyon.co.nz).