

The World's Most Dangerous Sports

By Clare Davidson

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- 1 "Some get their kicks from champagne..." while others like jumping off tall buildings.
- 2 Since Icarus, humans have been compelled to test how close to a nasty death they can go.
- 3 Defining the world's *most* dangerous sport remains a tricky subject, mainly due to limited data: Unsurprisingly, organizers and participants are loath to publicize deaths. (Existing information produces curious results. In the U.K., for example, angling kills more people each year than any other sport, due to drowning, but it is by no means deemed extreme.) The key is not the death toll but what the worst-case scenario is if something goes wrong.
- 4 Broadly speaking, if an activity involves being exposed to the elements, using specialist equipment to control an inherently uncontrollable and unpredictable environment, it is probably an extreme sport. Cave diving in dank, enclosed spaces qualifies, as does surfing 50-foot waves capable of destroying a small village.
- 5 Such activities, loosely defined as extreme or dangerous sports, are not for everyone. They tend to attract men (though not exclusively) in their late 20s to early 40s, who live for the moment—which is a good thing since it could always be their last. Even without death, there's a long list of injuries on offer: from concussion or brain damage (bull riding) to broken bones (luge, among others), frostbite (mountaineering) or the bends (scuba diving), to name a few.
- 6 So why do it? As Harry Parker, a BASE jumper, says incredulously: "Why? Because you can!" But the bottom line is this: People will go to extraordinary lengths to get high. If this means splashing out over \$600 per day to heli-ski by jumping from a helicopter into virgin snow, and risk starting an avalanche, all the better.
- 7 But besides the adrenaline junkies are what the Speleological (the Latinate term for caving) Society dubs "equipment junkies." They love the associated paraphernalia and experimenting. A notorious experimenter is David Kirke, the founder of England's Dangerous Sports Club. Most recently Kirke adapted the trebuchet, a medieval device for throwing rocks, to catapult humans from zero to 55 feet in the air in 1.9 seconds. By taking things to extremes, he says, it puts the rest of life into perspective. As Einstein would say, it's all relative.
- 8 Human curiosity, it seems, is as alive today as in the 1970s when Californian kids hit the open road by lying down on their skateboards and "butt-boarding," arguably one of the earliest extreme sports. The difference today from when these sports first started is that organizations and sponsors such as Red Bull, the energy drink, have turned events, offering prize money and endorsements. The Billibong Odyssey offers \$100,000 for the first surfer to ride a 100-foot wave.
- 9 But if you are game for one of these sports, remember: Insurance exists for a reason.

BASE Jumping

- 10 If it's not a bird or a plane, it's probably...a BASE jumper, one of those individuals who hurl themselves with nothing but a parachute from buildings, antenna, span (bridges) or earth (cliffs). Whereas SPLAT just stands for the sound you make if you wait too long to pull the cord. If you don't die by reaching the ground before planned, the wind could easily slam you into the object you've just left behind—or hoped to. Not only lethal—between 5 and 15 people die each year, according to Harry Parker of The International PRO BASE Circuit—it is also illegal in many parts of the world, including the U.S., except at organized events. Obviously, for a good reason.



- 11 Venues: Organized U.S. events include West Virginia Bridge Day, the world's longest span bridge; Utah's Tombstone Challenge, a 390-foot cliff; and The Snake River BASE Games, Idaho, the 450-foot Perrine Bridge. The highest jump was from Malaysia's 1,381-foot Petronas twin towers. Individuals are "encouraged" to get their own insurance.

Heli-Skiing

- 12 Even the most extreme ski scenes from a James Bond film pale in comparison with what heli-skiers do. Helicoptered to untouched snowy mountains, they leap onto virgin snow and ski down—far from the crowds and the ski patrol. If an avalanche doesn't kill you, a change of weather might leave you stranded. Even the helicopter ride can be perilous: Frank Wells, former president of The Walt Disney Co., died in a helicopter crash during a heli-skiing trip in 1994. This is extreme stuff, not least in cost. The helicopter ride to the top can easily cost upwards of \$500, and that's before airfare, special gear or insurance. Despite this, the sport attracts a passionate following: People often book up to a year in advance. (Travel policies will insure heli-skiing for an additional 10% to 20% over the standard premiums.)



- 13 Venues: Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Washington and Wyoming all have Heli-Ski U.S. certified operations. Outings are based on a daily rate with guides and a set number of descents. Additional runs cost more. Canada's British Columbia has numerous outlets that favor longer packages (three to seven days), which work out cheaper by the day.

Diving

- 14 Scuba (an acronym that stands for self-contained underwater breathing apparatus) diving is an increasingly popular sport, but imitating fish clearly has its drawbacks. The ascent from a dive, if done too fast, can cause decompression illnesses (including the bends), potentially causing failure of the spinal cord, brain and lungs. Not to mention that sharks passing by might be peckish.
- 15 Venues: The Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) and Scuba Schools International (SSI) offer open-sea diving certificates training, costing from \$150 to nearly \$600 for lessons. Florida and California as well as Mexico and Egypt are renowned. Once certified, PADI and Divers Alert Network offer specialist insurance, in the ballpark of \$60 to \$70. (Travel insurance providers often require an extra 10% to 20% premium. During training, private medical insurance should suffice.)



Cave Diving

- 16 Hypothermia, getting lost, getting separated from your diving buddy, low visibility, air loss and lighting failure are just some of the hazards in this unusual sport. The National Speleological Society defines a successful dive as “one you return from.” Perhaps it all has to do with expectation management. Unlike open-sea diving, you can’t simply come up for air—you’d smash your head. According to the Texas-based San Marcos Area Recovery Team, more than 500 people have died since 1960 in cave diving accidents in Florida, Mexico and the Caribbean alone. Experience does not guarantee survival, as many of the victims have been instructors and technical divers.
- 17 Venues: Florida and Mexico are popular cave diving locations, but it can be done almost anywhere. Before embarking on a cave diving course, cavern diving experience is often required; this, in turn, requires open-sea diving experience. Cavern courses typically range from \$200 to around \$350. (Travel insurance companies often classify cave diving as high risk, and special insurance may be required.)



Bull Riding

- 18 Gary Leffew, former world champion bull rider, states on his Web site: “There is more to bull riding than just pain. It can be an art if you take it to the next ride.” Good thing, because if one of these beasts, weighing up to 1,800 pounds, tramples you, the next ride you take will be in an ambulance—or a hearse. That Leffew advertises a so-called Jaw-Joint Protector for the upper and lower teeth as well as the brain reveals how serious concussions or head injuries can be. This is for men with testosterone to spare.



Courtesy Professional Bull Riding Association

- 19 The slogan of Lyle Sankey, who offers fantasy camps for bull riding, underlines this: “Real Men. Rank Bulls. Raw Sport.” He also says success is 60% mental and 40% ability. The only question is whether he’s talking about the riders or the bulls.
- 20 Venues: Two recommended schools by the Professional Bull Riding Association are Lyle Sankey’s in Missouri and California-based Gary Leffew’s. Leffew offers a 21-day “bull riding boot camp” for \$2,800, or a five-day school costing \$425. Sankey’s school offers “bull-riding fantasy camps”: one- to four-day lessons from \$300 to just under \$400 per day per person (minimum 15 people); or private bull riding, ranging from \$600 to \$700 for two days (minimum two people).

Big-Wave Surfing

- 21 Big-wave surfing is misleading. These waves aren’t big, they’re ludicrously big. Drowning, by being pulled under by the current, by smashing your head against hidden rocks, or by being whacked by the board on which you were supposed to be elegantly surfing, can be deadly. But the chase is still on to ride the 100-foot wave, perhaps not surprising since The Billibong Odyssey is offering \$100,000 to the winner. But as Adam Wright, surf forecaster at California’s Surfline, points out: “Anyone can try this sport, but the chances are you won’t be coming back.”



© Silk Barrel

- 22 Venues: Hawaii is famous for surfing—Maui has the evocatively named Jaws surf zone. Mexico’s Todo Santos, and California’s Cortes Banks and Mavericks are hot spots. Boards range from \$400 to close to \$1000. First-place prizes include \$65,000 for Quiksilver’s Waimea bay contest and \$70,000 for the Tow In Worldcup in Maui.

Street Lugging

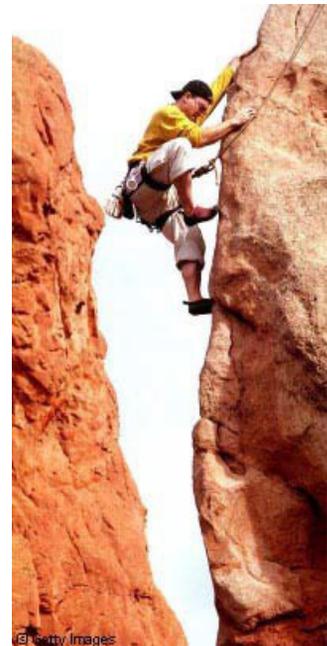
- 23 Back in the 1970s, Californian kids practiced an extreme sport virtually before the word had been invented. They hit the road—literally, lying down on their skateboards and “butt-boarding” next to motor vehicles. Short of a collision, the only thing to stop them was their feet. Today legality of this sport on highways is a gray area, and there’s no guarantee that cars or trucks will see you, let alone avoid you. Protective leathers and a helmet are essential—that is, if you don’t want to smear yourself all over the road.



- 24 Venues: New Hampshire-based Gravity Sports International offers day classes on a closed road, starting at \$250. A day’s lugging at Wild Fro Racing in California costs \$195 and incorporates a 2.5-mile Dinosaur descent. Both require full medical insurance coverage. The sport is featured in the Gravity Games.

Mountain Climbing

- 25 “All elements of climbing involve risks,” said Lloyd Athearn of the American Alpine Club. You can twist ankles, sprain muscles, tear ligaments, break bones, injure your back, suffer frostbite or even suffer concussion. And if this happens on the way up, you still have to get back down. Rapidly changing weather can be lethal. Add to this the difficulty of rescue helicopters operating in such conditions, and you could be stranded. In 2000, 24 deaths were reported in the U.S., according to *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*.
- 26 Venues: National parks are good rock-climbing locations: Yosemite, the Joshua Tree, Rocky Mountain National Park, among others. For mountaineering, Wyoming’s Tetons, Red Rocks in Nevada and Alaska’s Denali are renowned. The Alps, Himalayas and Andes attract climbers from all over the world. The American Alpine Institute offers courses at basic to advanced levels on snow, ice and rock, as well as at altitude; for example, beginners can climb in the Eastern Sierra for two days or so for \$150 to \$295 (for individual training). The International Mountain Climbing School also offers courses: Climbing in Red Rocks can cost from \$190 (two people) to \$250 (individual training).



BMX

27 The combination of acrobatics while astride a bicycle, BMX--bicycle motocross--in its basic form involves racing, but offshoots include bicycle stunts, vertical ramp and flatland. "BMX can really beat you up," says 29-year-old Grant Hansen of BMXtreme, who has personally suffered from a separated shoulder, had to have his knee drained, plus sustained countless cuts, scrapes and bruises. There are no known deaths, but concussions? "Sure! Absolutely," Hansen says. The ultimate goal? "To do a trick no one has done before," with, of course, attractive war wounds to show for it at the end.



28 Venues: This can be done anywhere in the U.S., but the East Coast is better suited to dirt tracks. A bike can range from a couple of hundred dollars to \$1,000 for the professionals, according to Hansen. California was the birthplace of BMX and has many spots in which to practice the sport.

White-Water Rafting

29 Surrounded by untamed rapids, participants hurtle towards...well, possibilities include smashing into rocks, being tossed out and drowning. If you fall out of the boat, foot entrapment could ensnare you, making it impossible to dislodge yourself for quite some time. Broken bones or twisted knees are common injuries. The problem with waterfalls is that you can't see how steep the drop is beforehand. By the time it's over, it could be too late.



30 Venues: The U.S. has many rivers from which to choose, across many states. Within each river are a variety of levels of difficulty, from I to V+. Internationally the choices are also diverse, from Zimbabwe to Mexico to Nepal and beyond. Costs vary hugely, but group rates range from a one-hour supervised taster trip for around \$20 to overnight or weekend sessions for nearer \$200.

Camp for Kids with Autism Offers Extreme Therapy

Colorado Getaway Features Rafting, Rock Climbing, Skiing, Rope Courses and More

By John Donovan

ABCNews.com, Aug. 31, 2009

- 1 Consider what it does to the senses when you're in a kayak on the Colorado River and you hit white water. You can't hear anything but the water. There's spray in your face. Violent drops. Wicked turns. And fear—moments when the river seems to be in control, not you. In short, it's total sensory overload, a total adrenaline rush.
- 2 But if you have autism—like most kids at the Extreme Sports Camp near Aspen, Colorado—it's overload times 20, or times 100. And that's the point: to take kids to their limits, and beyond.
- 3 "It's got to be visceral," said Doug Gilstrap, 47, who has run the camp since it launched in 2001. "It's stimulating, it's super-intense. And, actually, the more intense it is, the better they are on the other end."
- 4 It's about taking kids to the extreme, the kids who have difficulties with extremes in everyday life, he said.
- 5 "Many times our kids, campers have a lot of behavior issues or a lot of sensory issues that they just can't handle," Gilstrap said. "It's too cold, it's too hot, it's too bright. All those sorts of things can cause a lot of problems."
- 6 The kids here, ages 5 and up, represent the many different ways autism can take shape. Quinn, like several kids at the week-long camp, barely speaks, while Johnny talks and talks. The girls are more physically timid than most of the boys, while a few kids, like Josh, are athletically gifted.
- 7 One of Josh's challenges was to take on a steep rock wall.
- 8 "So, with any person, a new thing can bring about some fear and some apprehension," Gilstrap said. "It's even heightened with autism. A situation that forces focus, like here, knowing where to put your feet, figuring out what piece of rock to grab onto—you can see Josh working it through, 50 feet up, and then the rappel back down.
- 9 "We've built the camp around, sort of, not to use the word 'extreme,' like 'extreme games,'" Gilstrap said. "It's extreme in the sense that all the activities are visceral."
- 10 Back on the ground, Josh was asked if it was a hard ascent.
- 11 "It was hard, yes," he said, adding that he found all the cracks he needed.
- 12 "The greater the adrenaline shock that I can put to the system—the brain, the body and the endorphin rush that comes in post-adrenaline rush—is what gets them the most relaxation and calm," Gilstrap said. "When they are back in a normal situation, they have better capacity to be in control."
- 13 Internal struggle is visible on many of the campers' faces, as they move over ropes high above the ground.

- 14 The Extreme Sports Camp features ropes that go over a river and back again, and then run up to tree level. While every kid is in a safety harness—they can't fall to the ground—the kids can still slip off the line as they try to cross it, and do.
- 15 "Some kids need a little more pushing and some need a little less," Gilstrap said. "If the kid doesn't need pushing, I don't come and push—I just let them do their own thing."
- 16 Gilstrap tried to coax a camper named Johnny to try the ropes.
- 17 "You go first," Johnny said.
- 18 "Are you scared?" Gilstrap said. "That's the way you learn from it."
- 19 Johnny moved tentatively along a rope.
- 20 "You're doing great—I'm proud of you, Johnny," Gilstrap said. "Turn your feet upriver. I'm very proud of you—stand up, Johnny. Did your legs stop working?"
- 21 "I have lousy legs," the camper said.
- 22 "No, you don't have lousy legs," came Gilstrap's reply.

Autism Camp: A Taste of the Extreme

- 24 Gilstrap said he wants the campers to struggle, but only so much. If the campers get too scared or excited, he said, they can't move forward.
- 25 "With that heightened apprehension, if we make it over that hump and on to the other side," he said, "then we get what we're looking for."
- 26 They make it as fun as they can. At the end of the treetop rope course is a wonderful zip-line glide back down to Earth.
- 27 Gilstrap has also built a special device to help the campers go waterskiing. He described how he learned to work with kids with autism.
- 28 "I just studied it and watched how they did things," he said, "and I picked up on a way of interacting with them on whatever they were focused on. It's just a way of touch. Touch can be a very calming thing. Like, again for Josh, I can just reach over and touch him and he'll go [exhales slowly]. Just with the touch. I don't say a single word to him."
- 29 Each child is assigned his or her own counselor for the full week. It's what makes it possible in the first place for a kid to step on that wire or hang onto that wall, or just to get through the bus rides between events.
- 30 But the real signal that the camp works: Most of the campers come back, year after year—for another taste of the extreme.

Extreme Sports Not About Risk-taking: Study

Medical News Today, July, 13 2009

- 1 Those who think extreme sports are all about risk-taking are missing the point, according to a QUT researcher. Eric Brymer, a lecturer from the School of Human Movement Studies in the Faculty of Health, has been researching whether the element of risk was an important factor among participants in “extreme” sports such as waterfall kayakers, mountain climbers, big wave surfers and B.A.S.E. jumpers.
- 2 He said his research offered a different framework from the traditional understanding of extreme sport.
- 3 Dr Brymer found that, although the image of those who take part in extreme sports was that of risk-takers and adrenaline junkies, the opposite was true.
- 4 “I wanted to do this research because in my masters studies I was hearing about sensation seeking, risk-taking behaviour in extreme sports people, and it just didn’t match what I knew from my background in kayaking and canoeing,” he said.
- 5 “The people I knew were very careful, disciplined, determined and focussed, not at all reckless or risk-taking; for some people to get to a certain level of a sport, it takes 15 years dedicated training, which is not something you would associate with a thrill-seeker.”
- 6 In his study, Mr Brymer conducted interviews with extreme sportspeople aged from 30 to 73, to find out how they felt when they did the activity, and what their motivations were.
- 7 “What I found was that these people have a real love for these activities, and talk about a realisation about the power of nature, a sense of humility, and a real sense of peace,” he said.
- 8 “They also said they felt a sense of relaxation and freedom, not in the socio-cultural sense but in the sense that they were so focussed and aware, it was like clearing the mind in meditation.”
- 9 Dr Brymer said the participants, while unable to control nature, were educated about conditions, and were very careful to minimise potential risks.
- 10 “One thing that came up was that they realise people see them as risk-takers, but they do not see themselves that way at all, and they cited the road as a comparison, saying that crossing the road or driving was more risky,” said Dr Brymer.
- 11 “On the road, you have no control of other factors such as other drivers, but in the natural world you are at a level doing these activities where your depth of knowledge is so vast that you can be in control, you understand the weather and the clouds, and what will happen as a result, so you can plan for that.”
- 12 Dr Brymer said while he was not denying some people in extreme sports may have become involved because they were attracted by the risk-taking aspect, most of the people he had come across did not see that as a positive thing.

- 13 “Risk is about uncertainty, about not having control, and these people see themselves as in control,” he said.
- 14 “Some did mention times when they did feel the adrenalin and were in a risky position, but generally it is more about how lucky they were to survive it, and seeing it as a negative experience rather than something they are seeking.”
- 15 He said the perception people had of extreme sports participants was brought about by not knowing enough about the sports.
- 16 “It is about not really understanding something. I compare it to looking for love—you are not searching for the risk of not being loved, but you are aware that there is risk involved: the risk of rejection, of not finding what you are looking for,” he said.
- 17 “It is the same in extreme sports: while there is an awareness of risk it is not the reason most people are involved, but rather something they accept because they are looking for something deeper and more meaningful.”

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A Solemn Warning to Wingsuit Flyers

By Lola Jones

XtremeSport4u.com, April 28, 2010

- 1 Geoffrey Robson was a qualified mechanical engineer and mathematician who happened to love to wingsuit fly.
- 2 The fantastic video taken in early April, shows Robson opening a new route from the Groot Drakenstein mountains above Boschendal, near Stellenbosch, South Africa. It was recorded on his helmet-mounted video camera and shows graphically why this is such a seriously extreme sport:
- 3 Robson completed his Master's degree at the University of Stellenbosch, and was a PhD student at the ETH in Switzerland, where he conducted research on wingsuit flying. He considered himself lucky enough to be able to combine his interests in one study: aerodynamics and wingsuit flying and aimed to combine maths and science to improve wingsuit flying.
- 4 He had been studying wingsuit flight to unprecedented accuracy by using a highly sensitive instrument which measured 3D location by GPS and inertial measurement, flyer attitude and heading, altitude, and air pressure during many wingsuit BASE jumps.
- 5 Robson was said to be the only person in the world who combined the scientific capacity for this kind of research with the ability to test it himself in the air.
- 6 Thank you to "zurichminds" for this fascinating video. Today Geoffrey Robson is dead.
- 7 Early in the morning of Monday, 12th April, he tried the same route, but this time he wanted to cross the ridge between Devil's Tooth (the peak to the front, right) and the mountain. His calculations were wrong, and he failed to clear the ridge, resulting in his death at the age of 31.
- 8 "If he were two metres higher, he would have survived" said his jumping companions, and that is the name of the game with wingsuit flying. It is an inherently dangerous sport, but a sport participated in by people with huge skydiving experience and a deep love of adventure, of setting themselves new challenges and of taking on the ultimate challenge—wingsuit flying or 'proximity flying' as it is also known.
- 9 All extreme sports are dangerous, some more than others, and wingsuit flying and BASE jumping probably the most dangerous of all. We found this little list of statistics on fatalities in extreme sports over the past 5 years per 1,000 participants. Anyone with an ambition to climb K2 might take note of these figures too!

Skydiving:	3.3
BASE Jumping:	44.0
Hang Gliding/Paragliding:	3.8
Summiting K2:	104.0
ATV Riding:	0.5
Scuba Diving:	0.06
Snowboarding:	0.05

- 10 Although wingsuit flying is not on the list (there is probably not enough data to work with yet) it is probably somewhere between skydiving and BASE jumping. It is an interesting aside, though, that fatality rates were very high during the developmental period for this extreme sport. Between 1930 and 1961, 71 out of 75 people died trying to perfect a wingsuit.
- 11 But it is immensely popular with a small handful of hardcore adventurers. 'To fly like a bird' has always been man's ambition, and with wingsuit flying you are nearly there...
- 12 "Wingsuit flying was his life" said his friend and jump companion Leander Lacey. Robson's father, Bill, described his eldest son as a "brilliant mathematician" who was most comfortable in the outdoors. "He came here for a BASE jumping holiday. There is an element of danger, but this is just so tragic," he said.
- 13 Our commiserations go to Geoffrey Robson's family and friends.