

# Go home with a rock star

## Family outing to The Edge Climbing Centre, Sheffield

**I** NEVER wanted my daughter to take up rock climbing. There are plenty of less hazardous sports. Why fall off a mountain? But if she sees a wall, she has to climb it. She loves monkey bars and climbing frames. A summer trip to Doncaster's Earth Centre, where she blithely abseiled down a 40ft tower, clinched it. She wanted to learn to climb.

So, one cold Saturday, we set off for Sheffield, where the country's leading climbers base themselves to be close to the best routes in Yorkshire, Wales, the Lakes and the Derbyshire Peak District. Sheffield has two major indoor climbing walls: The Foundry and The Edge. We chose The Edge, which offered "Rockstars", a

two-hour "taster" session for seven to 13-year-olds for £12.

Interestingly, there were five girls and only one boy in the group. Eleanor is not the only girl with the climbing bug. After warming up, the instructor, Cayley Latham, led the nervously giggling girls into the main hall.

The serious stuff goes on here. Walls with colour-coded hand-holds disappear into the roof, three storeys above. Men in leggings and boots cling to impossible overhangs.

The Rockstars are first taught about harnesses. "It's like being in nappies," Latham says to more giggles. Then, one at a time, he sends the girls up the wall. At 10ft, Eleanor calls plaintively: "I want to get down." Latham coaxes her

to take one more step and soon she is at 15ft.

"Now, stop, Eleanor. Take your hands off." She can't let go. "Breathe deep and take your hands off," he repeats. Tentatively, she lets go and learns that she is safe. The rope and harness will hold her. "Smile, relax, take a deep breath." And down she comes.

The others follow. While one child is on the wall, another learns how to use the rope, and how concentration at the bottom is just as important as reaching for the top.

It's heartening, too, that these youngsters, strangers just an hour ago, are bonding happily — "Amy, put your right foot on the red thing." "Go on, Stephanie, you can do it." They want to reach the top,

but they want their new-found friends to get there, too.

Suddenly, halfway up, ten-year-old Rhiannon is frozen to the wall. Latham talks her through. "Stop, Rhiannon. Take a deep breath. Now, sit back and come down."

At the bottom he explains: "I wanted you to come down because I could see you were getting nervous. You might have made it to the top and freaked out and I would have had to rescue you. Don't worry. You're doing fine." Rhiannon is annoyed with herself: "I'm going to get to the top next time, I am."

Then it's Eleanor's turn. As she sets off, I can't believe that I have volunteered my little girl to shin up 36ft of vertical wall with nothing but a nylon rope to help her. But there she goes, stretching for hand and footholds, past 10ft, then 20ft.

Suddenly, she is touching the top to whoops from below. She lets go, leans back and pushes off for the abseil down. She touches ground, pleased and proud of herself. I must confess, I am, too.

Jill Turton

● John Street, Sheffield;  
0114 275 8899.  
Open: Mon-Fri 10am-10pm,  
Sat-Sun 10am-8pm

### The verdict

"This is great. I want to come back here again and again and again"

— Eleanor, seven

"The most frightening bit is when you first have to lean back into the air before coming down. It's important

at the bottom. It's really important to help each other" — James, ten

"The instructor's good. He sets you off easily to get you started. He teases you, but he's good"

— Rhiannon, ten



## The Castle Climbing Centre, North London

YOU can't miss The Castle Climbing Centre. The former Victorian pumping station in North London seems to brood over the area. It is a folly based on Stirling Castle, and all that is missing are a few ravens circling the tallest tower ready to pick off inexperienced climbers.

I have never been one for heights. While the children were in a frenzy of excitement, all I could do was remember my inability to climb the rope in PE classes as a child.

Walking through the doors reinforced my feelings of inadequacy. Vertical walls, almost 30ft high and with coloured moulded protrusions surrounded us. Lithe men and

women slithered up the climbs with ease.

Rescue came in the shape of Richard Baxell, a climbing instructor. Within seconds he had us in safety harnesses and climbing shoes. He looked at me and said: "You are doing it, too, aren't you?" I hesitated and he jumped in: "Course, you are."

We began by moving sideways about 6in from the floor. A doorway in the wall led us into a cave and, before I knew it, I was "climbing". The children's club is known as the Geckos, and that is exactly what my team became. Yes, they fell off a lot to begin with, and so did I, but they did seem to stick rather well after a bit.

Twenty minutes later, we moved on to the "free climbing" walls, which have no belay ropes and are about 12ft high. Here age started to play a factor.

Fred, aged ten, who admitted to having been before, worked his way up easily. Georgia, nine, struggled. Noah and Bert, both six and clad in khaki, refused to be defeated and Baxell showed his skills as an instructor. When the boys' confidence was challenged, he would talk them through the problem. Seconds later, they would be several feet higher — and happier.

Mental agility is also important, as Noah and Bert showed when they took time

to work out the best route to the top. My own newfound confidence meant that after a couple of attempts, I, too, was wanting to go higher.

Baxell runs the Geckos and offers weekend classes for children aged eight to 16 and birthday parties for children aged seven and older. We paid £100 for an hour and a half, including equipment rental — money well spent for a fantastic day.

Henry Harris

● The Castle Climbing Centre, Green Lanes, Stoke Newington, London N4 (020-8211 7000); [www.castle-climbing.co.uk](http://www.castle-climbing.co.uk)

Sunday lunch: the hungry Harris eat out at Manga II — see p4

GRANT MCKEE

## Learning the ropes

### Plas-y-Brenin, National Mountain Centre, Capel Curig, Gwynedd, North Wales

Centre of excellence run by the Mountain Training Trust. Cost: £3 a session; weekend taster sessions with instructor, incl Easter, £10. Open: 10am-10.30pm daily. Last admission 9pm. 01690 720 214, [www.pyb.co.uk](http://www.pyb.co.uk)

### Mile End Climbing Wall, Bow, East London

Five rooms for beginners to advanced. Children's clubs and holiday schemes. Cost: £5.50 a session. A six-hour introductory course (in groups) is £50 per person; techniques classes from £15 for 90 minutes. Open: Mon-Thurs, noon-9.30pm; Fridays, noon-9pm; weekends 10am-6pm. 0208-980 0289, [www.mileendwall.org.uk](http://www.mileendwall.org.uk)

### Glasgow Climbing Centre, Ibrox Church, 534 Paisley Road West, Ibrox, Glasgow, Lanarkshire

New climbing wall with overhanging prows and exposed traverses. Open: noon-10pm, Mon-Fri; 10am-6pm weekends. Cost: annual registration £5, £5.50 a session, £4 students/concession. Various memberships available. 0141 427 9550, [www.glasgowclimbingcentre.co.uk](http://www.glasgowclimbingcentre.co.uk)

### Bristol Climbing Centre, St Werburgh's Church, Mina Road, Bristol

Interesting viewing gallery (the old church pews). Learners' area. About 200 routes. Open: Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm; 10am-6pm. Cost: £5.30 adult, child £3.20 plus other concessions. £1 yearly joining fee. £300 buys unlimited use for one year. 0117 941 3489, [www.bristolclimbingcentre.com](http://www.bristolclimbingcentre.com)

### Bendcrete Climbing Centre, West View Leisure Centre, West View, Ribbleson Lane, Preston

Competition wall, tower and bouldering. Junior climbing club and courses. Cost: £1.50 registration; £2.75 adults, £1.40 under 18s, £1.90 off-peak. Beginners' five-week course £34. Open: Mon-Fri, 9am-10.30pm; weekends 8am-10pm. 01772 796 788

### Leeds Wall, 100a Gelderd Road, Leeds

Suitable for climbers of all abilities. Cost: £6.80 adult, £5.80. Taster session £15, beginners' course £70. Open: Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm; weekends 10am-8pm. 0113 2341554, [www.theleedswall.co.uk](http://www.theleedswall.co.uk)

[www.ukclimbing.com/walls/](http://www.ukclimbing.com/walls/) is a database of 360 UK venues

