

A person is rappelling down a large, powerful waterfall in a lush, green forest. The water is cascading down a rocky cliff face, creating a misty spray at the bottom. The person is wearing a blue jacket and a red helmet, and is secured by a red rope. The background is filled with dense foliage and trees.

WHITE-KNUCKLE WINTER IN SYDNEY

At the height of Australia's cold season, one brave mother decides to take on some of the Harbour City's lesser-known high-adrenaline sporting attractions – sailing races, indoor skydiving, mountain abseiling and canyon hiking



WORDS
STEPHANIE WILLIAMS



Taking in the beauty of Sydney Harbour with EastSail

I have a very adventurous partner – let’s call him Mr Adventure – who pushes me to do crazy things like jumping off cliffs and scaling mountains. It’s heart-thumpingly scary at first, but I almost always look back at what we’ve done with a sense of achievement, proud and fulfilled that we’ve been able to get through whatever nuts activity he’s lined up. As a newish mum, I’ve had to swap the adventure-filled part of my life for nappy changes and sleepless nights. But with the onset of colder weather, I’m determined to defy being cooped up indoors – it’s time for a bold, baby-free few days away.

A quick search online tells me that there are cool winter adventures beckoning to be accomplished – and they’re all within an hour’s drive or so away from the city. With Mr Adventure’s expert help, I put together a checklist that will see me travelling westward, further inland from central Sydney to Penrith, and then on to Katoomba.

A SAILOR’S LIFE

Life in Sydney is lived around the beautiful harbour. In the cooler months, salty sea dogs laugh in the face of the cold winds and join the Winter Series, a fantastic racing spectacle played out in the

sometimes choppy waters. But it’s not restricted to locals – anyone can do a session with operators like EastSail in Rushcutters Bay to get a taste of sailing, as well as to literally learn the ropes. I sign up for a three-hour beginner’s lesson, which starts near the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia, where the Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race boats depart.

When I’ve been on boats in the past I’ve been seasick, so I’m hoping for the best with the cool air and calm waters. The session is a mix of theory and practical, starting on the shore then heading out on the boat. Moving beyond the harbour, we cruise through with some easy instructions then hit our stride in the open water – gradually, my instructor gets more urgent with his prompts and requests. “Grind the winch!” “Ease the head sail!” “Hoist the main sail!” As it turns out, my favourite step is to grind the winch, which doesn’t sound all that fun, but consists of having to turn a lever furiously to rein in the sail. It calls for concentration and it gets my heart pumping – there’s a definite adrenaline rush, and I hardly notice the hours go by.

As we’re directed back towards the mainland, the rush subsides and I’m excited to return to dry land, so that I can enjoy a hard-earned beer at the EastSail clubhouse, like all sailors should. ➤

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“ Since becoming a mum, these wild trips have taken on a ‘preposterous’ sheen – it seems crazy for me to be throwing myself out of a plane ”



Adventuring among sandstone rock formations and water-carved canyons at Blue Mountains National Park in Katoomba

ROCKING ON

It's time to venture into the wilderness proper, and Blue Mountains National Park in Katoomba – a 20-minute ride away from Penrith by car – is my destination. Adventure seekers flock here to get up, on, in and down its incredible sandstone rock formations and ancient water-carved canyons. I've booked a day out with Blue Mountains Wild Adventures and our guide, like a smiling assassin, asks, "Are you ready to drop in on our most famous site here?" I agree with some apprehension, suddenly wondering whether heading off to see the famous Three Sisters rock formation might be a better idea instead.

We jump in a four-wheel drive and make our way to the designated point for my first multi-pitch abseil. We're descending from Malaita Point, with the epically proportioned Jamison Valley as the stunning, forest-blanketed backdrop. At first glance (not down!), we're a long way up. Our guide explains that we're dropping down in a series of six abseils, the longest being about 30m. I'm nervous as I step backwards off the first ledge, but once I get going, it's surprisingly fun – I'm moderately fit, yet I can see how abseiling could become addictive.

We stop to take in the view on each small ledge and the Three Sisters, named Meehni, Wimlah and Gunnedoo, live up to the hype. These rock ladies draw people in from around the world – hanging off the side of the stone formations here, I share in the amazement of these sandstone cliffs that have stood here for more than a million years.

To get back up, I'm given the choice of walking up the picturesque Furber Steps, or taking the Scenic Railway, the steepest rail line in the world. I'm saving my legs for an afternoon of canyoning, so I jump on the train, which has been in operation since 1945, to take in the gorgeous view one more time from the comfort of the carriage. >

HOT TIP

SYDNEY FUN FACILITATORS



EASTSAIL

Three-hour sailing lessons are priced at AU\$155 per session. Overnight liveaboard weekend packages are also available. D'Albora Marinas, New Beach Rd, Rushcutters Bay; eastsail.com.au



IFLY INDOOR SKYDIVING

Introductory packages start from AU\$89 and include two flight sessions each. 123 Mulgoa Rd, Penrith; downunder.iflyworld.com



BLUE MOUNTAINS WILD ADVENTURES

Abseiling and canyoning adventures start from AU\$135 per package, and are offered every day, all year round; bmwildadventures.com.au



GETTING WIND OF IT

Skydiving had been on my bucket list for the longest time and Mr Adventure has always pushed hard for me to go for it. But since becoming a mum, these wild trips have taken on a “preposterous” sheen – it seems even crazier for me to be throwing myself out of a perfectly comfortable plane. So, with that in mind, I settle for trying out iFLY Indoor Skydiving in Penrith, which is an hour's drive from the city. I'm told that the centre's programme is quite similar to the real thing – a try-before-you-buy take on the extreme sport. It's also open to people of all ages, even the young.

The smiley instructors get me ready for a lesson, decking me out in a funky suit before letting me loose in a huge glass tunnel. Like in abseiling, I begin by leaning inwards so that a massive column of air can catch my weight. With a rush and some encouragement from the instructors, I take off. It's such a weird sensation; hovering in nothing and having my face flop around in the wind. But once I get comfortable, I begin to move slowly around the space and get a feel for what skydiving might actually be like. And I find it to be unusually exhilarating. I grasp some momentum and ponder while suspended in the tunnel: maybe actual skydiving might shuffle back up that bucket list after all.

● EXTREME ADVENTURE

MORE WONDERFUL ADVENTURES OF OZ



Jump on a 90-minute Ocean Blast session with Jet Ski Tours **Perth** – a crazy 40km high-octane sprint with a wildlife viewing experience along the way.
jetskitoursperth.com.au



At Mount Tamborine on the **Gold Coast**, check out TreeTop Challenge and enjoy more than 100 challenges spread over six courses in 10 acres of natural bushland. Balance on suspension bridges, try one of 10 flying fox courses and hang in trees, literally.
treetopchallenge.com.au



Jump from Australia's highest altitude for skydivers (up to 14,000ft), directly over North Wollongong Beach, just outside **Sydney**, with Skydive Australia.
skydive.com.au



You can't get much more adventurous than diving with sharks. Get underwater inside the 2.2 million-litre Oceanarium at the **Melbourne** Aquarium to go face to face with these magnificent creatures.
melbourneaquarium.com.au

“ I descend into the canyon, walk along the ledges, slide down rocks and jump over huge boulders ”



FEELING BOULDER NOW

It's time for canyoning. I'm told that in the winter, Juggler Canyon is the place to be. Blue Mountains Wild Adventures have me covered for the afternoon too, so after a quick briefing, I take a short bushwalk with my guide to the first abseil location. Having got my confidence up this morning at Malaita Point, it's really easy to get going on the ropes. I manage to push myself off the rocks and look down.

Over the next few hours, I descend into the canyon, walk along the ledges, slide down rocks and jump over huge boulders. With its soaring walls and *Jurassic Park*-like feel, doing Juggler is a unique way to experience the Aussie landscape. From the canyon floor, it feels both serene and remote, and a million miles from the city (and dirty nappies). In summer, wet canyons are fun, with

loads of pools to jump into and wade through. But in winter, the thunderous waterfalls are about as close as you can get to being wet – and all the better, because despite all the vigorous activity, I can feel the chill in the air.

We have a delicious late lunch atop a rocky outcrop with an incredible view over the escarpment, and on the bushwalk out, my guide talks me through the fascinating finer points of the geology and history of the mountains. Geographically, the Blue Mountains has it all – and I'm feeling extremely grateful to be living so close to one of nature's wonders, and being able to explore it as thoroughly as I have.

Even though adventure isn't my natural state, a few days of high-energy winter fun has just been the perfect remedy for my new-mother cabin-fever state – as well as an ideal way to rediscover the Harbour City and its lush surrounds. 3



ABOVE:
Peeking out over Malaita Point; (top right) trekking through Juggler Canyon



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