hanging between heaven and hell

Seven years ago professional climbers Sean Disney and Alex Harris attempted a death-defying stunt with a camera crew filming their every move.

Hanging on a thread 1,000m up was awesome, the freedom spectacular. For five years we'd tried to get this one right, and now the Devil's Tooth Tyrolean traverse was about to become a reality. The first time Alex Harris and I came to the Devil's Tooth was in 1992. We undertook the 'sexual ascent', being the 69th on top, only to be greeted by a pair of false teeth in the summit box left by Daryl Margetts, the 'climbing, bolting dentist', as summiting proof a year prior. On one of our first encounters with the Tooth, we attempted to put up a new route on the left-hand side of the peak's only existing line: Alex took the lead and hammered in five pitons, while I belayed from below. As he aided and pulled on each piton to elevate himself, the pitons below would pull out of the rock, creating a zipper effect, pulling out as he ascended. Roped to him, I braced myself from disappearing down into the valley. The new route never went. On another occasion, a summer Berg storm hit while we were high up on the existing route. With the Eastern Buttress on the left and the Inner Tower to the right, the gullies on either side of the Tooth began to channel the winds at a frightful speed. With no summit in hand, I abseiled off in one rope length, leaving Alex to follow. Out of time, he took the brunt of the storm. The wind caught him, wrapping him around the Tooth and leaving me to tussle the line in an attempt to pull him back around. We walked away clean, vowing never to climb again. A Tyrolean traverse involves abseiling off the first of two masses into a gap, climbing up the adjacent face and then spanning the gap with the line you used to abseil off initially. According to the textbook, you attach yourself to the 'washing line' and haul yourself back over the gap; the whole technique allowing you to retrieve the rope afterwards. The angles of the rope have to be as acute as possible against the rock to decrease the incredible loads that are placed on the anchors on.
either side. With the Berg basalt being so friable, we'd done some tests on a few chunks of the rock with bolts drilled into them. A machine pulled the rocks and placed bolts apart, recording the kilogramage at which the whole chunk disassembled. Of the six tests we completed, three of them pulled at less than 100kg, with one pulling at just 56kg.

November 1999: it was looking pretty stormy. Sean Wisedale, our adventure cameraman, had the film rolling, and Derek Watts of Carte Blanche fame was doing the commentary. After the approach from the chain ladders and the climbs through the three summits of the Inner Tower, we set up camp for the night. We'd asked the helicopter pilot, Ray Sharp, flying a Squirrel from the Cathedral Peak Hotel, to put us down on the summit of the Tooth the day before so we could place a few anchors needed to secure the traverse line. As the summit is the size of a dining room table, the helicopter couldn't land. Ray placed one skid of the Squirrel down, while the rest of the machine hovered, a tricky affair due to the wind channeling through the gaps on either side of the peak. Alex and I had secured ourselves to safety lines attached to the helicopter that, once we jumped out of the hovering machine, we could unclip and throw free.

I went first, unclipped and threw my line free, crouching under the blades. Turning to watch Alex follow, he hesitated as the helicopter caught an updraft and lifted two metres or so. He jumped, landed in a crouching position on the Tooth and attempted to unclip, but there was a snag. He had unclipped, but the safety line was somehow tangled in a few slings held attached to the gear loops on his harness. Unaware, the helicopter pilot started to depart. Alex was getting dragged closer and closer to the edge. I threw myself onto him and fumbled with the line, just managing to free the rope as the aircraft elevated itself. The implications of what had happened were clear: Alex had nearly been killed. We simply looked at each other; it had been close.

Crossing the line
After topping out, Alex and I shook hands on the summit and tensioned the rope across the 40m gap to where Derek Watts and Sean Wisedale were waiting on the Inner Tower. Hauling up the rope, we attached it to a sling webbing and clipped the two main karabiners in reverse to one another. We'd discussed such technicalities and procedures at length. Alex would go first on a single line and I would give him a belay across. A belay in this case would mean that if any of the anchors or main ropes should fail, he would be caught on my belay rope and swing back into the Devil's Tooth – something like driving a car into a brick wall at high speed. We tensioned the rope with the right angles and I put Alex on belay. The entire system cracked as he loaded his body weight on the system and I braced myself for the worst. Alex was silent as he checked his harness, the surrounding gear and rope. Everything seemed to hold. Alex began a slow, gentle slide down to the centre of the 40m rope before attaching his kroll and jumar, ascending devices needed to crawl back up the rope to the other side. Alex let out a yell of excitement. At this point I felt alone, high up on a ledge and watching an awesome technique in progress. I was quite happy where I was; I didn't want to be out there risking my life and dangling in space where there were too many elements that could go wrong. Once again my mind spoke, 'Your turn next, buddy; no turning back; no way out.' Alex clambered up to the other side and was greeted by the film crew. I undid the ropes and threaded them through the anchors. Alex attached the rope to the anchors on his side. Now it was my turn. I was now on a horseshoe system, with both ends tied off on the Inner Tower; two ropes, myself on one, no belay. It was now or never. After some final checks, I quickly descended to the middle of the rope, which formed a perfect triangle in the gap. The helicopter circled and I paused to look around. With the Sentinel behind me and the Berg dropping off 3000 feet below, I dangled on a thread out there. It was wild. The ascent up the other side was a mechanical mission. I couldn't believe it. We had almost done the first Tyrolean traverse of the Devil's Tooth. The anchors had held and we retrieved the rope with no problems. Completing the project was an abstract event. Only when returning to my usual daily chores do I feel the satisfaction of doing something unusual and exciting. For me, the Tyrolean traverse of the Tooth borders on the unknown challenge of the impossible and it removed my mind from life's daily grind for a short period.