

FELIX BAUMGARTNER

The last time you saw the Austrian BASE-jumper and skydiver was on the first page of your newspaper, the day after his freefall across the English Channel. His next project will redefine the limits of human endeavour. You really will believe a man can fly...

Words: Christian Seiler

“ I WANT TO BEQUEATH SOMETHING TO THE WORLD. I WANT TO LEAVE MY MARK ”

In 2003, Felix Baumgartner put on a carbon wing, and used it to freefall into Calais after jumping out of a plane over the south-east coast of England. He crossed the Channel in a way that no one before or since has done. Breaking records, and smashing expectations, is what the 40-year-old Austrian does.

Since then, he has undertaken some spectacular BASE-jumps: leaping from some of the world's tallest buildings and the statue of Jesus Christ in Rio de Janeiro was how he made his name. He has also graduated from helicopter school and has been working, for more than two years, on a secret project so groundbreaking that it will recalibrate our knowledge of the human body, and raise the bar for human endeavour to... well, to outer space.

Now, at last, his secret is out. Baumgartner's next and most fearsome challenge is Red Bull Stratos, an incredible descent from the edge of Earth's atmosphere, during which a man, by freefall alone, is going to break the sound barrier. That man is Felix Baumgartner, and here is his story.

Name
Felix Baumgartner

Born
April 20, 1969,
Salzburg, Austria

Profession
Helicopter pilot

Peaks and troughs
Broke the world record for highest and lowest BASE-jumps

Spaceman
His next project, Red Bull Stratos, will set the bar for human endeavour. Watch the skies...

Web
www.felixbaumgartner.com

“EVERYTHING AROUND ME
WILL BE BLACK. I’LL BE ALONE
IN THE STRATOSPHERE”



1. THE LEAP FROM OUTER SPACE

BAUMGARTNER HAS BEEN WORKING FOR YEARS ON MAKING RED BULL STRATOS A REALITY. HE SECURED THE HELP OF LEADING SPACE EXPERTS TO CONSTRUCT A HELIUM BALLOON THAT CAN TAKE HIM UP TO AN ALTITUDE OF AROUND 36KM (22.5 MILES). HIS HEART POUNDS WHEN HE THINKS OF THE MOMENT HE MAKES HIS LEAP. “WHAT TO SAY BEFORE I JUMP?”

Your latest project is called Red Bull Stratos – Mission to the Edge of Space. What’s it all about?
The biggest mountains have already been climbed. The Atlantic has already been crossed. Man has landed on the moon. But no man has broken the speed of sound on his own. That’s what I want to do. If I can do that, I’ll also do the highest manned balloon trip, the longest freefall, the fastest freefall and the highest jump in the world.

And what are the project’s basic details?
In a capsule attached to a helium balloon, I will ascend to a height of around 36km (22.5 miles), at which point I will leave the capsule and accelerate in freefall to a speed of 1300kph (808mph). I’ll be wearing a spacesuit. Doing this will mean breaking the sound barrier.

So you’re trying to break records held by US Air Force officer Joseph Kittinger, which he set over New Mexico on August 16, 1960?
Yes. Kittinger climbed to 31,322m in his helium balloon, and then jumped out of the gondola. He

was in freefall for four minutes and 36 seconds, and almost reached the speed of sound when he was clocked at 988kph (614mph; the speed of sound is 1236kph [768mph]). I want to break these records.

When did you first think about surpassing Kittinger’s record?

The project has been on my desk four times in one form or another. In 2004, an Austrian balloonist suggested taking up a gas balloon to 50km (30 miles) and jumping. The second time I thought about it was when a company I didn’t know suggested it to me, but that didn’t pan out either. Then I was approached by a former colleague of Richard Branson – a man who has set a whole host of ballooning records. We sat down and went through the logistics, but we didn’t click.

And so what happened next?

I decided to take matters into my own hands. After painstaking research, I got a team together with enough expertise in aviation and suit technology for us to make an attempt at the records.

Who’s in your team?

Art Thompson, an aviation expert who, among other things, helped develop the famous Stealth Bomber. I’m also working with the David Clark Company, which is making my suit and is one of NASA’s most important suppliers. Then there’s Joseph Kittinger, the current record-holder. And Red Bull, of course. Without Red Bull, I’d never have been able to get my projects off the ground.

What is it you are expecting to get out of Red Bull Stratos?

We will provide a huge amount of data that will allow analysis of what happens when extreme pressure is applied to the human body. After all, no one has yet gone faster than the speed of sound without a machine powering them.

What do you think it’ll be like for you?

Everything around me will be black. I’ll be alone in the stratosphere. When I jump, I’ll be going on a journey that no one has ever done. I will be the first person to break the sound barrier alone. That will be a record for all eternity. As such, a piece of me will become immortal.

What’s the appeal of going down in history?

I want to bequeath something to the world. I’ve always been a fan of people like James Dean and Ayrton Senna, people who live on in their fans. I’ve often thought about why we don’t forget people like them, and it’s because they left behind something worth remembering. Because they leave their mark. That’s what it is. I want to leave my mark.

Are you in charge of the project, or can you defer when needs be?

I am involved in every step of this project, because 36km up I am completely on my own, and I don’t want to have to pay for someone else’s mistakes.

How far have you got with testing?

I’ve already done preliminary tests in the pressurised suit. I performed them at a simulated height of 36km, and I coped well.

So, the suit increases pressure to replace the atmospheric pressure that decreases the higher you go...

When you go higher than 18km (11 miles), your blood starts to boil. Most military pilots have pressurised suits that can handle altitudes of up to 15km (9 miles). Hardly anyone has been up as high as 36km, because such an extreme height is of no interest to the military.

What does it feel like 36km up?

The suit inflates and the pressure increases, and any movement is agony. The human body is not at home up there.

So how can you do a parachute jump under such conditions?

I’m learning how to from scratch. For starters, because of the helmet, you can’t see if the parachute has opened. Two mirrors have to be fixed to my gloves. And then you need total oxygen supply.

How much time do you spend in the suit?

As much as possible. Joseph Kittinger told me, “You have to go singing and dancing in the suit. You shouldn’t even notice that you’ve got the suit on, otherwise you’ll be suddenly and hopelessly out of your depth when you get to 36km.”

What does he mean by that?

Imagine you’re sitting in the capsule. There’s not much room. It’s cold. You can’t feel your hands and feet. You can’t sweat, because if you do your visor will steam up. It’s not normal, so I have to prepare as much as possible.

And how will you learn to jump in the suit?

We’ve planned several jumps at different heights.

What equipment will you have in the capsule?

The most important things: navigation and emergency equipment, altimeter, radio, oxygen.

And how exactly do you get out of it?

There’s a sliding door that I can open, and there are two rails fixed to the outside, which I hold onto before I get going.

How big is the balloon?

Before lift-off it’s 145m tall. The skin is as thin as a normal plastic bag. That’s what makes getting the balloon started so hard every time. If there’s a tear in the skin, you have to pack the balloon back up again and start from scratch.

What’s the toughest challenge for you as far as Red Bull Stratos is concerned?

Only this: returning to Earth alive.

Are you afraid as zero hour approaches?

I have respect for what I am going to do, because never before have I had to rely so much on technology and my team.

Do you have a mental image of the moment when you jump?

Yes I have, because I’ve gone through it a thousand times in my mind. The only question I have yet to answer is what I’ll say before I jump.

You’ve got to do something as good as, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap...”

Exactly. Whenever I think about it, I start to get palpitations.



“AS A CHILD, I ALWAYS
WANTED TO FLY LIKE
OUR SUPERHEROES”

2. EARLY YEARS

When did you begin parachute jumping?

When I was 16. You’re not allowed to do it any younger than that.

And why did you want to do it?

As a child, I always wanted to fly like our superheroes. And in my way, I’ve achieved that.

You served your time in the Austrian Army, where you learned to drive tanks and jump out of planes. Why did you leave the army?

I was first a tank driver and instructor, then I was an athlete in the close combat school. I couldn’t follow stupid orders.

So it was an acrimonious break-up?

Let’s put it this way – I had problems being subordinate.

It can’t all have been bad, though?

Not at all. Much of what I learned in the military – for example being tough on yourself and coping with hardship – has helped me enormously with my life further down the line. I also learned my leadership skills in the military.

HE COMPLETED A MECHANIC’S APPRENTICESHIP AND THEN TRAINED AS A PARACHUTIST WHEN IN THE AUSTRIAN ARMY. HE DECIDED TO BECOME A BASE-JUMPER BECAUSE IT WAS THE CLOSEST THING HE COULD FIND TO MAKE TRUE HIS DREAMS OF FLIGHT. THE TATTOO ON HIS ARM SAYS ‘BORN TO FLY’

“ONCE YOU'RE ON THE WAY,
THERE'S NO GOING BACK”



HIS FIRST TRAINER SHOWED HIM VIDEO FOOTAGE OF A BASE-JUMPER WHO DID ALL SORTS OF CRAZY STUFF IN THE AIR, THEN ASKED HIM IF HE LIKED THE KIND OF MOVES HE SAW. BAUMGARTNER ANSWERED: "YES, IT LOOKS COOL." AND HIS TRAINER REPLIED: "BUT HE'S DEAD"

After the army, you tried your hand at motocross and also at boxing.

I had a lot of free time when I was serving in Wiener Neustadt [south of Vienna], so I signed up to a boxing club. My aim was to have a professional fight after I'd completed my training. I wanted to know what the world looks like from the ring.

You fought the Croatian welterweight Dinko Porobja, who had previously won 140 fights.

Couldn't you have made things easier for yourself? The fight was only over three rounds. I got hit in the face immediately and knew that I had to fight back or it would hurt. And after 40 seconds, he was on the floor. A knockout.

Why didn't you continue with boxing?

Because as an Austrian boxer, I thought I had no chance of an international career.

3. THE BASE LINE

How did you make that leap from parachuting to BASE-jumping?

In 1995, I watched a video of two guys jumping off El Capitan, a 1000m monolith in the Yosemite National Park in California. Not long after that, I saw Rainer Nowak jumping off the Olympiaturm [the tower in Munich's Olympic Park] on TV. I was totally fascinated by the idea that you could parachute jump without an aeroplane. It comes very close to my idea of being able to fly.

So did you just give it a go?

No. I had the good fortune to meet and learn from Tracy 'Space' Walker: a fat, unshaven guy who, when I met him for the first time, opened the door in a blue-and-white striped dressing-gown, beer in one hand and a Marlboro Menthol in the other. I thought to myself, "This is not the man who is going to teach me something so difficult and dangerous."

But he was the one who taught you?

He did. To set the tone, Tracy showed me videos of one guy who'd done really crazy stuff. Then he asked me if I liked what I saw. I said yes, it looked cool. Then he said, "But he's dead." He showed me how dangerous the sport can be if you're not careful. When I say I was lucky to meet Tracy, this is what I'm talking about, because if you're with the sort of crowd who are happy to hurl themselves off anything after smoking a joint, you probably won't live long.

So your maiden jump was on Bridge Day off the New River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia, USA?

On the third weekend in October every year, hundreds of BASE-jumpers from all over the world get together to celebrate the bridge's birthday and to hold the unofficial BASE-jumping world championships with a combination of acrobatic and target jumps.

How did the first jump feel?

Just as I'd imagined it in my head thousands of times before. I was totally focused.

It wasn't stressful?

No, the first time that happened was the day after, when Tracy showed me a much lower bridge, one only 70m high [the New River Gorge Bridge is 267m in height].

Are jumps from lower down that much more dangerous?

They limit the working time you have in the air. If the parachute turns 180 degrees after the jump – which can always happen – you hardly have any time to make adjustments.

And because of that, you got butterflies...

It's not butterflies, really. It's a sudden calm. You can only vaguely hear what's going on around you, until you finally let yourself fall, and once you're on the way, there's no going back. It's a bad moment.

Is 'bad' the right word?

It is bad in a way, but it's interesting too. I'm fascinated by how final the decision is once you've jumped. After that it's all very quick. There's juddering above you: you look up and the parachute is open. You pull the steering lines and you land. Only then can you say to yourself – wonderful.

So was it a while before you could enjoy BASE-jumping fully?

Yes, that came much later.

But you'd joined the BASE-jumping world.

I was energised. I would travel around, looking for places to jump from. I was always on the lookout.

So where did you go?

The Europabrücke [in Austria], and a whole host of other places. Those were heady days.

Were you ever wild and careless?

Only once, when I hadn't taken one of Tracy's most important rules to heart: never let someone who isn't either a BASE-jumper or a parachutist control your parachute.

What happened?

My brother released the parachute much too early. I was spinning in the air and went too close to a power cable. I had to avoid it, and when I landed, I broke my leg awkwardly. I was out of action for

so long that I lost my job, which at the time was with a ventilation systems company.

Did that change things for you?

Yes, a lot, but all for the better. I did a lot of casual work as soon as I was well again, and had a lot of time to train.

And what happened to you as you did more jumps?

I became more cautious. When I found a bridge in the north of Salzburg that was only 50m high, I asked Tracy for advice. He shook his head and said, "If you want to kill yourself, then do it on something big." He was right. I mean, no jump is worth dying for, but if you screw up jumping off the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio, at least that has a certain glory about it.

Fair point...

Then I took part in Bridge Day again the following year, in 1997. There, it's a question of pulling off acrobatics in the air and then making a pinpoint landing, which is measured electronically. I won the target jumps, came second in the acrobatic jumps and the overall result was, "First, all the way from Austria, Felix Baumgartner". It was crazy.

Would you say that was the beginning of your BASE-jumping career?

From then on I was officially a Red Bull sportsman. Red Bull had already supported my parachuting club and I'd made myself a helmet with their logo on it. After winning Bridge Day, though, I had a wonderful connection to the company, which made huge, spectacular events possible.



“I ALWAYS WANTED TO BE THE BEST, A MAN OF AMBITION”

PHOTOGRAPHY: JÖRG MITTER/RED BULL PHOTOFILES

PHOTOGRAPHY: ULRICH GRILL/RED BULL PHOTOFILES

4. TO THE EXTREMES

What's the difference between someone being good and bad at what you do?

A good sportsman makes the right decisions. Over the course of my career, I have had to develop the very important ability to say no.

When is 'no' the right answer?

Say, for example, you're on the world's tallest building. It takes huge effort to get up there, and then when you're up there, it's too windy. And you have to come back down and you don't know if you'll make it back up onto that roof. Going into reverse at that point is hard.

You've never given into the temptation to be devil-may-care about things?

It's like the great climber Reinhold Messner once said: the only thing that matters is who gets back down.

Is BASE-jumping a sport or a show?

It's a challenge. I always wanted to be the best, even in the sack race at school. I am a man of ambition. I've always liked to swim against the tide, and what I do symbolises that really well. With BASE-jumping, you're always on the edge of the law. I do something that is forbidden. And it's fun breaking rules.

But you stick to the rules of BASE-jumping?

The preparation for my jumps almost gives me more enjoyment than the jumps themselves.

How much effort do you put into a project?

It's can be years' worth. First you go scouting for a worthy location. I always look for something unique. Every jump needs to strike a new image into people's minds.

Then how do you proceed?

I research the rough data first: the height, the surroundings. Whether the building is public or private is a decisive factor... Then I check out the location personally. Once I've done that I go home and sort out all the information. Then I get a jump team together, because the jump has to be documented professionally.

Is the recording of a jump really so important to you?

You've got to blow your own trumpet. Of course I can tell people about my jump from the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio, but a picture says more than a thousand words.

How do you get around the security at landmarks and buildings?

I've learned to proceed psychologically. Security staff the world over react the same way. No one would suspect that a clergyman might want to jump off a roof, for example. Or someone whose foot is in plaster.

With all your adventures, are you working on the principle that it's never too late to have a happy childhood?

Exactly. Once the child in you dies, you're not worth anything.

Are you an adrenaline junkie?

I am the greatest opponent of all that adrenaline-junkie talk. I wouldn't have any fun putting myself

AFTER WINNING THE UNOFFICIAL BASE-JUMPING WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP, HE'S SINCE JUMPED FROM WORLD'S TALLEST BUILDINGS AND ANY NUMBER OF BRIDGES. BUT HAS NEVER FORGOTTEN ONE IMPORTANT SKILL: WHEN TO SAY NO. IT'S WHY HE'S STILL ALIVE TODAY

“ I WOULDN'T HAVE FUN
IF I PUT MYSELF AT RISK ”



JUMPING FROM THE WORLD'S TALLEST BUILDINGS IS, OF COURSE, A REMARKABLE EFFORT, BUT IT IS AS DIFFICULT TO GET TO THE TOP OF THE BUILDING THAN TO ACTUALLY LEAP FROM IT. IN KUALA LUMPUR, HE MADE A FAKE ID FOR THE PETRONAS TOWERS, FOUND THE RIGHT HATCH IN THE UPPER LEVELS AND DULY MADE THE WORLD'S FRONT PAGES AND NEWS BULLETINS

in harm's way. I have a goal to achieve and if the goal demands me putting myself at risk, then I take the risk. But I'm not some wild dog.
So what are you?

A good planner. I calculate the risk until it's as low as possible. That's the only reason I can do the large-scale projects I'm doing at the moment.

How do you weigh up the challenge that Red Bull Stratos presents?

The experience I now have means that I can redefine the limits that I was confronted with a couple of years ago.

Do you ever go beyond the limit?

That's a stupid thing to say. The limit is the limit.

You are now sounding like you don't enjoy what you do...

That's also just words. I have never enjoyed a jump. You never know if a particular jump might be your last, regardless of how well prepared you are.

5. PETRONAS AND RIO

In 1999, the project that got you noticed was your leap from the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. How difficult was it to get onto the roof?

It's a very well-guarded commercial building. I sat in front of the Towers for a week to give myself an overview, checking for uniformed security staff and those who were on patrol in civvies. I had to look like a businessman so as not to arouse suspicion. No long hair. No jeans. No searching gazes.

How did you get the accreditation you needed to get in?

I had a small camera with me and went up to one of the security men and asked him to take a picture of me in front of the towers. And when I gave him the



“ I THOUGHT, THAT'S IT, WHY
DON'T I FIRE A ROPE OVER JESUS'S
ARM WITH A CROSSBOW? ”

camera, I'd already taken a photo of his ID. Back home I made a copy of the ID for myself using Photoshop, laminated it and that was that.

And was a crude forgery good enough?

Yes. Back then there were only visual checks. I had my parachute in a briefcase and a small hand-held camera too. I was wearing plain glass spectacles to look a little more serious. I got to the top unchallenged, but I had to look for the right staircase to get out onto the window-cleaning crane for over an hour.

Were you nervous?

Very. I was so close to my goal. It was my first event as a Red Bull sportsman. I went out onto the crane. Below me there was a garden mosaic and that guided me in the right direction. I jumped, landed and disappeared. It was all perfect. But I wasn't happy until I was back in the hotel and we could watch the recording together. At that point, the event had become a story and could be publicised.

That same year saw you jump in the most spectacular setting: the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio.

A Brazilian friend of mine put me onto the idea and I was enthusiastic right from the off. The main issue was how I was going to get onto the statue. There is a spiral staircase inside the statue that leads out onto Jesus's arms, but we couldn't do it that way.

Why not?

We would have had to break open three locks. I thought that would be disrespectful and so I looked for another way. I'd just seen *The Rock* in the cinema, in which the hero uses a crossbow and I thought, "That's it. Why don't I fire a rope over Jesus's arm with a crossbow and climb up?"

A bit like one of your heroes, Spider-Man...

Exactly. I experimented with an elaborate system of arrows with different types of rope on a crane in Siezenheim, back in Austria, and it worked. I had done my homework on all aspects of Brazil – the shock came when we got to Rio and went to Corcovado [the mountain on which the statue stands] by taxi. Jesus's hand, which is where I wanted to jump from, wasn't over a sheer drop,

as it had appeared to be in photographs, but directly above the visitors' platform. That meant it wasn't a 700m BASE-jump, but one of 29m. The conditions suddenly and dramatically changed.

Did you think of abandoning the project?

I didn't want to give up without a fight. Tracy did say he didn't know of any BASE-jumper who had ever jumped 29m, but I wanted to try it.

What was the biggest problem?

We needed a guarantee that the parachute would open straight away, which meant we had to fix it to the statue's right arm. We did this using a rubbish bag which we knew would break at a certain point. After some test jumps from a bridge, over water, we'd solved the problem. It was all fine.

How fast did your 'chute have to work?

At 29m, you've got 2.5 seconds before you hit the ground. The parachute was open and stable after 1.5 seconds. That gave me a second to spare.

What about the other factors?

The weather forecast for the planned jump day was good. We hired a couple of cameramen from the ZDF studio in Rio and a helicopter pilot who could film all the action. We had to get to Corcovado by 8pm the night before, because after that time there's no way of getting there: the area is sealed off and outside the roads and so on, it's just jungle.

Did you spend the night outdoors?

On tree trunks because there were so many bugs on the ground. It was hard and the time passed slowly. Then it began to rain in the middle of the night – heavy Brazilian rain. We had to cancel it. That happened to us five times.

How did the sixth attempt begin?

With a crossbow shot in the dead of night. A couple of seconds later I heard the zing of the arrow hitting the visitor platform – on the correct side. Perfect. We attached the climbing rope, fixed it in place and I climbed up it. Everything went well.

You had a bird's-eye view of one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

I did, but I was only thinking about the jump.

Whether we'd calculated correctly. Whether everything would go according to plan. And then I saw a security car coming up the switchback. Two guys got out of the car in their uniforms and were ranting and raving. And then I heard the photographers' helicopter approach. It was time. I was stressed.

How did you calm down?

I looked Jesus in the face. Oddly, I suddenly felt very meek under the circumstances and thought to myself, "He won't let me down."

And he didn't...

A step forward, and then it was as quick as lightning. Parachute up, a turn to the right to get past the visitor platform, the stone balustrade fell away underneath me and then all of a sudden I had time and space. Now, with the parachute up and me in the air, I could start enjoying it for the first time. This city. The sunrise. The sea.

Did you finally have the feeling that it had all been worthwhile?

No. When I got back to the hotel, I just felt empty

and relieved. But the next day, the pictures had made it into the newspapers, all over the world.
And didn't anyone complain that the statue had been desecrated?

On the contrary – a Brazilian church newsletter printed the picture, along with the headline, "The Lord was his witness".

6. FROM JUMPING TO FLYING

What have been your criteria as you've looked for new projects?

I wanted stories that would challenge me and that a lot of people would find interesting.

So you see yourself an entertainer?

You could put it that way, yes.

Is that what made you come up with the idea of your freefall crossing of the English Channel in 2003?

I didn't. After Brazil and Malaysia, offers came flying at me. One day my telephone rang and two aerodynamics students from Munich offered me a wing construction made of carbon fibre, which, supposedly, I'd be able to fly with.

And did it fly?

Not at all. On my first attempt, I completely lost control and went into a tailspin. But I didn't want to throw it away immediately, and when I tucked in my legs, I began flying correctly – at homicidal speed. It was clear that I was onto something huge here.

How did the construction's possibilities become more concrete?

Because Red Bull and I spent a lot of time and energy developing the wing further. One day, after I had covered a really remarkable distance, I realised as I was analysing the telemetry data that I'd be able to fly across the English Channel using the wing.

What did you do to get the plan off the ground?

We got a distinguished aerodynamicist and a carbon expert on the team and carried out endless,

A COUPLE OF AERODYNAMICS STUDENTS SENT HIM A SHORT CARBON WING CONSTRUCTION, WITH WHICH, THEY ALLEGED, HE'D BE ABLE TO FLY. AFTER A SERIES OF TESTS AND MODIFICATIONS, HE DID SO, ACROSS THE ENGLISH CHANNEL, IN JULY 2003

“ WITH THE PARACHUTE UP AND
ME IN THE AIR, I COULD START
ENJOYING IT, THE CITY, THE SEA ”



THE ONE THING HE WOULD NEVER DO AGAIN? HIS ZOOM DROP INTO THE DARKNESS OF THE MAMET CAVE IN CROATIA: "NOT FOR LOVE NOR MONEY"

sometimes extremely dangerous, jumps. One time the wing broke and shredded my parachute, so I had to use the emergency spare. Another time I couldn't bring the wing down and went into an extreme tailspin. It's bloody dangerous testing prototypes, but after two and a half years, we were ready. We started at six o'clock in the morning in France [in July 2003] because the wind blows toward the mainland. We climbed to 10,000m and flew over to the English coast.

How did you know when to jump?

We had a small traffic-light system on the plane. The countdown went three, two, one, then the light turned green and I released myself via the hatch, right over the English coast. I got an almighty blast in the face from the headwind.

How did you get your bearings in the air?

From a plane that was flying ahead of me.

And how fast were you going?

I got up to 360kph (224mph), but that felt like nothing at that height. All I could see under me were clouds. I had serious doubts whether I was really getting any closer to the target. I was in freefall for six and a half minutes – it felt like an eternity. Only when I passed through the clouds could I see Calais directly below me, and the observation tower that we had selected as a point of reference. I was on target.

Were you worried that you might not make it?

Of course. It's extremely important to be aware of your own doubts, but to know at the same time that, hey, you've always managed it in the past. That gives you real self-confidence.

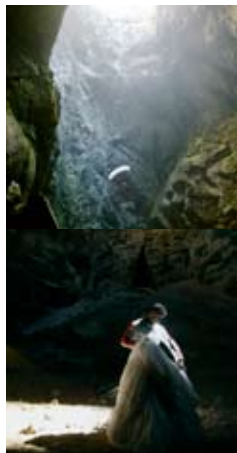
How evident is your self-confidence?

It's unassailable.

That's quite a statement!

It is. But with the Channel crossing, I did make man's age-old dream of flight come true.

“THE CAVE AROUSES PRIMAL FEARS. YOU LOOK DOWN INTO THIS BLACK UNKNOWN”



7. FROM UP HIGH TO DOWN BELOW

The following year, 2004, you BASE-jumped into a cave 200m deep...

A Croatian colleague came up with the plans for a jump in his home country, in Mamet Cave in the Northern Velebit National Park. It looked perfect for a jump: the cave had a bottleneck and became wider further down. That sounded appealing.

So how did the idea become reality?

First we had to actually find the cave – which took almost a year after the jump was suggested. Then I abseiled down into it with a mountaineer and we checked it out. It wasn't perfect, but it was good. There was enough room to fly, but the landing would be difficult as the cave walls sloped considerably, and were very uneven.

What was it that tempted you, then, in the face of imperfect conditions?

The cave arouses primal fears. You stand at the entrance and look down into this dramatic, black unknown.

What was the biggest problem?

Knowing when to open the parachute. When you enter a tunnel, for example, at first you can't see anything and you instinctively slow down. So at Mamet Cave, I can't see anything, but I'm travelling faster and faster.

How did you get around it?

By using an acoustic signal. I had six seconds in total, and I had to release the parachute after five seconds and land in a 50m radius; that's how big the cave was at the bottom.

How did you practise for the jump?

By suspending a hot air balloon at exactly 190m [the height from which he would jump above the cave floor] and simulating the cave's dimensions on the ground. The tests showed that I needed a special parachute made for me, one that I could land in a narrower radius with.

And what about the jump proper?

It was dead quiet around me. I hadn't slept the entire night. I'll never get used to that moment. It's do or die. There's no way around it.

In the end, you jumped, trusting the countdown on your Walkman...

I did, and the Walkman counted down bloody slowly. You can feel yourself accelerating in the darkness, sensing the wind getting louder and louder and you know you'll run out of air beneath you eventually. But you mustn't be conned by your own fears into opening the parachute too early, or you might not live to tell the tale.

How did you feel after the landing?

I've rarely had such an adrenaline rush after a jump.

Was it your most difficult jump?

Yes, I think so.

Would you do it again?

Not for love nor money.



“MAYBE STEVEN SPIELBERG WILL CALL ONE DAY AND MAKE A FILM ABOUT ME”

8. THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Do you sometimes ask yourself what is the point of doing what you do?

I know that I bring joy to many people. And I know that people need heroes, especially when times aren't great. I don't question what I do. I listen to my inner voice, which tells me I'm on the right path. I've calmed down as far as BASE-jumping is concerned, because I've achieved a lot. But if I'm faced with a new challenge, I put everything else on the back burner and pursue my goal flat out.

What makes you feel the greatest humility as you're waiting to jump?

Knowing that it is a matter of time before something happens.

What's the most exciting thing about your projects?

Entering virgin territory. That's always on my mind.

How important is money?

It's background noise. I haven't been involved in a single project for the money.

What's more important to you, winning or not losing?

To be honest, I'm very bad at losing.

Is it important for you to be a star?

I've planned my career around the long term. I am not the type of person who suddenly ends up in the spotlight for winning Big Brother.

Aside from the superheroes from your childhood, who do you admire in real life?

The NASA astronauts were my childhood heroes. So it was huge for me when Buzz Aldrin, the second man on the moon after Neil Armstrong, took an interest in my Channel crossing. I live for that kind of encounter.

Do you think that Red Bull Stratos will open other doors for you?

Why not? Maybe Steven Spielberg will call one day and make a film about me.

Does acting appeal to you?

It might. I'm a fan of Sylvester Stallone. And Arnold Schwarzenegger has already smoothed the way for us Austrians in Hollywood.

What will you do after Red Bull Stratos?

It looks like it will be my final project. If everything goes off without a hitch, I'll turn my attention to my new career as a professional helicopter pilot.

For more about Baumgartner and his record-breaking project, jet over to www.redbullstratos.com

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PHOTOGRAPHY: SVEN HOFFMANN

HE LOVES IT WHEN A PLAN COMES TOGETHER



Assembling a team of experts for Red Bull Stratos was Baumgartner's top priority. Then he had to learn how to fly a balloon

The Red Bull Stratos project is as much an exercise in scientific advancement as groundbreaking adventure. The technicians and scientists on Felix Baumgartner's team all have space experience – some are former astronauts – and the majority of outside partners are established firms in the fields of space science and engineering. Every step of the development and construction of the capsule, the balloon, the parachute and Baumgartner's special suit is accompanied by extensive testing.

In attempting the highest manned balloon trip, the highest parachute jump and the longest and quickest freefall, Red Bull Stratos is going to provide unprecedented data, which will be used in research elsewhere. The partners of the project team will use the new information to help develop even better rescue equipment for future space flights.

Baumgartner has been preparing for Red Bull Stratos for almost two years, and alongside

his physical training, which is similar to that endured by astronauts, he has also had to jump through administrative hoops. One of these was getting a balloonist's licence in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

He will spend the final weeks in advance of D-day carrying out final tests in pressure chambers and a wind-tunnel. The first manned test-trips in the balloon are planned for March, with the final launch currently scheduled for later this year.

Despite all this meticulous preparation, there are still several unknowns. Most of these will be revealed when Baumgartner is hurtling back towards earth at a rate of almost 1300kph (808mph).

Says the 40-year-old Austrian: "The only thing we don't know is how the body is going to react in the supersonic area when I'm careering back down to earth. None of the experts have been able to tell me what will happen when I'm travelling faster than a bullet."