

## **From terror to terra firma**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

THE Tower of Terror stands hundreds of feet from the ground. It is the most horrifying ride I've ever seen. Like a giant skyscraper it looms above the surrounds of the Gold Coast, dark and ominous.

Every few minutes a huge cable car is dragged up the side of the monstrosity, then dropped, free-falling to within inches of the ground, like a broken elevator.

Visitors on their way to Brisbane can talk of nothing else. Traffic slows to a crawl as people on the highway marvel at the utter courage or bizarre stupidity of those on board.

I'm one of those commuters, almost driving up the bum of the car in front on many occasions, pondering: "Would I? Could I?"

I would have once, despite my terror of heights. I was a fearless young woman.

"But now?" asks a busload of middle-aged, middle-class visitors to the Gold Coast. "But now?" asks a woman with a car full of children. "But now?" wonders a man on his way to the office. "Would I go on the Tower of Terror now", we all ask, hearts thumping with the adrenalin rush of imagining.

"No way ... madness ... crushes your spine," say friends from nearby Byron Bay who have travelled the road and returned. But no one can forget it. The Mt Everest of urban risks. The symbol of lost courage, lost youth and a time where we would plunge through space, out of control, at rapid speeds, without fear.

So when my daughter, who's been watching Big Brother, finally pops the inevitable question - "Mummy, can we go to Dreamworld?" - I nod reluctantly, the Tower of Terror teasing the recesses of my mind. Not that I would ever go on it willingly. Never. Merry-go-rounds make me nervous.

But I've always lived by a fantastic philosophy: before embarking on any of life's challenges and adventures, find someone braver than you and invite them along for the ride.

Mostly we live the opposite of this. Choosing friends who reinforce our feelings of safety, our world view, our need for security. We rarely choose people who - by their lifestyle, values or behaviour - force us to confront our deepest doubts and fears.

And yet in order to push ourselves out of the so-called comfort zone, to go to places within oneself and without that we deeply want to go to but can't access due to fear or conditioning, we need wacky or unconventional friends to lead us astray.

So, having talked with my husband, who likes to keep his feet firmly on the ground, we decide to invite a couple who are known for their ability to go to the edge. And still come back for more. The bravest, most luminous people I've ever met. And I prepare to follow them where'er they lead.

Happily we start slowly, gently spinning and twirling in relative safety as screams of torture echo around us.

Slowly too my defences are dropping. Incrementally. Bob senses a chink in the armour.

"Over there. The Wipeout!" he says, pointing to the second most horrific ride I have ever seen. People are dangled dangerously and spun around at unbelievable speeds over a shark-infested pool.

"Yes," I say through gritted teeth. In the queue I am trembling with the if-ness of awful possibilities: spinal dislocation; vomiting; death. My husband pikes out, claiming parental responsibility. And then suddenly the boom gate comes down and there's no more escape.

Wipeout is far worse than I ever imagined. Waves of nausea, waves of horror. The world is turned upside-down, literally. No gravity. No balance. A profoundly challenging vantage point from which to view existence. And yet I feel an amazing rush, not from the ride, but from the fact I've pushed my own boundaries and survived.

"What doesn't kill you makes you strong," chuckles Bob - mentor of fun - leading me from crazy ride to crazy ride. Helping redress the tragic effects of time, and fear, and too much responsibility, on the human soul.

And finally he and his wife are marching me towards the Tower of Terror. The ultimate risk. I stand motionless and pale with other white-knuckled people who don't quite know how they arrived at this point, waiting.

As we near our turn, 4.30pm, the Sunday before last, the Dreamworld attendant makes an announcement: "Sorry, this ride has been temporarily closed due to a fault."

The Tower of Terror still looms on the horizon of my mind, an unrequited challenge. A metaphor. An intriguing possibility. But I was prepared to give it a go. I really, really was. And that alone is enough to make my head rush with dizzy, euphoric pride as I drive back down the highway, towards home.

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