



# High on life

Freefalling from 14,000 feet into the lush panorama of the Yarra Valley is an adventure like no other. Cassy Polimeni takes the leap

**D**riving east from Melbourne on a crisp, blue-sky morning, suburban homes give way to sprawling farms, forest and vineyards shrouded in fog. I clear the crest of a hill and descend directly into the fog and for a second everything turns white – is this what it's like to fall through cloud?

I'm on my way to fulfil a long-held daydream: I'm going to jump out of a plane.

At Lilydale Airport, a khaki green Cresco with a cartoon grimace painted on its nose waits patiently for its cargo. Inside, we're briefed on jump protocol and don bright blue and orange dive pants before meeting the tandem master who will have our lives in his hands within the hour. I'm paired with Kerry "Kez" Lewis, an easygoing veteran of the skies with 3,400 jumps to his name.

As we make our way towards the Cresco, nicknamed 'Wicked' for its WKD license plate, Kez asks me to rate my nerves on a scale of 1-10. So far none of it seems real and I'm just enjoying the crisp fresh air and the prospect of all those Yarra Valley views. I tell him "one".

Four jumpers, their tandem masters and our photographer Sam Bishop cram into the Cresco and cosy up as it accelerates across the paddocks and propels us into the air. I'm seated

by the floor to ceiling window, in prime position to watch the valley shrink below us until it looks surreal, like a relief map of itself. Kez points out Coldstream below and the Dandenong mountains on the horizon. Sugarloaf Dam, the source of much of Melbourne's drinking water, shimmers blue in the distance.

Kez runs through the briefing one last time, shouting to be heard over the engine. I ask him to describe what a jump feels like. He tells me that for the first few seconds it's fast and furious with air rushing past you but once the parachute is open, you float.

"It's feels like you're not even moving, like you're lying on a mattress of air," he says.

He asks for an update on my nerve ranking. Wineries and farms spread out like a patchwork quilt below us and the door, which will soon be flung open, is rattling furiously in the intense winds. Suddenly, the jump feels real. My heart races at the thought of willingly tipping myself out of that window and straight into that incredible view. I sheepishly admit I'm clocking about six or seven now.

"It's better when you're nervous," Kez assures me. "More fun that way."

Someone opens the door and Kez yells, "legs out!" If I am ever going to panic, now is the

time, watching my legs dangle above 14,000 feet of empty air. But before I can give it a second thought, Kez nudges me out the door and we're flying.

We involuntarily back flip out of the plane and I see land, then sky, then land again as we right ourselves. Wind rushes up to greet us as we hurtle towards the ground, reaching terminal velocity of 220 kilometres per hour. Drag forces distort my face like a cartoon character going through a wind tunnel, but underneath the comically flapping skin I'm grinning.

Kez taps me on the shoulder, my cue to let go of my harness straps and "spread my wings" and I do. Moments later he opens the parachute and we're jerked into an upright position, as if sitting in an invisible chair with the valley spread out beneath us. I pull off my goggles and watch the scene unfold below – the morning sun glinting on dams, Matchbox cars making their way down ribbons of road. It doesn't feel like we're moving at all, more like we're sitting safely in mid air, watching a movie play out below us.

We land unceremoniously, sliding across the dewy grass on our backsides as if taking on a waterslide, but when I stagger to my feet, shaky from the adrenaline charging through my veins, I'm still grinning. **DV**

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Freefalling over the Yarra Valley; moment of truth; back on ground with Kez; suspended over Sugarloaf Dam; preparing to land.

TEXT: CASSY POLIMENI / IMAGES: SAM BISHOP

## Getting there

The Yarra Valley is a one-hour drive from Melbourne. The Melbourne Skydive Centre's Yarra Valley drop zone is at Lilydale Airport. **To book call 1300 73 44 71 or visit [www.melbourneskydivecentre.com.au](http://www.melbourneskydivecentre.com.au)**