



jumped into the upper Niagara River just above Horseshoe Falls and plunged into the basin 51 meters below. Sustaining minor bruises to his ribs, Jones was admitted involuntarily to a psychiatric unit by authorities to determine if the act was suicidal or a stunt. Upon being released from the hospital, Jones was then arrested and charged with mischief and performing a stunt within the Niagara Parks. After pleading guilty to both charges, Jones was fined \$3,000 and required to reimburse the Niagara Parks an additional \$1,408 in lost revenue because an attraction was shut down at the time of his rescue.

The regulation of jumpers by law enforcement authorities has been a longstanding subplot to the story of Niagara. The publicity prior to Annie Taylor's jump was cryptic, in part, because of a concern that she would be arrested before the barrel was let into the rapids. Fred Robinson, a riverman who had been approached about assisting with the retrieval of her barrel, declined to be involved at the last minute because police had made him aware that he could be charged with manslaughter if Taylor died as a result of the stunt.

In 2003 Sarah Wood, events and public relations coordinator for the Niagara Parks Commission, explained that the parks' prohibition against stunting is intended to deter would-be thrill seekers and to protect the rescue workers called upon to save those who jump. As is the case with other extreme sports that have been limited by local statutes, individual rights of expression are weighed against the overall public good. In the case of barrel jumpers at Niagara Falls, it is difficult to know if the small number can be attributed to the daunting nature of the jump or to the effectiveness of the stunting prohibition.

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See also Meaning of Extreme, The

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## BASE Jumping

Although a somewhat obscure activity, BASE jumping (less commonly known as “fixed object jumping”) may be the archetypal extreme sport. Jumping from a 35-meter bridge, for example, allows almost no margin for error. If a jumper's parachute hesitates (opens slowly) or, worse, malfunctions, the jump will almost certainly result in serious injury or even death. Even in cases where jumpers' equipment works as planned, BASE jumps are almost always rife with hazards, including facing challenging wind conditions, landing on rock, flying into structures or wires, or, occasionally, being arrested.

These hazards have led some people to call BASE jumping the “most serious play in the world.” Almost one hundred fatalities have been documented in the relatively short history of the sport. Contextualization of this number is, of course, difficult because, as advocates of the sport point out, tens of thousands of successful jumps have been made. Despite its obscurity, and perhaps because of its status as an extreme sport, BASE jumping has been covered by a number of major television networks, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Outdoor Life Network, and the American Broadcasting Company. In addition, it has been featured in several James Bond films and other popular culture outlets.

## Technical Issues

The term *BASE* is an acronym for “Building, Antenna (or Aerial), Span (i.e., bridges), Earth (i.e., cliffs and other rock formations),” the four categories of objects from which participants jump. Although not all objects neatly fall into one

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of these four categories, a broad classification into one of the four based on geometry and interaction with the wind can be useful for risk-assessment purposes and is therefore common. For other purposes unusual objects may be designated simply “Other.” Most jumpers, for example, would require that an object be designed to be occupied in order to be classified as a building, thus excluding an object such as a grain silo from this category. Depending on the height of the object from which they are launching, jumpers may either undertake a short freefall before deploying their parachute or set up a static line—a piece of equipment that rapidly deploys their parachute as soon as they have launched.

Whether they are in freefall or under an open parachute, the most important objective of BASE jumpers, from a safety perspective, is to create distance between themselves and the hazards in the area. Often the most important of these hazards is the object from which a jumper has just launched. In this respect BASE jumping benefited from two advances in skydiving during the 1970s: tracking and the ram-air parachute. Tracking is the use of body position to generate forward speed in freefall. A skilled jumper can achieve a glide ratio of nearly 1:1, that is, the jumper can cover one foot horizontally for every foot he or she descends—even without specialized clothing. Meanwhile, ram-air parachutes (commonly called “rectangular”) create a great deal more forward drive and maneuverability than do older round parachutes. Together these advances changed the face of BASE jumping.

Although BASE jumping shares some important technical elements with skydiving (the use of a parachute being the most obvious of these), a number of elements of BASE jumping differentiate it from skydiving. Whereas skydiving entails jumping from an aircraft, BASE jumping entails jumping from fixed objects such as cliffs and buildings. Meanwhile, the fact that a BASE jumper’s parachute is generally not inflated as he or she leaves the “object” differentiates it from sports such as paragliding and ground launching. A standard feature of skydiving “rigs” is a reserve chute for use in case of a malfunction of the main parachute. A BASE jumping rig has no reserve parachute. Two factors motivate this choice: First, many BASE jumps are undertaken from such a low altitude that there would not be time for a reserve parachute to inflate in the case of a malfunctioning main parachute; and second, the presence of a reserve parachute would complicate a system whose reliability stems partly from its simplicity and would introduce additional failure modes.

BASE jumping generally has a far smaller margin for error than does skydiving. Experienced skydivers, for ex-

### National Park Service on BASE Jumping

In its management policies, the National Park Service states: “Parachuting (or BASE jumping), whether from an aircraft, structure, or natural feature, is generally prohibited by 36 CFR 2.17(a). However, if determined through a park planning process to be an appropriate activity, it may be allowed pursuant to the terms and conditions of a permit.”

Regulation 36 CFR 2.17(a) states: “Delivering or retrieving a person or object by parachute, helicopter, or other airborne means, except in emergencies involving public safety or serious property loss, or pursuant to the terms and conditions of a permit.”

Source: National Park Service Office of Policy. Retrieved February 5, 2007, from <http://www.nps.gov/policy/mp/chapter8.htm>

ample, generally deploy their parachutes at least 600 meters above the ground, providing for a certain amount of time to deal with hazards (such as a malfunctioning parachute or obstacles in the landing area). BASE jumping, on the other hand, is sometimes done from objects lower than 60 meters or in areas with many obstacles, including not only the object from which the jumper has just launched, but also often a hazardous landing area.

The lowest altitude from which BASE jumps can be made with any degree of safety, even by the most experienced jumpers using modern equipment, is 30–60 meters. This highlights the fact that BASE jumping is an intrinsically dangerous sport because the heights from which a parachute can be effectively used render survival unlikely if it fails. Furthermore, in many scenarios a BASE jump can become life threatening even after the parachute opens properly. Significant technical knowledge and prior training are important in mitigating these risks.

## History

BASE jumping shares an early history with skydiving. The first recorded descents from a fixed object occurred around the beginning of the twentieth century, including several



A BASE jumper leaping off a cliff. Source: istock/Jason Lugo.

jumps from the Upper Suspension Bridge near Niagara Falls (the earliest of these by H. P. Peer in 1879) and a promotional jump from the Statue of Liberty by steeplejack Frederick Law in 1912. These early jumps were stunts in the sense that they were performed by a handful of people, many of them accomplished performers, who generally did one or two such jumps in a lifetime.

The first record of sports parachutists jumping from fixed objects is from the mid-1950s, with cliff jumps by a dentist in the Italian Dolomites. In 1966 Michael Pelky and Brian Schubert, both experienced skydivers, made the first jumps from El Capitan in the Yosemite valley. After a successful freefall, Pelky had difficulty maneuvering his round parachute and broke his ankle after flying into the cliff face. Schubert's parachute collapsed 15 meters from the talus below, injuring him more seriously.

In 1978 the first jumps using ram-air parachutes and modern skydiving freefall techniques to achieve separation

from the object were organized by Carl Boenish. In 1981 Boenish coined the term *BASE jumping* and began issuing sequential BASE numbers to jumpers who completed one jump from each of the four object types, awarding "BASE 1" to Phil Smith. More than a thousand BASE numbers have been issued since.

## BASE Jumping Community

Because of the hazardous and specialized nature of the sport, BASE jumping has attracted a small number of participants compared with other sports, with perhaps five to ten thousand jumpers worldwide. Although firm statistics have not been compiled, participants are predominantly male and urban, with an average age in the range of thirty. The largest BASE jumper populations are found in North America, eastern and western Europe, the United

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Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, and Russia. Few jumpers come from the remainder of Asia and Africa. Anecdotal evidence suggests that BASE jumpers are, on average, of a relatively high socio-economic status. Like skydiving, BASE jumping requires a certain amount of discretionary income (for equipment, travel, etc.) and time.

The small size and broad distribution of the community are reflected in a lack of formal structure in the sport. In contrast to skydiving, BASE jumping is largely unregulated, with associations such as Cliff Jumpers Association of America and the Alliance of Backcountry Parachutists focusing on advocacy rather than regulation. Indeed, although jumpers generally adhere to a code of ethics and are outspoken in favor of responsible use of sites, most are resolutely against setting formal rules.

BASE jumping has no mandated student progression and no formal rating system. The large majority of BASE jumpers enter the sport only after having completed hundreds of skydives, most of the remainder beginning with considerable experience in some other area of aviation. Whereas many do their first jumps through an organized course offered by an experienced jumper or equipment manufacturer, others are mentored by a local jumper. Because of the high levels of technical expertise and awareness demanded of participants, many experienced jumpers are reluctant to act as mentors to neophytes whose abilities they do not know or trust.

Some evidence indicates a move toward institutionalization of the sport. In 2005, for example, a number of French BASE jumpers formed an association that is now part of the Fédération Française des Clubs Alpains (French Federation of Alpine Clubs—FFCA). This organization still does not mandate particular progression guidelines but has formally aligned itself with other alpine activities. One interesting dimension of this development is that through this association with the FFCA, affiliated BASE jumpers have access to insurance coverage for personal injury, as well as some coverage for legal fees associated with arrests in certain national parks.

The rapid dissemination of information within the community is important because techniques and equipment continue to evolve at a fast pace. Although a number of publications have arisen, from *BASE Magazine* in 1981 to *BASEline*, *Jump*, and *Fixed Object Journal* in the mid- to late 1980s, none lasted longer than five years. Web forums have largely supplanted these, with some of the most reliable sources of technical information on BASE jumping includ-

ing forums on Dropzone.com, Blinc, and, more recently, the BASE Wiki.

## BASE Jumping and the Law

Although popular opinion holds that BASE jumping is illegal, this is not the case in most instances. However, a minority of jumps are made from urban objects or other private property; in such cases, object access may involve trespassing. Furthermore, flight in urban areas is often tightly regulated, though the agencies responsible do not generally concern themselves with flight at the altitudes from which BASE jumps are conducted. BASE jumpers sometimes engage in elaborate acts of deception in order to gain access to high-profile “objects” from which jumping is forbidden. In the spring of 2006, for example, Jeb Ray Corliss IV, a thirty-year-old experienced BASE jumper from Malibu, California, donned an elaborate disguise to gain access to the Empire State Building in New York. Hiding his BASE rig under a “fat suit,” Corliss was able to access the roof of the building posing as a tourist, although he was apprehended before he was able to jump. Corliss faced charges of criminal trespassing, reckless endangerment (the authorities argued that had he jumped, he would have been placing pedestrians below at risk), and assault (a charge stemming from resisting apprehension).

Jumps made in the backcountry from public lands are generally permitted. In some cases BASE jumping has been made illegal even there by inclusion in a broader aviation ban. Such is the case, for example, in Canada’s national parks and in some of its provincial parks, where BASE jumping is prohibited under legislation against taking off or landing an aircraft. In other cases BASE jumping has been the target of specific legislation, as is the case in the national parks of the United States. A history of conflict exists between the National Park Service (NPS) and BASE jumpers, beginning with a 1978 ban on jumping in Yosemite, a park in which jumping was (briefly) permitted. The NPS argued that BASE jumping technically violates 36 CFR 2.17(a)(3) (“Delivery by air”). The NPS opposition was formalized in section 8.2.2.7 of the 2001 NPS Management Policies:

8.2.2.7 BASE Jumping. BASE (Buildings, Antennae, Spans, Earth forms) jumping—also known as fixed object jumping—involves an individual wearing a parachute jumping from buildings, antennae, spans (bridges), and earth forms (cliffs).

This is not an appropriate public use activity within national park areas, and is prohibited by 36 CFR 2. 17(a)(3).

There are some indications that the section will be removed in subsequent revisions.

## Important Locations and Events

In a technical sense, BASE jumpers can jump almost anywhere. However, a number of locations and events serve as touchstones in the BASE jumping community.

### Bridge Day

At a height of 267 meters, the New River Gorge Bridge near Fayetteville, West Virginia, is the second-highest vehicular bridge in the world. The bridge lies within the New River Gorge National River Park, and consequently jumping is forbidden almost year around. On the third Saturday in October of each year, however, BASE jumpers are invited to jump from the bridge for a six-hour window beginning at 9 A.M. The event, part of a day celebrating the bridge, was first held in 1980 and has since been held annually with the exception of Bridge Day 2001 (cancelled because of September 11, 2001). Bridge Day attracts more than 450 BASE jumpers and 200,000 spectators annually.

Bridge Day is a popular event for skydivers making their first BASE jumps. In terms of avoiding collisions with the structure from which a jumper has just launched, bridges are generally the safest object type. The bridge's height and the presence of a large number of boats to pull jumpers from the river make for a particularly safe first jump.

### Twin Falls

The community of Twin Falls, Idaho, is unusual in North America because it has welcomed BASE jumpers as a part of its tourist industry. The I. B. Perrine Bridge, crossing the Snake River Canyon at a height of 148 meters, is one of the most popular destinations for BASE jumpers worldwide. Jumps can be made legally from the bridge year around, with local authorities asking only that they be informed when the day's jumping begins and ends.

The Perrine Bridge is among the safest locations in North America. The Snake River moves slowly below the

bridge, and a large meadow is available as a primary landing area. The influence of the bridge on modern BASE jumping can hardly be overstated. Until the early 1990s the most experienced BASE jumpers had perhaps a hundred jumps, made over ten or more years of jumping. A few jumpers now have more than a thousand, often with 30 percent or more of those made in Twin Falls.

### Norway

The fjords of southern Norway are home to a number of popular exit points visited by BASE jumpers from around the world. Sheer or even overhanging cliffs measuring 600 meters and higher, with 300 meters or more of high-angle scree below, allow for freefalls exceeding twenty seconds even without special equipment. On such long freefalls, the jumper has time to reach "terminal velocity," the speed at which the force of drag equals that of gravity and the jumper falls at a constant rate of nearly 200 kilometers per hour vertically. At one site jumpers can take advantage of camping near the cliffs, bus rides to the trail head, boat rides back, and even an annual "heli-boogie" for jumpers who wish to forgo the two-hour hike.

### Moab

Moab, Utah, is a center for outdoor activities of all kinds, from mountain biking to climbing to off-road driving. Much of the land surrounding Moab is controlled by the federal Bureau of Land Management, which supports responsible BASE jumping in the area. The cliffs surrounding Moab range in height from about 60 to 180 meters, making them much more technically challenging jump locations than higher cliffs.

### Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

In recent years Malaysian authorities have courted extreme sports participants as part of a tourism-marketing strategy. State-sanctioned jumps from structures such as the 452-meter Petronas Towers in downtown Kuala Lumpur began in October of 1999 and show no signs of slowing.

### Exotic Locations

For many jumpers the most rewarding jumps are those that occur from an object that is in some sense unusual. In addition to objects that simply do not fit into one of the four

## BASE Jumping, Up Close and Personal

*The following is author Jason Cooper's account of a BASE (Bridge, Antenna, Span, Earth) jumping training day. An experienced skydiver, Cooper was getting ready for his first BASE jump.*

I had driven twenty-five hours with my brother from Calgary, Alberta, to a place near Los Angeles, California, to learn how to BASE jump. I had five hundred skydives when I headed out, and even with that background this wasn't a simple three-hour course like a person takes when they sign up to make their first skydive. Three full days, from nine in the morning to nine at night, learning how to determine the height and suitability of an exit point, how to recognize acceptable weather conditions for a jump, how to reconfigure equipment.

What to do if this or that happens on opening, and how to rig a parachute so that this or that never happens in the first place. Mock exits on a 20-foot bungee cord from under a bridge, repeated until we got it just right.

On the last day, we head out to an open field where

a hot-air balloon waits for us, tethered to the ground by an 800-foot rope. I've never jumped from less than 3,000 feet. On the way up, we draw straws. I'm going first. All I can think about is that I packed the rig on my back just yesterday. Did I miss anything? I can see the headlines: "Man dies in fall from . . ." The next round of students is going to learn to avoid the mistake I already made. Or am about to make. No. I'm here to jump. The balloon [reaches eight hundred feet] and I step onto a plank outside the wicker basket. Breathe. "Ready when you are," says the instructor quietly. I'm terrified. I give the count: "Three, two, one . . . See ya."

My peripheral vision explodes as my feet leave the plank. It's all perfectly clear now—why I did this. Then, with a sudden crash, the canopy opens over my head, and the revelation becomes a vague memory.

The opening is perfect. I bring it around to a landing, and I head up again."

*Jason Cooper*

basic categories, many exotic locations are available to the jumper with sufficient financial resources. Examples include organized trips to Venezuela's Angel Falls, Canada's Baffin Island, and (until jumps there were prohibited in early 2004) even Mexico's Cave of the Swallows, in which the entire freefall is made underground.

## Future Directions

A number of controversies are likely to shape not only the future of BASE jumping, but also the possibilities for research into this sport. In terms of the sport itself, technological and performance innovations are likely to continue to expand the possibilities of what kinds of objects BASE jumpers may choose to jump from. A recent skydiving innovation, for instance, is the "wing suit"—a suit that allows jumpers to slow their fall rate toward the Earth while covering tremendous horizontal distances (see "Skydiving" for further elaboration). Recently some BASE jumpers have employed this technology to jump from cliffs and freefall

more or less diagonally just a few meters from the trees and rock, following the slope of a cliff as it descends before deploying their parachutes.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that BASE jumpers are resistant to those who are interested in investigating BASE jumping from a social-scientific perspective. Like many other risk-sport enthusiasts, BASE jumpers seem to be of the (perhaps understandable) opinion that those who do not engage in the sport cannot understand why BASE jumpers do what they do. Moreover, participants seem to be concerned that researchers will unfairly demonize the sport by citing the hazards without considering the huge number of successful jumps that have been made.

Overall, the hazards associated with the sport, together with the sometimes clandestine activities of participants, present challenges to researchers but make the sport an interesting area for the investigation of the sociological dimensions of extreme sports.

*Jason Cooper and Jason Laurendeau*

See also Skydiving



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## Baumgartner, Felix

**F**elix Baumgartner (b. 1969) is a BASE (Building, Antenna, Span, Earth) jumper, skydiver, stuntman and stunt coordinator, and free-fall camera operator. His number, “BASE 502,” identifies Baumgartner as the 502nd person to have jumped from the four categories in the discipline—building, antenna, span, earth. His most acclaimed jumps include those from the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur (451 meters), the statue of *Christ the Redeemer* atop Corcovado Mountain, Rio de Janeiro (29 meters), and the bridge over the Parne River near Millau, France (343 meters). Baumgartner regards the BASE jump into the Mamet Cave, Velebit National Park, Croatia, as his most dangerous. The

7.5-second jump into darkness was, he said, “everything you don’t want: it’s a deep hole, it’s steep, and it has a nasty landing area.” Equally treacherous was the jump from the statue of Christ. Baumgartner had just 1.5 seconds to open his parachute before potentially crashing on to the visitors platform and then, immediately on deploying the parachute, he had to turn sharply to clear the edge of Corcovado Mountain. Baumgartner admitted being “really scared” when “standing on top of Jesus and knowing that there was just one second between living and dying.” Baumgartner performed his most publicized feat in 2003 when he glided across the English Channel wearing an aerodynamic suit and a 6-foot wing. During the flight, which began at 10,000 meters over Dover and lasted 6 minutes, 22 seconds, Baumgartner endured temperatures of minus 40° C and traveled up to 360 kilometers per hour.

Baumgartner possesses all the guile, stealth, agility, and physical skills required of successful BASE jumpers who participate in an activity that in most circumstances is illegal. Baumgartner disguised himself as a businessman and carried forged identification to access the Petronas Towers; his briefcase contained a parachute and video camera! To reach the launching platform for the statue of *Christ the Redeemer*, Baumgartner fired an arrow from a crossbow over the extended right arm of the icon; the arrow carried a fine steel cable to which he attached climbing ropes. Before jumping from the heavily guarded Parne River Bridge, Baumgartner had to climb, unsecured, up a 230-meter column in the early hours of the morning. He then hid in steel formwork under the road until first light when he received an “all clear” text message from his cameraman. But Baumgartner has not always evaded the law. Panamanian police arrested him, and his photographer, after Baumgartner jumped from a height of 108 meters on the Bridge of the Americas (which connects North with South America) in September 2004. The pair languished in prison for a week.

Born in Salzburg, Austria, where he still maintains a residence, Baumgartner trained at Porsche as a machine fitter. Conscripted into the military, he worked as a tank driver and helicopter pilot, but his commanders labeled him a “troublemaker” and declared him “unsuited for military services.” Baumgartner completed his first parachute jump as a teenager in 1986; ten years later he made his first BASE jump, from the New River Gorge Bridge (Fayetteville, West Virginia) on Bridge Day. (Authorities open the bridge to BASE jumpers on one day each year.) In 1999 Baumgartner left the anonymity of Porsche to pursue a professional career in extreme aerial pursuits.