

by Shelley Wood

First step into the harness: an unflattering tangle of webbing and buckles designed to accentuate fleshy thighs and muffin-top. Cinch it up around the waist, check the leg-loops, double the webbing back through the buckles. Check it twice.

Tie a figure-of-eight near the end of the rope, thread it through the harness, then double-back through the knot. Check it twice.

Maybe three times.

Tie the bag of chalk—essential blocker of sweaty fingers—around the midriff; check for the chalk-ball inside, which has a tendency to disappear into the chalk-bags of less-prepared friends. Toe reluctantly into shoes: malicious little rubber-soled slippers that fit like they've been painted in place by a masochist versed in the ancient Chinese practice of foot-binding.

"Ready to climb," I say, with a slight quaver that belies the statement. I'm adhering to the hallowed code of climbing parlance, not voicing my innermost thoughts. "Climb on," my belayer tells me, taking up the slack in the rope as I step up >>>



A COMBINATION OF HEART-STOPPING HORROR AND ELATION COMES FROM REACHING THE TOP OF A CLIMB, NARROWLY AVOIDING A BIG FALL. BUT GETTING THERE IS HALF THE FUN

HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS AND SWAY GRAVITY

Some rock-climbers are fearless, feather-light, adrenaline-junkies, but the rest of us just love puzzling through the delicate moves and take pains to make the sport as safe and controlled as possible

to the rock and start my ascent.

Rock-climbing lures thousands of people to the Okanagan every year—predominantly to the world-renowned Skaha Bluffs, near Penticton, but also to the lesser-known crags in and around Kelowna and Vernon. Before moving here, I climbed on the sun-baked cliffs of the Okanagan several times per summer, although my passion for the sport has also taken me around the world, from Thailand to South Africa. I've scraped, and bruised myself in the most unmentionable places; I've calloused my hands into leathered gloves the texture of sandpaper—not quite the sort of handshake to impress a prospective employer or first date. I've scared myself witless, time and again, and still come back for more.

Before trying it, I assumed rock-climbing was for the very strong, the very fearless and the feather-light. I am none of the above. Coaxed out to the local crags years ago, I discovered the sport was less about upper-body strength and an invincibility complex, and more a kind of puzzle of possibilities that my mind and entire body—not just my arms—would be involved in solving. I was hooked. Now, after 15 years, climbing has taught me who my friends are and offered me a glimpse of my innermost doubts and strengths.

While some people climb dangerously, for the adrenaline-high, many more are drawn to the careful, deliberate process of moving delicately up a sheer face, and take pains to make it as safe and controlled as possible. At various times in my life I've enjoyed the combination of heart-stopping horror and elation that comes from reaching the top of a climb, narrowly avoiding a big fall. These days, I've outgrown what little interest I ever had in self-terrorism and, on this return to the rock after several year's absence, I'm just hoping to reach the top and enjoy myself en route.

Today, it's a blistering summer morning and we're returning

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THE HOT, STEEP HIKE DOWN FROM SKAHA BLUFFS OFFERS A PANORAMIC VIEW



CLIMBERS ON GRASSY GLADES WALL, SKAHA

to our favourite crag, my husband and I, after a hiatus that stretched unintentionally from months to years, our expensive gear sulking in storage, our shoes shrinking out of disuse and spite. My younger, more nimble cousins are visiting from less mountainous terrain and insist we take them to Skaha. Comprised of parallel canyons of blocky gneiss cliffs perched above Skaha lake, this climbing area boasts hundreds of routes ranging in difficulty from beginner to expert. I'm always happy to visit Skaha, despite the hot, steep hike required to access the routes—I met my husband at the exact same face we've come to climb today, Grassy Glades. A few years later he proposed to me here, leaving me a diamond ring tied to a bolt halfway up the cliff face.

My cousins are eagerly trying on gear, eyeing up the routes, keen to have their turn, but I'm not even certain I know how to do this anymore. I place one hand, then the other, on the first plausible handholds to present themselves. Looking down, I lift my right foot and plant the inside of my right toe on a little ledge at knee height, a sliver of support.

"Climbing," I say, still adhering to the code.

I make my way up the rock-face feeling as if I'm negotiating some kind of sombre compromise with gravity. One of the first lessons I learned as a climber was to use my feet as much as possible. Over the years, I've occasionally gone climbing with beefcakes whose forearms and biceps bulged like oversized sausages. And I've astounded them by being able to get up routes that stumped them, always by looking

CLIMBERS PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM FALLING BY CLIPPING A SERIES OF PAIRED CARABINEERS THROUGH HOOKS BOLTED INTO THE ROCK. THE LAST CARABINEER CLIPPED WILL SAVE YOU FROM FALLING TOO FAR

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for footholds and delicately shifting my weight in different directions to take the strain off my arms. Today, some careful footwork helps me get three-quarters of the way up the face, five bolts clipped in my wake as if I'm sewing a thick seam of rope into the rockface.

But after all this time, my feet, having approached cantankerous middle-age some years before the rest of my body, are protesting the harsh confinement of my rubber shoes. Oddly, my hands, fingers and feet can recall the movements required of the various holds with a lucidity that is completely at odds with my ability to actually perform the moves. I've heard the term "muscle-memory," but there surely is no subtle way to cajole a pinkie finger or toe into remembering how to use a miniscule muscle it hasn't called upon in years.

"Falling!" I cry out. There are at least two types of falling in rock-climbing: the legitimate, unexpected fall caused by actually trying extremely hard and failing. Then there's the less noble "falling," more accurately characterized as "giving up because my strength is giving out." I admit, I've done the latter. But I don't fall far—I'm right in front of the last bolt I clipped and my husband/belayer easily locks the rope.

I'm getting too old for this, I think, dangling like a marionette in my harness, fingers raw, toes whimpering. Watching my cousin lace into a pair of my old shoes on the ground below, I tell myself it would be easy enough to be lowered down, pass the torch, take up tamer, earth-bound pursuits. But then there's my husband beaming up at me, delighted to be back here together, connected by the same rope. There's the warm rock under my touch—an old and solid friend offering mute encouragement. Sometime in the future, I'll have to spend all my time on—or in—the ground. But not just yet.

"Climbing on," I call down. And I do. **OL**

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES...



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TIPS

- Brat packs and beyond: climbing is a low-impact sport that can provide whole-body strength in a fun and social environment. You may not climb the same routes as the 16-year-old string-beans, but you're never too old to learn.
- Gear up: rock-climbing is not a cheap sport – the harness, shoes, ropes and protective gear can run from hundreds to thousands of dollars. Be wary of second-hand gear: better to be broke than broken.
- Read all about it: unless you're a seasoned pro, it's almost impossible to gauge the difficulty of a climb until you're on it. Guidebooks describing climbs and their difficulty are available in outdoors stores and some bookshops.
- Listen to your body: most climbing injuries come from overuse. Listen to your body, never push through pain and don't forget to stretch.

Okanagan Trail

SKAHA BLUFFS

The jewel of Okanagan climbing, the Skaha Bluffs stretch over several kilometres just south of Penticton and comprise more than a hundred cliffs, roughly half boasting climbing routes that have been formally "opened." For people who'd rather hike than rock-climb, a loop trail allows you to ogle the climbers on most of the cliffs and is a beautiful introduction to the area, although watch out for snakes basking in the sun.

For years, the climbing area, which is on crown land, was accessed through a private farm. As of 2008, the BC government working with land conservancy groups and others raised enough money to purchase land adjacent to the bluffs soon to be developed for access and parking. Howie Richardson's *Skaha Rock Climbs* is an invaluable guide to all the routes in the area including a map of the loop trail. —S.W.



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

It can't be over-emphasized: climbing can be a dangerous sport and people die every year, often as a result of errors that could have been avoided. No one should try to rock-climb without a full grasp of knots, anchors, protective gear and rope techniques. Before you hit the rock, consider a course at an indoor climbing gym or outdoors with local expert, Russ Turner (www.skaharockclimbing.com). Never climb with a partner you don't trust implicitly.



IF YOU GO...

Learn rope techniques, build strength, master basic moves and meet other climbers at indoor climbing gyms. Most have fixed ropes, letting you "top-rope" a range of different climbs. Artificial rocks in different shapes and sizes bolted to the walls at varying distances, simulate the feel of moving from one hold to another. Check out Beyond the Crux in Kelowna. (www.beyondthecrux.com)

