

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

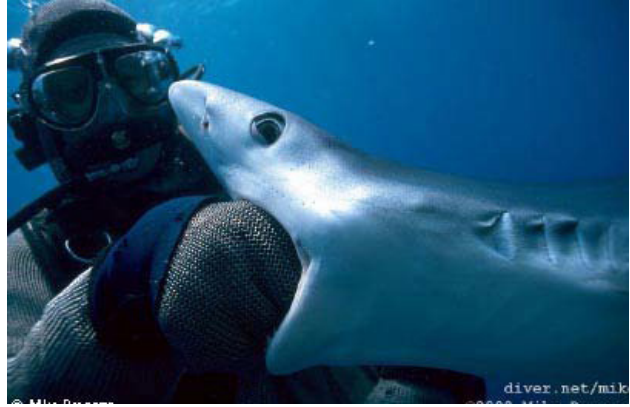
- 12 Even the most extreme ski scenes from a James Bond film pale in comparison with what heli-skiers do. Helicoptered to untouched snowy mountains, they leap onto virgin snow and ski down—far from the crowds and the ski patrol. If an avalanche doesn't kill you, a change of weather might leave you stranded. 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.



- 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.”



- 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

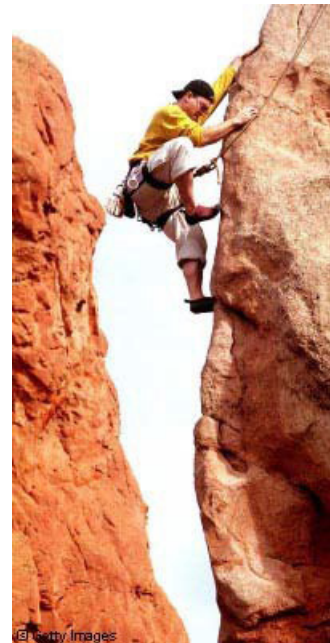
- 23 Back in the 1970s, Californian kids practiced an extreme sport virtually before the word had been invented. They hit the road—literally, lying down on their skateboards and “butt-boarding” next to motor vehicles. Short of a collision, the only thing to stop them was their feet. Today legality of 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.