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# WINGSUIT

**Ready hombre?" said Alvaro, as I sat knees together in the door of the levelling plane, the faint acridity of A1 jet fumes in my nostrils, and the propeller draft searing across my face. "Damn right amigo," I said stretching out a webbed arm to bump fists gangster style.**

**I**t's the sixth and final jump of my WSI international wingsuit course, and I've just hopped into a 100mph headwind, and spread my polyester wings 13,500 feet above the picturesque Pyrenean town of Alp. My instructor Alvaro "Aviador" Valdez is just seconds behind me as we whistle away from the diving aircraft, cheeks flapping furiously.

Once the initial stomach-stirring drop is over a small measure of calm is restored, and we gain our desired superhero like glide position. I glance downward, and check the altimeter mounted on my chest, then look ahead feeling the chambers of my suit inflate

**Words** Maxwell Roche





# T S C H O O L

and become a rigid wing. Whoa, I look around. The electric blue of the sky is rebounded by a convex protrusion of hills and patchwork fields. My ears are now aching slightly from the sudden change in pressure, yet the pain seems unimportant, the purity and delicacy of the sensation completely surpasses all other emotion. I'm bloody flying!

I have another few seconds of dreamlike imaginings, and then I'm back, streaking like a man-shaped missile towards a cluster of candyfloss clouds. Alvaro drops down and flies along beside me, grinning through the dampening mist. We dive 90 degrees left, and then left again, navigating a pre-agreed box-like flight pattern, which brings us round on a heading with the airfield.

It's now that the real fun begins. Landing

area in sight, still 9,000 feet above the world, there's nothing left to do but enjoy. Alvaro, who just so happens to be the type of guy who jumps off and flies down mountains for kicks in his free time, now demonstrates his piloting prowess by swooping above me from side-to-side with a smile on his face, like zippy on helium.

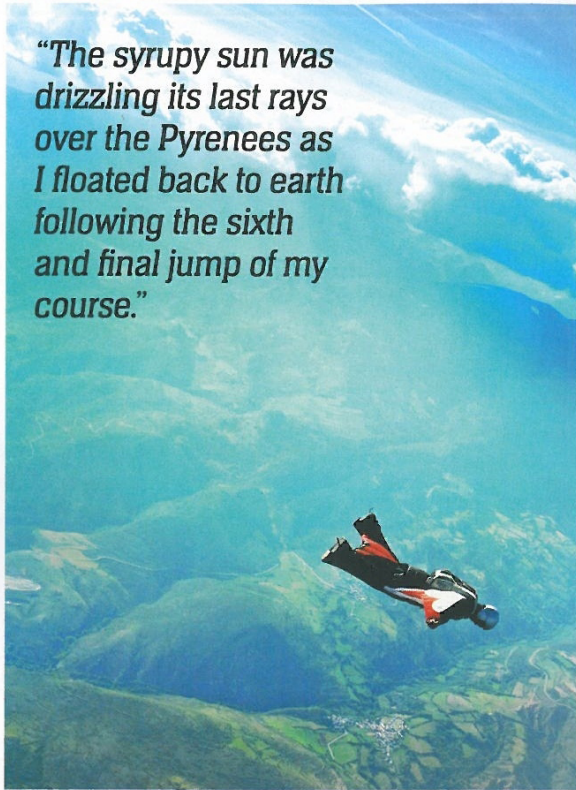
Eventually after 1-minute and 50 seconds (which is an extremely short flight compared to what's possible in a wingsuit) we reach 4,000 feet, and I deploy my parachute. Seconds later I feel the reassuring yank from behind as my parachute opens, and my legs are flung forward rather as though I've slipped on a banana skin whilst running at full sprint.

The syrupy sun was drizzling its last rays

over the Pyrenees as I floated back to earth following the sixth and final jump of my course. A few of the happy characters packing parachutes on the ground shouted congratulations up to me, probably hoping for some free celebratory beer that evening! I near enough lost my eyeballs inside my head through grinning but thankfully a firm and congratulatory slap on the back from my instructor Alvaro was all that was required to pop them back to the surface back on terra-firma. So, two long years after my dream of learning this mind boggling new sport began, it had finally been realised. Looking back on my meagre 29 years in existence I am truly at odds to recall a single day where I've experienced such a sensational thrill.



*“The syrupy sun was drizzling its last rays over the Pyrenees as I floated back to earth following the sixth and final jump of my course.”*



If you've made it to this point in the article you're probably thinking one of two things. Either it's firstly; 'Why on the Lord's good blessed earth would someone want to do anything as ludicrous as what I've just described?' or secondly: "Ahhho come to mama... I wanna piece of this action, where do I sign?" For those of you pleasure seekers who are thinking the latter. Here's how it goes.

First you need to complete your AFF (Accelerated Freefall) course, which consists of eight instructed skydives and 10 solo practice jumps. All in this costs around £1,500, which I think most will agree isn't cheap, but the fun gained per pound spent ratio is titanic. After this you will be a fully qualified skydiver and receive you're A

licence which enables you to jump solo anywhere in the world. From this point on jumps will cost you around £15 each, provided you have your own equipment, and if you don't roughly £30.

If once you've gained you're all important A licence, you're still keen as mustard to hurtle like a hawk through the heavens then you must go on to complete a further 182 skydives (I know this sounds like a lot), and gain your B licence. The B licence course is only a 10 jump course and slightly cheaper at around £500. This is when you will learn the necessary techniques to control your movements in the sky and jump safely with others.

Now I know this is starting to sound like an expensive and time consuming process.

A total of 200 jumps might also sound like an absurd amount to complete before you get your wings, but unfortunately it is exactly the amount that's necessary to prepare you for the added complications and dangers the wingsuit creates, and trust me you get out everything you put in, with interest. By the time your 200th jump comes around, which will be sooner than you think, as skydiving is even more addictive than Pringles, you'll be truly ready to safely have a go at what is arguably one the most exhilarating sports this planet has ever seen. You will earn yourself a seat at the table around which sit the privileged few guys and girls qualified to experience the closest our homosapien race has come to unassisted flight.



Escape the beige two dimensional world, and be catapulted like a hellish fireball into a four dimensional surround sound technicolor universe.



The speed with which you progress toward being able to fly the wingsuit solely depends on how much time, money and enthusiasm you are willing or able to dedicate. It took me two years of intermittent weekends at the drop zone and a few long holidays to Spain to get there but for someone with more time and money it could certainly be achieved in a matter of months.

Skydive BCN in the Spanish Pyrenees and Skydive Empuriabrava on the Mediterranean coast near Barcelona are both perfect places to learn to skydive all the way from complete beginner to wingsuit wonder wizard. Under the watchful eyes of instructors Alain Downy, Ariel Juncos and Alvaro, you will be safely and expertly guided every step of the way. Flights to the

Barcelona area are cheap in the winter months and good weather (which is an essential for skydiving) is more common on the continent. Another benefit to learning in warmer climes such as Spain and Italy, is that the cost of tuition and jumps are slightly less, so you will be sure to get more "holla for your dollar".

So, now you know people. A grand total of 200 skydives and an FAI B licence is all you need to go wingsuiting! I've no doubt that 9 to 5 is getting you down, and those dusty looking adrenal glands are in serious need of a juicing, so why not score a few weeks off work, bust open the piggy bank and get airborne? Regret it, you most certainly will not, especially once your certificate arrives in the post and you become an internationally

recognised hero of human flight.

And finally, for all those die-hard readers out there who are inevitably thinking, "This isn't outdoor fitness", I urge you to think again. Just as your aching limbs yearn for animation after eight hours in a sedentary state hunched over that keyboard, so do all those neurons and synapses up there in your noggin. A pastime such as I have here described takes you out of what can sometimes feel like a beige two dimensional world, and catapults you like a hellish fireball into a four dimensional surround sound technicolor universe. This is fitness of an altogether different kind begot by the flexion and extension of your sensory self. It may seem mental but it's actually 'mental health'.



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