

Piha: Plunging in to darkness

By [Estelle Sarney](#)

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We went canyoning the night before Halloween; we soon realised the threat of ghouls leaping at us from behind a rock was the least of our worries.

No, the demons were all inside our heads. They hovered as we gingerly abseiled down a waterfall, freezing water gushing over our faces, down into an inky pool. They wrapped themselves around our chests as we gasped for breath, paddling toward the headlights of our team members and safety. They dared us to retreat from the edge of cliffs where we had to jump 5m into waterholes we couldn't see, and lurked inside caves accessed through holes in the rocks that seemed impossible to squeeze through, until our guide showed us how to do it, head-first.

But once each of us pushed those demons aside, magical rewards awaited us. Glow-worms welcomed us inside the cave, and in trees beside the stream. Luminescent algae on underwater rocks sparkled into life under our feet, a living reflection of the stars that peered down at our adventure through the shadowy forest canopy. But most of all was that sense of achievement you feel when you accomplish something you wouldn't have thought yourself capable of.

I had never abseiled in my life, much less at night down a canyon waterfall. The AWOL Canyoning website shows photos of it of course, but they don't prepare you for the moment when it's just you and a rope at the top of a chasm of roaring water, and blackness below.

The website doesn't really tell you much at all, and even in the van on the way, guide and AWOL founder Cam Bowen was cheerfully vague in his answers to questions about what exactly we'd be doing. But therein lies the excitement and challenge later – you realise that you don't know quite what you've got yourself into, but you do it anyway. Of course you can chicken out and take the bush track back to the parking lot if you really can't bring yourself to do this stuff, but part of you knows you'd regret it, that this may be the experience of a lifetime, and it is, after all, safe.

Our wonderful guide Cam had that reassuring outdoors-man way about him – laid-back, can do; his calm and sense of humour instilled in us a feeling of safety and confidence that we could meet any of the challenges he put before us, and overcoming our fear was part of that. There were five of us that night: two Kiwi women, an American woman, an American man and a Canadian woman – the latter three all friends who came to New Zealand seeking adventure. They did it all, and although the women tourists grew progressively quieter as the journey went on, they were still smiling at the end (my young compatriot bounded through the experience barely missing a beat).

The night wasn't all about physical adventure. Cam clearly loves the bush as much as leaping over it from great heights, and talked about trees and plants we passed as we walked to our start point. On the way down the canyon he would occasionally pause to shine his headlamp on a huge silver fern, its fronds spread over us like a market umbrella, or point into the water at small freshwater crayfish nestled beside rocks.

I'm not going to give you a blow by blow account of the night, that would be spoiling the fun. But I recommend you do it, especially if you're like me and never normally do this kind of thing. You'll get as close as it's possible to get to the raw beauty of this incredible landscape of ours, and feel proud of yourself.

After we were back in dry clothes we went and stood on Piha beach – the still air had never felt so fresh, and the stars had never looked so clear. There was screaming behind us from a Halloween party – it didn't frighten us a bit.

INFORMATION



Canyoning in the Waitakere Ranges with AWOL Canyoning Adventures. Photo / Supplied

AWOL Adventures takes canyoning trips into the bush behind Piha. You can meet them at the Piha General Store or they will pick you up from the CBD in a company van.

Full day (7.5 hours) \$170 per person; half day (5.5 hours or shorter) \$140; night canyoning (about 6 hours) \$160.

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