

Resource A

**What is BASE Jumping?**

BY [LOIS FRIEDLAND](https://www.tripsavvy.com/lois-friedland-33644)

In recent years, thanks in no small part to thrilling YouTube videos and increasing mainstream media coverage, BASE jumping has gone from a fringe sport to a full-blown phenomenon. But what exactly does this activity entail and what do you need to know before you give it a go.

In its purest form, BASE jumping involves highly trained extreme athletes who climb to great heights on manmade structures or tall cliff faces. Unlike [skydiving](https://www.tripsavvy.com/the-world-s-best-destinations-for-skydiving-4138258), BASE jumpers don't use an aircraft of any kind, but instead choose to leap from the top of a fixed structures. But the two sports are similar in the fact that both use a parachute to arrest their fall and gently deliver them back to the ground.

BASE is actually an acronym for the four types of fixed objects that jumpers can potentially leap from while taking part in the sport. These objects include buildings, antennas, spans (which often refers to bridges), and the Earth itself. That includes high cliffs, mountain tops, or other tall natural locations.

BASE jumpers wear a parachute, and sometimes [a wingsuit](https://squirrel.ws/), which are specially designed outfit that allows them to slow their rate of descent while making precision aerial maneuvers on the way down. After leaping off a cliff, the jumper's wingsuit rapidly fills with air, so he or she can glide along like bird. Eventually they reach an altitude where it becomes critical to open their parachute instead, which is the safety mechanism that lowers them safely back to Earth.

BASE jumping can be a very dangerous sport and there have been numerous fatal accidents over the years. Readers are encouraged to train with a certified skydiving instructor and spend many hours honing their skills before attempting a jump on their own. While trained professionals can make these descents look easy and routine, there are many subtle nuances and techniques that are only gained over time and following many successful jumps.

Unlike skydiving, which typically takes place at higher altitudes, BASE jumping usually occurs closer to the ground and often in proximity with structures. This gives athletes less time to react to shifting conditions, equipment failure, or recover from a bad jump. This can sometimes result in serious injury or even death. That said, as the sport has evolved, some skydivers have turned to BASE jumping to get a visceral rush of adrenaline on a regular basis, creating a great deal of crossover amongst the two activities.

Some base jumpers leap off bridges, while others take off from buildings. Some extreme adventurers don "birdmen" or "flying squirrel" suits (AKA wingsuits) then jump off of high cliffs or manmade structures instead. Others will even leap out of a plane and glide along at higher altitudes before deploying their parachutes, although by the strictest definition that isn't usually considered BASE jumping.

During the first few seconds of free fall the wingsuits fill with air, allowing the birdman to soar at up to 140 miles per hour, sometimes flying close to rock walls and towers (or [even through caves](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3146923/Daredevil-wingsuit-makes-craziest-basejump-flying-hole-mountain-just-TWO-metres-wide.html)) during their descent. The suits allow the "pilots" to pull off precision maneuvers, although those are best left to experienced BASE jumpers and wingsuiters who have years of experience and know exactly what they are doing.

Once the flight is near its end, and the ground is rapidly approaching, BASE jumpers deploy their parachutes and slowly drift back to the ground. The visceral appeal to the sport comes from the fact that no aircraft is needed, participants can leap off of anything that is fairly tall, and they are in complete control of their own destiny throughout.

BASE jumping can trace its origins back to the 1970s when adrenaline seekers were looking for new sports to push their skills to the limit. In 1978, filmmaker Carl Boenish Jr. actually coined the term, when he and his wife Jean, along with Phil Smith, and Phil Mayfield, made the first jump off of El Capitan in [Yosemite National Park](https://www.nps.gov/yose/index.htm) using ram-air parachutes to slow their descent. They made an impressive free fall from that iconic rock face, essentially creating a whole new sport in the process.

In the early years of BASE jumping, participants in this wild and dangerous new activity mostly employed the same gear that skydivers used when jumping out of airplanes. But over time, the equipment was refined and redesigned to meet the specific needs of the jumpers. The parachutes, jumpsuits, helmets, and other gear all evolved, becoming more compact and lighter, turning into something that was far better suited for use in a more active sport. Since BASE jumpers often have to carry their equipment with them to the point where they make their leap, these refinements were welcomed by the early pioneers of the activity who often walked or climbed considerable distances before they jumped into the air.

The parachutes also has to deploy and fill with air quickly, as the distance from the jump point to the ground wasn't always very high.

In the mid-1990's, French skydiver and BASE jumper Patrick de Gayardon developed what would become the first modern wingsuit. He had hoped to use his designs to add more surface area to his body, allowing him to glide more easily through the air while adding maneuverability to his jumps as well. In the years that followed refinements were made to the initial design by a number of other skydivers, and the wingsuit concept went from a prototype used by just a few people to a full-fledged product that is commonly used – [and sold](https://squirrel.ws/) – today.

In 2003, the wingsuit made the leap from skydiving over to BASE jumping, giving rise to a technique known as [proximity flying](http://www.wingsuitfly.com/proximity-flying/4579414707). In this activity, the BASE jumper still leaps from a structure of some sort but glides back down to Earth while flying close to the ground, just above trees, buildings, cliffs, or other obstacles. A parachute is still required to make a safe landing however, as a wingsuit doesn't provide enough deceleration to allow for a controlled touch down.

Resource B

**Why Are So Many BASE Jumpers Dying?**

BY ANDREW BISHARAT

In researching 2016’s dramatic rise in BASE jumping deaths, I was almost unable to keep up with which the pace of jumpers were dying.

I even watched one of these deaths in real time, live-streamed on Facebook.

A guy with the handle of “Sat Dex” popped up in my feed on the morning of August 26, broadcasting himself via Facebook Live.

The video opens with him stepping into a wingsuit. He has dark hair, a sleeve tattoo, and a Hollywood-style beard. He speaks in German. He gives the finger to the camera and grins. He zips up his suit, flashing more smiles with a sort of nervous or excited energy, the kind you might associate with a child opening a birthday gift.

“Today you fly with me,” he says in German.

He waves into his outstretched phone. The video goes dark as the phone is now inside his wingsuit, ostensibly in his hand, and still live-streaming to Facebook.

Now I hear a whoosh of air. The sound of airflow grows, reaching a ferocious decibel. The turbulent din lasts no more than a few seconds.

Suddenly I hear the man emit an acute bellow. Then, pandemonium. He’s tumbling and tumbling. I hear cowbells. The tumbling stops. It’s silent. Cows continue milling around in what I’ve imagined to be idyllic mountain scenery somewhere in Europe, with giant blue limestone cliffs towering over rolling green pastures.

More silence.

Then long, low, soft moans.

Then all that is left is cowbells.

I later learned this man’s real name was Armin Schmieder. He was Italian, but lived in Freiburg, Germany. He was a father to a young child. He was 28.

Facebook did not immediately take down the video, despite outrage from many commenters, including his family. The social media site slapped on a disclaimer: “Warning - Graphic Video.” Yet the views continued to pile up.

Meanwhile, a rather grim irony remained, as per Facebook’s design protocol for these types of posts. It said: “Sat Dex was live.”

After 36 hours, the video was finally removed.The end of summer can’t come fast enough for many in the speed-fueled world of wingsuit BASE jumping (BASE is an acronym standing for the types of objects participants may leap from: Buildings, Antennas, bridges—aka, “Spans”—and the Earth itself, in the form of cliffs or promontories). This has already become the deadliest year on record for BASE jumping, with at least 31 deaths thus far. Twenty-three of those fatalities occurred this summer—six deaths in June, two in July, and 15 in August. The fatal spree has spurred practitioners to dub summer as “Wingsuit BASE Killing Season.”

“It’s been a horrific last couple of months,” says Richard Webb, a former fighter pilot for the U.S. Navy, current private pilot, and active wingsuit BASE jumper from Moab, Utah

“This is easily the worst season I can remember,” he says. “And, honestly, I haven’t even been keeping up with who’s been going in. I’m tired of the carnage.”

Summer is a time when the European Alps—with its myriad locations that feature highly accessible, legal, and very large cliffs from which to jump—are devoid of snow and are considered to be in good condition for flying. Like moths to a flame, wingsuit BASE jumpers from around the world descend on the Alps each summer to get their fix.

Aside from the record fatality count, the BASE world hit another morbid milestone in August. The BASE Fatality List (BFL), an unofficial and non-comprehensive wiki that records BASE fatalities dating back to 1981 for educational purposes within the community, surpassed 300 names. The greater cause for concern, though, is that the BFL appears to be trending at an accelerated rate—more than 260 of those names have been recorded since 2000.

So, why are so many BASE jumpers dying?

“The simplest answer is wingsuits,” says Webb. “Right now, wingsuit BASE jumping is, globally, the hottest thing going for the impressionable, 18- to 35-year-old single-male demographic.”

BASE jumping has no organizing bodies that keep track of participation numbers. Anecdotally, the sport is growing, perhaps as evidenced by the increasing numbers of people who are dying.

This year’s constant, gruesome news has spurred some BASE jumpers to rebuke their wingsuiting counterparts. “Sketchy Andy” Lewis, one of the world’s most accomplished BASE jumpers (and hardly a model of prudence himself, as evinced by his nickname), wrote a scathing post on Facebook that, among other things, called for the BFL to be split into two separate lists: one for wingsuiting and one for regular BASE jumping.

“I called out wingsuiting as not being BASE jumping anymore,” he says. “I wanted the death list split. I also just asked everyone who wingsuits to just go die, so we can get it over with. Obviously, it was a horrible thing to say.”

Some context: Lewis wrote the post in the wake of a friend’s death. John Van Horne, an extremely experienced wingsuiter, had just crashed in the Alps at the end of June. “JVH,” as he was called, was “one of my best friends and last idols,” says Lewis. “He died with his family there.”

Lewis was upset, angry, and just sick and tired of waking up to learn about yet another friend’s death. Most dismissed Lewis as a pot calling the kettle black. Yet in some way, what he wrote in July was prescient. Summer’s big death wave was just about to begin.

“The post got deleted by Facebook, and I pissed off the entire community,” says Lewis. “My message was followed up by the most fatal month in BASE. I just painfully sat back and watched my friends die one after the other.”