

DARE

TO BE DIFFERENT

# THRILL SEEKER

What makes a seemingly normal person want to ride the scariest roller-coasters in the world? Filmmaker Malcolm Burt spills the beans on fear and fun

LEANNE EDMISTONE

**M**alcolm Burt has dedicated his life to riding the world's highest, fastest, scariest and most expensive roller-coasters, even though he is terrified of heights.

He feels like crying while waiting in line and screams until his stomach hurts while hurtling through time and space, defying gravity.

But still he craves the thrills.

"I'm basically so scared of them, it seems kind of wacky; people are like, 'how do you go on them in the first place?', but it's stupid for me to hold myself out as some sort of expert if I'm not willing to try all the rides," Burt, 40, says.

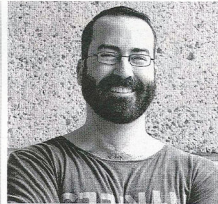
"Even the 500ft (about 152m) one coming up on a visit to America, it will make me cry, but I have to do it. I'm not kidding."

It's all-American actor Michael Landon's fault, this roller-coaster obsession.

One glimpse of him, in hit 1980s TV show *Highway to Heaven*, riding a roller-coaster at Knott's Berry Farm, California, and five-year-old Burt, half a world away in regional Queensland, was hooked.

"When other little boys were talking about football, I was talking about roller-coasters—where they are, what's being built, riding them and what I want to go on next," he says.

Fast-forward to today and the media producer's personal passion has become the focus of his scientific research and subject of his latest documentary *Signature Attraction*, where he pinpoints the



reason roller-coasters exist for his Masters in Fine Arts at the Queensland University of Technology.

"To me, (riding roller-coasters is) a way to connect to the innocent and carefree, even the terrifying rides. I definitely appreciate old roller-coasters and support their preservation, but it's the super-new, ridiculously tall, horrifyingly fast rides I'm particularly excited about," he says.

Burt is used to people ridiculing the focus of his study, but he says roller-coasters are a universal icon of leisure, an aspect of life people are obsessed with. There are 2556 roller-coasters internationally, according to the Roller-coaster Data Base (rcdb.com), of which Australia has 26.

Burt says that in Asia, which has the most (1656), and is the fastest-growing market, theme parks are deemed frivolous and attending them is an act of rebellion.

"The actual research question, 'Why do roller-coasters exist?', ended up initially being answered quite quickly, because we have a strong psychological need for them as humans, and they make a lot of money," he says. "The world has changed enormously since the Industrial Revolution, but we haven't."

"We are still the same twitchy cavemen we've always been."

"Why do we go to Dreamworld and go on the terrifying 400ft (about 122m) drop tower?"

"The thrills we get biologically are virtually the same as if we were being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger, or jumping off a cliff, or climbing Mount Everest."

"Most people don't have the time, fitness or financial resources to climb Mount Everest. What we can do, especially because it's heavily marketed to us, when we need that thrill, we can just pop into the theme park, pay \$70 to get in and go on a big, scary ride."

Burt's first roller-coaster ride was the Wild Wave at SeaWorld, on the Gold Coast (after balking at Dreamworld's Thunderbolt on his 10th birthday). He has since lost count of how many he's been on, but his all-time favourite is the Top Thrill Dragster, in Ohio, US. The 30-second ride is 130m high, with a maximum speed of 193km/h.

Burt has been researching and filming his documentary for almost three years, interviewing academics, roller-coaster designers and enthusiasts across the world.

Next month he will speak at the American Culture Association's annual conference in New Orleans. He hopes his film, to be completed mid-year, will be considered for the festival circuit. Burt says roller-coasters "democratise thrillseeking", in that anybody can access them.

They are designed to be as intimidating as possible and commodify basic human fears, such as falling.

International research has shown people are most scared waiting in line, rather than on an actual ride.

"Going on The Giant Drop (at Dreamworld) I honestly feel like I'm going to cry, but I do it and what an incredible feeling you get when you get off. It's testament to the manufacturers that they're such horrifying experiences and yet you're sad when you get off, and go and have an ice-cream," Burt says.



Fearful fun: This image from Malcolm Burt's doco (left) shows him on the Gatekeeper Winged Coaster at Cedar Point, Ohio, US. Top picture by Amanda Quirk