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by **Duff Watkins '77**

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Atop from Afar

by Duff Watkins '77



What do you and Nicole Kidman have in common?

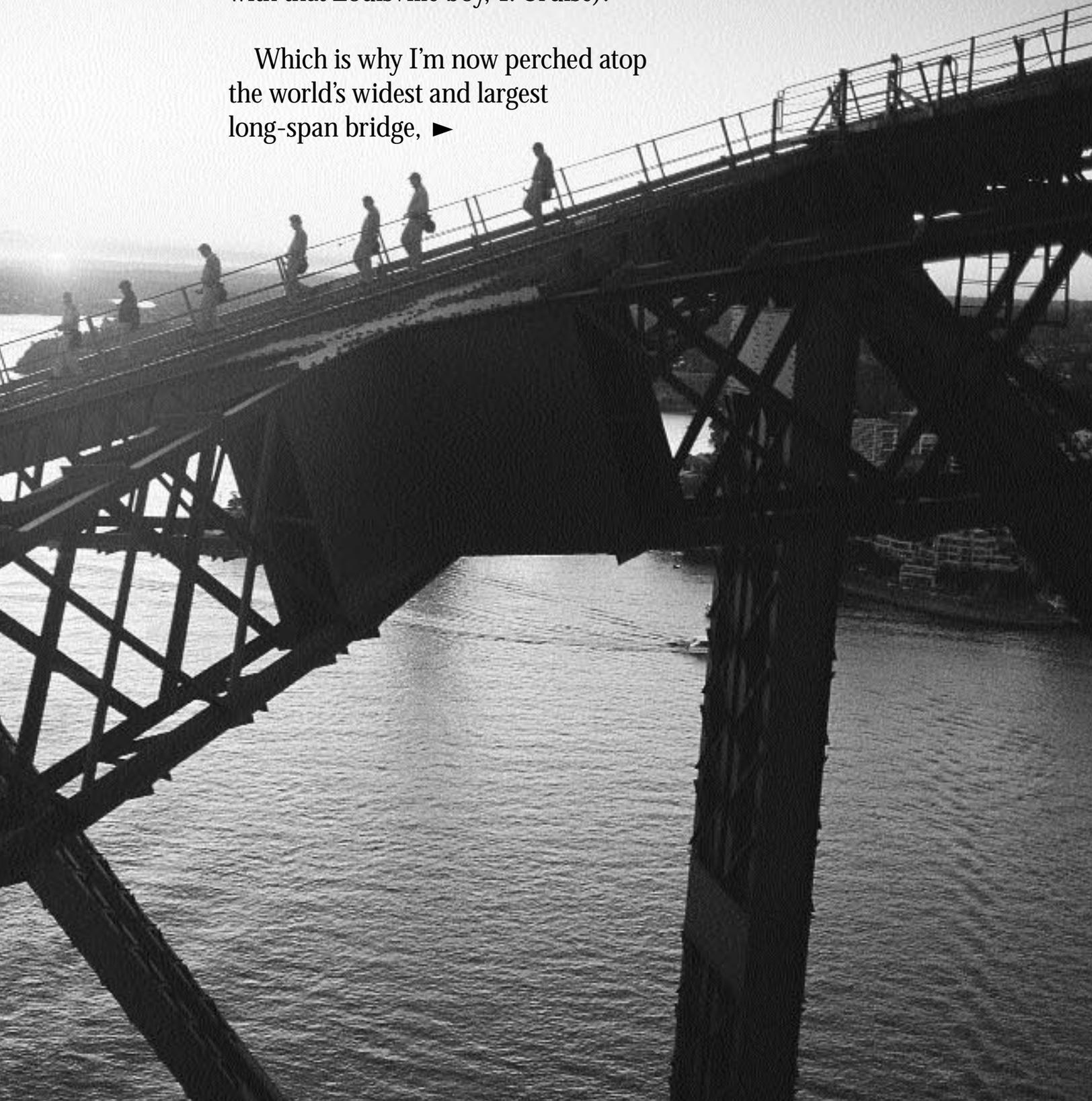
Nothing.

And you won't, until you climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

She and I did.

No, not together, separately (...but only 'cause she's going with that Louisville boy, T. Cruise).

Which is why I'm now perched atop
the world's widest and largest
long-span bridge, ►



looking down 134 meters (440 feet) into water. The Sydney Opera House below looks like an “actual size” post card. Seagulls fly beneath me. A Qantas jet flies overhead and I can see the license plate. I can read the labels on the bottles of wine they’re serving in first class (okay, I made that up, but we’re definitely high).

Welcome to BridgeClimb, wherein commoners and celebrities alike scale Australia’s international landmark. I’m standing here—even though I’m afraid of heights—because I had a large, sudden, temporary drop of IQ and got talked into it.

So with IQ restored, I prepare first. I phone the bloke who sold the height safety equipment to BridgeClimb and ask his advice. He replies, “Well, just don’t slip and plunge to your death screaming.” Informed of my fear of heights, he chuckles, “You’re a dead man.”

Thus fortified, I begin the three-hour trek. The first 90 minutes consists of safety procedures. We’re breathalysed, zipped into jumpsuits (unfortunate name), and stripped of anything that could fall off, out, or in. Eyeglasses are tied onto necks, handkerchiefs are lashed onto wrists, earphones and radios (to hear the guide’s commentary) are fastened onto safety harnesses, which are then fastened onto us. We’re climbing at sunset so we don’t use headlamps for night vision. We hitch ourselves onto a steel guide rail leading directly from the ground to the bridge’s crown. Not only can we not fall, jump, or plunge, we can’t escape. Looking like the convicts who originally settled Sydney, we

shuffle out single file. Groups of 12 people ascend every 10 minutes in all weather except electrical storms. We snake our way above eight lanes of speeding traffic.

We begin the ascent by climbing the four short, steep ladders that take us to the arch above. We’re instructed to climb the narrow ladders one at a time but the Japanese girl behind me comes up too fast and her miner’s lamp gives me an impromptu prostate exam. I squeal like a bagpipe and unload a stream of invective. She doesn’t understand English and laughs. An international incident is barely averted.

It’s dusk. A full moon jostles city lights for reflection space on the water below, which brims with sails, ships and sharks. I can’t see the latter but they’re there. Probably trolling for human snacks to drop like crumbs from a table.

We arrive at the span, the curvy bit that looks like a big coat hanger. I survey the long walk to the top and ask the guide if we’re going to make base camp here for the night. He silently sizes me up as shark bait.

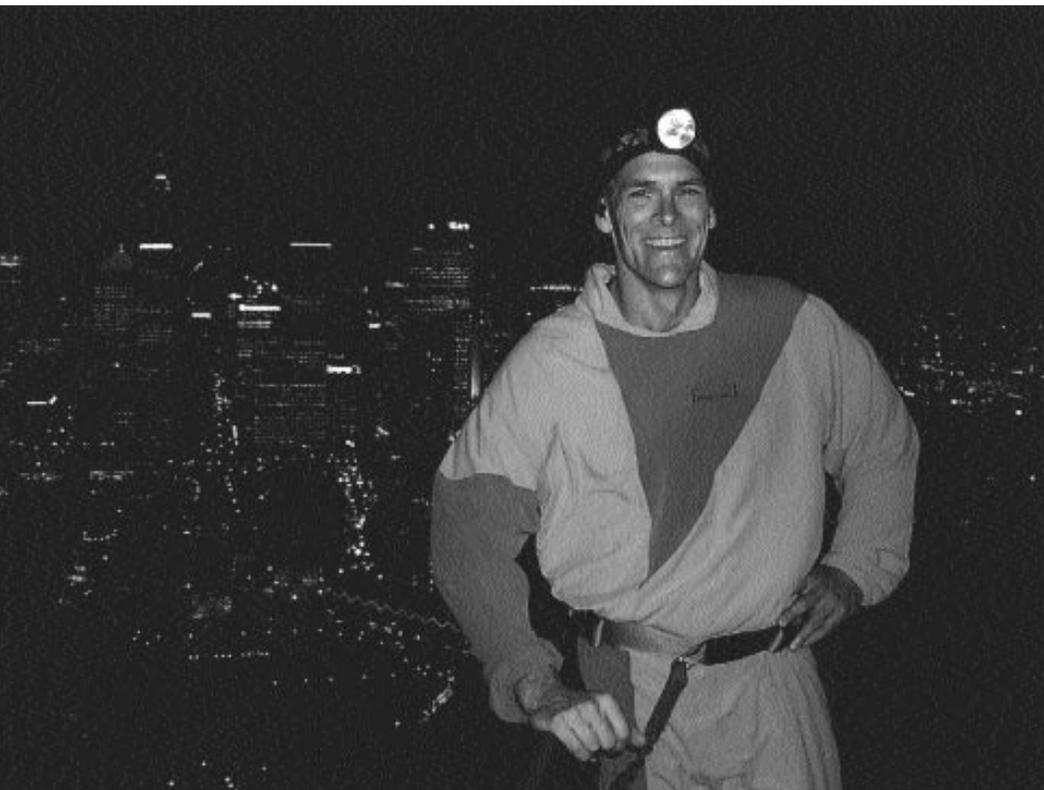
The span looks curved but is constructed entirely of straight iron beams. It rises slowly and majestically. Like the road to perdition, it is gradual and soft underfoot without signposts. Except we’re headed the other way. Our guide encourages us to walk slowly and enjoy the views. He punctuates our climb with picture stops and takes individual

photos with a digital camera. We continue upwards without exertion or danger. Hey, we’re climbing a bridge and don’t even feel it!

Suddenly we’re at the top. I impersonate Jimmy Cagney and yell, “Look at me now Ma, I’m on top of the world!” Evidently there are no aficionados of American cinema among us. Now 10 more people silently size me up as shark bait.

The harbor below is a hive of aquatic activity: catamarans chuff about to and fro, dinner cruises patrol the shore like guards, tugs and trawlers amble out to sea. A tri-mast timber sailing ship, like that captained by James Cook when he discovered Australia 200 years ago, magically appears and glides underfoot.

Truth is, it’s all a big yawn in terms of danger. A 100-year-old woman climbed it recently. I’ve felt more anxiety riding a lawn mower. But I do feel small and insignificant up here. Not as small and insignificant as that girl Gail from Yerkes made me feel when I asked her out (another temporary drop of IQ), but small enough.



Duff Watkins '77 makes it to the top of the world on a thrill-packed night climb of Australia’s landmark Sydney Harbour Bridge.



Small though we may be, the peaceful panorama engulfs us and makes everything seem right with life. The world simply looks better when you're atop it. Climbing a bridge will do that to you.

We cross the bridge at its apex and descend on the other side. We remain cosseted from danger yet exposed to enjoyment. We hit the ground, buy our photos, and head home. Tiredness clobbers us from behind. The climb was easy. But three hours of sensory super-stimulation wears you out. How much beauty can a man bear?

Still, I'm feeling pretty good. I just climbed one of the world's largest bridges!

Say, anybody got that girl Gail's phone number? I'm feeling on top of the world.

Duff Watkins '77 is president of an executive search firm in Sydney, Australia, where he has lived for 21 years. Contact him at research@speednet.com.au.

Tour Australia in August 2001

A small group departing from Louisville will tour Australia in August 2001. The group leader is Dr. Marc Wessels, who lived six years in Melbourne, now teaches a course in Australian history at the University of Louisville, and leads groups regularly Down Under. Contact him directly at on2mars@bellsouth.net.

