

The rocky horror show

LEAPING OFF THE HIGH CLIFFS ABOVE THE IRISH SEA IN SOUTH WALES SOUNDS SOMEWHAT SUICIDAL, BUT EMILY COLSTON FOUND PEOPLE WHO DO IT FOR FUN.

I must have been mad. I mean, here's a great idea: head to Pembrokeshire in the middle of winter to spend the weekend throwing yourself off cliffs into the raging Irish Sea. Yeah, sounds like great fun, count me in. Oddly enough, I didn't start questioning the sanity of this decision until it was already too late. Standing at the edge of the wild blue water, swathed in several layers of neoprene, the absurdity of the situation finally hit me.

I'd started off my weekend slowly with a nice leisurely kayak around the sweeping limestone cliffs of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, weaving in and out of caves, riding the waves and, thankfully, failing to capsize. The next step was to actually get into the water — with a surfing lesson. Now being an Aussie, I've obviously tried surfing before. And 12 months and thousands of miles of travelling later, having spent a couple of hours floundering in the

Welsh waves in an attempt to brush up on my skills, I can say with absolute certainty that I'm still shit.

But these were just baby steps; side servings to the real reason I'd ventured all this way in the middle of winter — coasteering. This unusual sport was actually invented in Pembrokeshire, with its origins dating back to the late-19th century when early climbers would traverse the rocky sea cliffs. These days it's almost commonplace for



coastal hikers to be bemused by the sight of seemingly crazy people clambering around the cliffs of St David's Peninsula.

And so there I was, waves lashing at my feet as I questioned my sanity. I thought about heading back to the bus and just sitting this activity out. It was cold, and would only get colder once we hit the water. And then there was my supreme fear of heights (and extreme reluctance to jump from them, especially into raging seas) to be considered. But this was my job, I said, so there was no wussing out.

Those first few steps out into the water from the beach were awful — the chilled water slowly seeping through the layers of wetsuit and settling next to my skin. I wanted nothing more than to be back at the lodge, tucking into some hearty homemade soup but, minutes later, that same water had warmed up and kept me decidedly cosy for the rest of the trip. It also helped that it took some time scrambling over rocks and flailing through the light swell before I was faced with my first jump.

We started off small — the drop can't have been more than 1.5m, but I still closed my eyes, held my nose and thought happy thoughts as I leapt to what I feared would be my death. It wasn't, of course, and I lived to take more and more jumps, getting braver and higher each time.

After a brief stopover at the 'toilet bowl', a swirling ride of white water rising and falling against the towering cliffs, it was time for the big one — leaping in the quarry (cue scary music). Depending on the tides, the jump could be anything up to 10m. Luckily for me, our trip took place when there

were higher tides, so the drops weren't as big as they could have been. Still, I only managed two or three straight pin-drops from the lowest rock (about 3m) before I settled back to watch the show put on by my fellow coasteers, the more brave (or foolhardy) following the lead of our guides with spectacular jumps and flips as they tossed themselves from even the highest levels.

The best way to describe coasteering? It's like someone's turned up the adrenaline levels on one of the rockpool exploring excursions I used to take with my dad when I was a kid, and given it some hardcore drugs. And instead of checking out anemones in calm pools, you're allowing yourself to be swept off those rocks you were always warned to stay away from. But when you're wearing this much rubber, a lifejacket and a helmet, getting washed off the rocks isn't the dire safety situation our parents would have us believe.

It's adrenaline adventure like you've never experience before and, though it was hardly the heart-in-mouth excitement of a bungee jump or skydive — although, as I chickened out of the higher leaps, I guess I'm not really one to talk — I can't think of a better way to spend a weekend in the great outdoors. ■

■ Emily Colston went on an Adrenaline Cocktail weekend with Preseli Venture (01348-837 709; www.preseliventure.com). They're offering *TNT* readers a special price of £169 (down from £185) for all Adrenaline Cocktail bookings, which includes activities, accommodation and meals. They also offer other weekend breaks, including the Wicked Liquid coasteering and At Sea with the Seals sea kayaking.