

HardTales in the Wild

Carra Beanga Adventure - January 2006

We had been doing some solid training over the last few weeks in preparation for XPD (10 day adventure race in Tasmania). One of our aims was to do a solid trek in rugged/hilly terrain with an overnight navigation and an abseil. Chris Milne persuaded Danny, Gina and I to head up into the Blue Mountains near Kanangra Falls. We treated the exercise as a dress rehearsal for XPD with full packs, mandatory gear and food for an overnight stay if needed, we also carried our helmets and harness. Chris asked Andy Harmer to join us as he is also an experienced guide and abseiler. Danny, Gina and I had completed around 5 abseils mainly during adventure races over the last 18 months. Both Chris and Andy had done some research on Carra Beanga and carried a guide book for the area, this was their first abseil down Carra Beanga. We also knew before we started that 2 people had died during an abseil in 2000 attempting the same descent.

We set off from our overnight camp around 7.30am, the first 8 k was an easy trek along the ridge but the going got tough through the thick tea tree scrub. There was a track but it was easy to loose, we went down the wrong spur for a short distance and had a rough climb back up through the tea tree. We planned to return to our start point above the falls so we marked 2 GPS way points to ensure that we were in the right area at night on our return. We dropped down from around 1200m to approx 1000m which was the first abseil at the start of the falls. There were abseil slings set up on either side of the falls, Chris chose the left side, we started our descent at around 11.30am. Andy was the first over at each drop and he was to find the right ledges and set the path for the descent. Chris and Andy used whistles to communicate once they were ready for us to come down, this was critical as the waterfall was in full flow after the recent rain and it was very hard to hear. Danny, Gina and I took turns at being the first down. The guide book said there were 10 abseils. We had a 66m rope and two back up ropes.

Chris and Andy set up a safe and efficient routine, Chris would locate the abseil point, set up safety lines for us to access the drop point, Andy would go down set up the belay, we would go to the drop attached to the safety line, we hook up sometimes by ourselves with Chris checking or if it was a difficult start he would hook us up first, the whistle would sound, down we went and so on. Chris would come down last with the double rope, unhitch then Andy and Chris would pull the rope down. The process generally took 30min for each descent so with 10 drops it should be ok. Little did we all know.

Our first descent was OK and we all felt confident. Andy told us to watch Chris come down to see the right way to descend. Chris always looked left and right and always had his eyes

down and just glided to each point. This was a valuable lesson which in due course ensured that we had a safe and enjoyable descent when things did not always go as planned. Each abseil was different, they were not straight walls as we were used to as we had to continually change direction to miss trees, ledges and outcrops, it was a very intense experience for me but after the first five drops I was feeling confident along with the others.

On occasions we got trapped in vines and were hanging upside down or throwing our legs over trees growing out from the cliffs. Sometimes we dropped into the waterfalls or we sat on tiny ledges with our safety lines wrapped around trees. We got to around abseil 7 which was the longest drop of around 60m.

This drop took Andy a fair while to undertake as he was looking for the next ledge and abseil point as he went down. I was the first over and was going OK but very slowly as I thought Andy was belaying me.

I looked down and saw that the rope was on one side of a tree then went horizontally across to another tree around 4m away. I got to the first tree and tried to push off the cliff face to bring the rope free. This did not work and I was getting tired in the process. Fortunately for all of us we did not drop down to where the rope was horizontal but started to pull ourselves across the rock face with anything we could hold onto. I just got to the next tree with the rope on the other side and managed to throw my leg over the tree then drop down. Thankfully there was a large area to rest in at the base of the waterfall. We all made it safely over the most difficult descent. Chris said that was the hardest descent that he had done in years. The wind created by the waterfall was quite strong and I put my jacket on to keep warm. We could see the spur down lower that we were heading for and it looked like a reasonable walk out for most of the way.

By abseil 10, I was getting tired and started to crash into the rock face instead of gliding down. Chris could see that I was slowing down and took longer to get set. Danny and Gina were fine and were still enjoying the whole trip. I looked up from abseil 10 to the start of 7, it was the most awesome site to see the waterfall so high above us and that we had just come down it. My biggest disappointment was not having a camera. Chris had a talk to us and said that we had to stay focused so that we could finish the abseil in daylight. I got my act together and stopped banging into the rocks, I took it slower and kept looking down. By abseil 19 we were still not at the bottom of the canyon and we had around 30 min of light. For the last few descents Danny was going down after Andy to scout ahead for the next abseil point or a safe track to the spur which was ever so close.

Chris made the decision to edge our way around the side of the canyon as they were not vertical walls anymore away from the waterfall. It was the right decision again as we reached the spur with still some light to go. It was 8.00pm, after eight hours of descending we started the climb. Once again I was holding things up as I was very slow on the traverse and found it

very hard to let go of trees and rocks, Danny and Andy eventually coaxed me around to the spur.

No stopping now we had 30 min of light and we started the climb from 400m back up to 1200m. The first part of the climb was just hard yakker. We reached a knoll and saddle which was easy going but we knew from the map that the spur got very steep and narrow, more to come. Once again Danny and Andy stayed with me they walked where I walked and crawled. I am glad that it was now dark and I could not see what was ahead of me. I could not believe how effortlessly Andy, Chris and Danny climbed with the ropes over their shoulders, Gina was just a quick and she was staying close to Chris.

We were getting closer to the top but on two occasions I asked for a line to be thrown down. I put on my harness, hooked up to the line, as far as I was concerned it was my only way of feeling safe in making the final climbs. Once again I was guided along and now I could walk upright again instead of on all fours.

My shins were cut to pieces, my pants were torn and my Salomon's were looking worse for wear. There was still no stopping as Chris wanted to reach the ridge at around 1000m before we rested. It had been a three hour climb I was starving and feeling dizzy. Just as we reached a place to stop I took a big trip, ripped a big hole in my chin again, I was not going anywhere till we had eaten. We practiced eating the types of food that would get us through XPD, we all have different tastes.

It was around 11.30pm when we started along the top of the ridge back to the start of the falls. It was a good walk on rocky ground, at least there was no thick tea tree. Chris and Andy both navigated our way out and we got to within 100m of our GPS waypoint before we turned back on the ridge that took us home. In the dark it was very hard to find the track in and we spent a few hours smashing through thick tea tree. We had all had enough by now. We got back to our cars at 3.30am and amazingly Andy got into his car and drove back to Sydney, we were having a sleep.

We went for another walk on Sunday to some waterfall and along some ridges just to relieve the aches and pains from our little adventure. It was an amazing experience, I really hope that we see nothing like it in Tassie. Thanks Chris, Andy, Danny and Gina for a day that I will never forget.

Pa Egg

Team HardTale in the Wild

