

BASE Desires

INSIGHTS FROM THE EDGE

Flights of fancy or cold calculated steps into space? Dave Gallagher finds out what drives a man to take that leap off the edge of a cliff as member and resident photographer of the UK-based Mountain Man BASE team.



i Team effort opening a new exit on Ben Nevis sees Jase Mackenzie under canopy over the north face.

Lowering myself tentatively into position over the edge, I sit back into my harness letting the rope take my weight. Turning awkwardly with camera poised, I signal that I am ready. My associate is poised on a sloping rock over a sheer drop, preparing to launch himself into the chasm below. He isn't really attached to anything and although he has a parachute in his backpack there's very slim margin for error and only one chance to get this right. He gives the ok sign and with a "3-2-1, SEE-YA!" plunges over the side...I try to hold still to get the shot, but my heart is pounding in anticipation of what might happen if it doesn't go to plan...

The alarm jars me awake from this dream, which replays a recurrent motif in my attempts to photograph members of Mountain Man BASE team opening up cliffs to BASE jumping in the UK. The nervous excitement of being there 'in the moment' – trying to get shots that convey the drama and exhilaration, trying not to think about what might happen if the plan goes awry.

This common night time rumination attests to how swept up I have become in the escapades of Mountain Man BASE as resident photographer and team member. They are pioneering new BASE jumping exits on UK cliffs on an unprecedented scale. With ever evolving ambitions, barely a weekend goes by when some new scheme hasn't been hatched to find new places to scope out, climb up to, dangle from, and ... jump off! My special access grants me opportunity to not just capture the excitement and drama in pictures, but also delve deeper into the question of why individuals would choose such a perilous past-time. Fortunately, as an 'adventure psychologist' I can attempt to address this question from a scientific perspective in-situ as the action happens.

ALL PHOTOS: DAVID GALLAGHER.





*"AND IF THOU GAZE LONG INTO
AN ABYSS, THE ABYSS WILL
ALSO GAZE INTO THEE."*

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE



📍 Josh of Mountain Man BASE soars along the cliffs of Clogwyn Du'r Arddu on Snowdon.



📍 Josh with Andy Ross doing a two-way exit from Falcon Crag in Borrowdale, Lake District.

➤ I think back through the catalogue of escapades I have borne witness to whilst associating with the team. Initially ignorant to the possibilities, I came to realise that there is a wealth of BASE potential to tap into across the British Isles. Furthermore, I gleaned insight into the process of scoping new exits, the judgement and skill required to 'open' these up, and some appreciation of why some individuals are attracted to this seemingly 'crazy' enterprise. This was an important induction into the context of BASE jumping and what can be achieved in the UK (for cliffs do not as a rule exhibit the scale of Alpine or North American counterparts). Some misconceptions were banished, along with the realisation that it's not just some crazy adrenaline fuelled enterprise by impulsive 'thrill-seekers'. Far from it.

Asking my associates what makes them do it elicits a varied range of responses. From the flippant 'because there's nothing worth watching on the telly' through to more considered rationalisation. This emphasises planning, scoping, scouting and execution of a 'mission' – with objectives, goals, application of skills. And, somewhat surprisingly perhaps given stereotyped ideas of the lone maverick rebel, emphasis on the teamwork to make the exit happen safely and successfully. For every member. A clear support network exists, with the more experienced members mentoring those with fewer jumps under their belts. The mutual cooperation brings different skills to bear – climbing and mountaineering skills to facilitate getting up onto less accessible pinnacles, rope access to belay one's

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companion onto the airy ledge exit point. A support crew collects any spare kit after the jump to lighten the load of those leaping into the beyond, and carry it back down the mountain!

Of course, at the end of the day, and in the moment of the jump itself, it is the lone individual who must make that decision to step out into space, and that is where the really interesting question focuses. Just what goes on in the brain of a BASE jumper to enable such a life-vs-death decision to be made?

The roots of this question perhaps rest in the responses noted earlier. Although a spike of adrenaline may occur, by the time someone becomes proficient enough to be a BASE jumper, actually the novelty and 'adrenaline for its own sake' have generally worn off. One must already be an accomplished skydiver with hundreds of jumps, and then have followed a progressive, mentored system learning the skills necessary to jump from Building, Antenna, Span, or Earth (the latter is Mountain Man BASE team's main UK focus, being strictly legal stuff!). One can begin to appreciate that this is about skills, experience, and rational level-headedness.



Using reasoning from *cognitive* psychology that seeks to account for how mental functioning relates to brain activity in stressful contexts, one explanation considers how the brain directs resources for performing tasks that need to be done, whilst minimising distraction. When attention is focused on accomplishing such a task, a certain network of brain regions appear to become more strongly connected, potentially pushing the individual into 'the zone' and a state of 'flow'. This can facilitate the very best performance, and allow that individual to push boundaries beyond the normal level of accomplishment. Interestingly at the same time this *task-focused* network becomes 'switched on' as it were, another network in the pre-frontal cortex (the so called 'default mode') actually becomes 'switched off' – actually areas of the brain where awareness of 'self' is thought to be situated. In practice then, it is likely that the brain is focused on getting the job done, and really does not want to be troubled by unwanted 'self-indulgent' thoughts that interfere with this life-or-death point of decision-making. This perhaps accounts for why many reports of *flow* correspond with a lack of awareness of self, and thus represents a mechanism for achieving optimised performance when it is really needed!

A watershed event helping me appreciate how these facets of the process come together through team efforts, occurred in late January when I was called upon to rendezvous for a winter assault on Ben Nevis.

Up to this point I had witnessed Mountain Man BASE jumping from frighteningly low cliffs, perhaps only one hundred or so feet (30-40m) in height, and with steep sloping ground below (called 'talus'). Canopy deployment was facilitated often using static line techniques for rapid opening, thus revealing how such techniques can facilitate exits much lower than one might expect. There is indeed a deep level of commitment in this, which makes the feats of these UK jumpers so impressive.

But Ben Nevis is on another, spectacular scale, and on this occasion offered

incredibly dramatic atmospheric conditions in the throes of an Arctic spell. I hastened to Fort William late Friday evening, spending a bitterly cold night in my van with temperatures dropping into minus double figures. We all convened hideously early pre-dawn in the North Face car park. The sky was encrusted with stars and the ground a firm frozen white. Setting off as a team of six (five jumpers and myself), we made the long approach in, leaving the forest behind and breaking trail through often waist-deep snow. Night gave way to a stunning alpine day with clear blue skies and intense sun, though a stiff occasional breeze bit harshly at exposed skin.

Eventually we arrived, strung out according to fitness levels (me towards the rear struggling to keep up with the youthful enthusiasm and overladen, admittedly, with camera gear), and re-grouped in the summit shelter considering options. The proposed exit was just below the summit trig point and would be facilitated by a roped descent. But unexpected wind was putting paid to that plan. After some deliberation it was decided to leave the summit itself and perhaps find an alternative somewhere off the plateau. As alluded to already this is an enterprise requiring composure and judgement as well as the execution of skills developed over an apprenticeship of progressive development. As luck would have it, a couple hundred metres further down a prospective exit was identified: a promontory above Number Three gully protruding like a snow-encrusted diving board over the north face of the Ben.





Josh jumps from 'Cloggy', the highest exit yet established on Snowdon.

➤ For my role in the proceedings I settled on a parallel outcrop and awaited the photographic opportunity to present itself. Meanwhile the team put in place their meticulous procedures and jumping sequence. Gradually it became apparent that the window of opportunity was opening as the wind dropped off. The scene was one of sublime majesty with the north face laid out before us in wintry splendour.

With careful and prolonged preparation of rope security, ritualised checks and counter-checks of equipment and drilled actions prior to exit, the group bonded over collective purpose. Then it was time. I readied myself with camera and watched the proceedings unfurl, as with their canopies, one by one, like fledglings leaving the nest, they dived over the edge.

Each figure in turn described an arc abruptly halted as the static line came taut and snapped the main canopy open. There followed a graceful gliding trajectory down into the glen below.

It is difficult to accommodate all of this at the time, focusing on taking shots, and nervously holding breath and hoping all goes to plan. One has to review this moment back later through POV video footage and photos in order to take stock of the experience. Steadying breathing rate. Poising before launch. Hunkering down, loading up to spring out into empty space. Back arched, arms spread. The violent spasm as the torso is whipped vertical by the canopy opening above. Relief...

Returning to the earlier points made however, from witnessing the build-up, moment of exit and aftermath, it does make sense to consider this task-focused rationale that displaces any sensationalist notions of impulsivity, or thrill seeking. Indeed one might contend that the 'thrill seeker' line of thinking actually denigrates the activity and renders it meaningless as a pursuit which in fact takes real skill, and balls at the end of the day. One must be bold, but one must conquer one's impulse to *not jump* in a way. From my personal experience, BASE jumpers exhibit common sense, judgement, and profess nervousness and fear, much as anyone else might. But they also seem to have that capacity to tune down the voice of dissent that is at the root of self-doubt in that moment (again implying those particular brain regions are taken offline when it is critical to do so).

"One by one, like fledglings leaving the nest, they dived over the edge."



It will never be possible to 'know' what it is like to BASE jump without actually doing it! The flow state achieved by this activity is undoubtedly addictive in itself. A neurochemical cocktail of stress hormones and rewarding neurotransmitters reinforce an experience that is highly challenging yet grants the ultimate accomplishment of survival against the odds; at the same time highlighting the exhilaration of performing in an optimised brain state. Sometimes people don't really know how to articulate why they do things, they are just driven to do so, and if pressed may resort to a degree of speculative post-rationalisation. Perhaps the real 'answer' is that it's not a

definable thing that sets apart the BASE jumper as a separate species. If anything, perhaps it rests in the motivations that exist in all of us to explore and participate in the landscape, to plan and execute objectives and to apply skills to satisfying challenges; and with that an indirect sense of one's brain functioning in an optimal way to accomplish the task. And of course the tuning out of self-doubt ... maybe that's the real 'buzz'!

I ponder upon all this, how rewarding the association has proven to me, enriching my memories, dreams, and photography. I can now also appreciate how the UK mountains present this grand opportunity to exhibit boldness of spirit tempered by skill and judgement; a fundamental lust to live life to the full.

Sighing contentedly, free of the anxiety provoked by my earlier dream, I turn over and bury myself back into my warm sleeping bag ... then remember why the alarm went off in the first place. 🏔️



Dave Gallagher is team photographer with MountainManBASE.com who collectively create action media content, pushing boundaries of BASE in the UK through all sorts of exciting projects. As well as photographing BASE jumpers in close proximity he writes about psychology and brain function in relation to adventure pursuits (see CognitivExplorer.co.uk).

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