



Tim and Leo jumping together; Leo's red 'tracking pants' inflate and give forward thrust.

IT TAKES A FEW SECONDS OF FALLING TO BUILD UP ENOUGH SPEED, THEN THEY SUDDENLY PULL OUT OF THE DIVE AND FIRE OFF TO THE HORIZON LIKE MINIATURE JETS.

LEO HOULDING AND TIM EMMETT SET OUT TO CLIMB THE BIG WALL OF MONTE BRENTO NEAR ARCO, ITALY, WITH A VIEW TO BASE JUMPING OFF THE TOP IN A NEW SPORT PARA-ALPINISM. ADAM LONG WENT ALONG FOR THE RIDE.



Tim and Leo on pitch 12, hard at work hauling up the slabs... before taking the easy way down!

"Live your life like a thrown knife," that was the late Todd Skinner's motto. I always liked the phrase, though I was never quite sure what he meant. My own life certainly didn't seem to be firing through the air, twisting and turning in its wild trajectory. All this was to change, however, a week in the company of those who really do live the life of a thrown knife. Literally.

"Adam, it's Leo. What are you doing next week? Fancy coming to Italy with me and Tim? We need some shots for our sponsors, so we're going to do a big wall, it's dead easy, a bolt ladder, but really overhanging, should look amazing. Then we're going to BASE jump it. Flights are only 20 quid, should be a cheap week, you up for it?"

Hmm. Sounds a bit more appealing than teaching rope access... might need to cancel some work...

"Yeah I'm in. Get us a ticket."

The pile of gear at the check-in desk is growing: two portaledges, three 60m ropes, one 70m haul line, two racks, two BASE rigs, three sets of personal gear, my cameras, Ben Pritchard's video gear. We have 20 kilos of baggage allowance each, so far mine is about 23, Leo's over 30 and Ben's pushing 40. Tim has yet to appear and Leo is getting agitated. He sets off to try to arrange the extra baggage allowance for sporting goods advertised on the website. By the time he comes back our 20 quid flights have gone up to 50.

"Well, we should be okay as long as Tim hasn't gone mad - we've got all the climbing gear so he hasn't got much to bring anyway."

Right on cue Tim strolls in about 10 minutes before check-in is due to close and dumps about seven bags down. Leo rolls his eyes and turns back to the check-in.

"Twelve bags to check-in please."

"Okay Mr Houlding your total allowance is 128 kilos. You have 141 kilos. Excess baggage is charged at £15 a kilo."

Ouch.

Leo reaches for his credit card again. So much for cheap flights.

Two hours later and Leo is driving the hire car whilst Pritch films him from the passenger seat. Tim and I are in the back seats, separated by a tottering pile of bags, portaledges and BASE helmets crammed to the roof. Leo is 'on', talking about what he hopes to achieve in short snippets of dynamic prose that are a film editor's dream. We are travelling at about 95 miles an hour down the fast lane about six inches behind the car in front. Struggling to adapt to an unfamiliar car and side of the road whilst churning out vox-pops, Leo corrects our course with sudden erratic swerves, causing the pile of bags to alternately slump on to Tim or myself. I wedge my shoulder into the biggest bag, sink into my seat, cinch my seatbelt even tighter and try to take some comfort from the fact that all Italians seem to drive in the same manner.

T O T A L L Y A D D I C T E D T O

B.A.S.E.

This is more like it, sitting in a café below the wall we have come to climb, drinking delicious cappuccinos served by beautiful, friendly waitresses. The wall's size, steepness and road-round-the-back accessibility have made it a Mecca for European BASE jumpers; the steepness especially adding a good degree of safety. Shaped like an armchair tipped forward, its situation belies its size – set back into the valley side with none of the daunting machismo of most big walls. I trace the line up the cliff; stepped slabs rising to a series of bushy ledges at the junction with the headwall. Above a chossy-looking wall builds out in a series of roofs to a jutting prow at the apex, the BASE jumpers 'exit point'.

Right on cue two parachutes burst open near the base of the wall and float slowly down over the pine trees. Then something nearer catches my eye and as I squint to make it out, my brain races through the usual cliché – is it a bird, is it a plane? Neither. Getting nearer rapidly now, I can see material flapping in the wind, it looks like a man. In a bat suit? But we're a mile and a half from the wall, how did he get there? And, assuming he is a BASE jumper, why hasn't he opened a parachute? As my brain struggles to make sense, I point my finger, garble something and the others turn round just in time to see the man's suddenly open parachute make the final 100ft of descent. A few minutes later I'm introduced to Robert Pecnik, 'sky-god', designer of the Phoenix wingsuit and better known to the girls in the café as 'The Robbie-bird'. It seems that what Leo has been telling me is actually true; the suits aren't just controlling the fall, these guys are actually flying.

With the weather holding good the boys don't want to waste any time in getting their first jump in. So by mid-afternoon I'm hanging over the 900m drop from an *in-situ* scrap of old static rope on a sapling, getting my breath back from the hike up as Leo and Tim run through their final checks.

Underneath the rock cuts back sharply under my feet, and despite years in rope access such exposure remains distinctly unnerving. I'm clearly not the only one the suffering from nerves; Tim has disappeared back into the bushes for the third time since leaving the car. BASE dumping, he calls it...

A full moon rises from behind the ridge opposite. In the darkening valley below, the lights of the café mark the landing field; for Ben and I it's a good hour-and-a-half's walk and drive away, for the boys it's less than a minute. A stone dropped from this point hits the slabs in just over 12 seconds, for BASE the aim is to open the parachute at the point where the jumper is furthest from the wall – about seven seconds. With practise though, experienced jumpers can control their fall to pick up forward speed and 'track' away from the wall, enabling freefall to be maintained for up to 20 seconds. To help Leo and Tim are wearing special pairs of 'tracking pants'.

After final checks and rehearsing their jump and 'pull' positions, Leo and Tim make their way to the very edge of the wall and then, together, launch themselves off. At first the fall is slow; over the first second they travel mainly outwards and then down in a graceful curve right next to Ben and I, giving us ample time to follow them with our cameras. Then they begin to accelerate at an incredible rate, the wind ripping past their bodies rising to a roar like a jet plane. Approaching terminal velocity, they sweep their arms back like wings and start to track away from the wall, out over the slabs, scree and forest, the walls around them seeming to grow as the

diminishing specks of their bodies throw it into awesome scale. I've no idea how many seconds have passed, but I'm willing their canopies to open long before they do. First Tim's, then Leo's burst open like neon fireworks in the valley gloom, the rippling double crack reaching us a moment later. Ben and I start breathing again, look at each other and swear, laughing and shaking our heads.

Before we have time to pack up Robbie and his gang arrive, dressed in their bizarre wing suits like a cross between Dracula and Batman. With these, the vertical plummet can be converted to a glide angle of 3:1, covering a horizontal mile-and-a-half at 80 miles an hour. It's an outrageous spectacle; one by one they shuffle to the edge and dive off. It takes a few seconds of falling to build up enough speed, then they suddenly pull out of the dive and fire off to the horizon like miniature jets. The wait after losing their fading speck into the distance is agonizing. Each time it seems certain they must be buried in the scree before, at last, a canopy snaps open far across the valley.

Robbie is last to jump. Everyone else has, sensibly, flown straight away from the wall; Robbie, however, prefers 'proximity' flying. He dives off sideways and disappears from view under the overhangs, reappearing a few seconds whistling across the left wing of the wall, seemingly only feet away from it and oh-so-fast. As the wall peters out into the hillside the scree rises up to meet it and it seems impossible he can make it over the shoulder. Again, just as death seems inevitable the tiny shape crests the ridge, carves a neat right turn and disappears behind it. Ben and I make a sober walk back to the car, enough adrenaline for one day and all we've done is watch.

With a couple of days of good weather the wall seems to be on the back burner and the days pass in a frantic race to get more jumps in. Nevertheless, after a final jump is squeezed in during near darkness, we pack haul bags and set off up to bivvy at the base of the wall. In the morning Tim has to run back down to buy some gas whilst Ben, Leo and I try to finally get started on the wall. Full haul bags and limestone slabs are not a great combination and progress is slow. We've about 13 pitches to cover today, giving us two days on the headwall and hopefully getting to the exit point before dark. The plan is that Leo and Tim will then make a final BASE jump off, giving Ben a nice climax to his film, and perhaps more importantly, getting a driver back to the hire car and giving us a hope of catching our flights home.

Tim returns with some gas by late morning, a great relief for me at least, since Leo had been expounding his theory of 'limit-testing' training for tougher conditions by always making 'easy' conditions more difficult for yourself. That's all very well, but this was supposed to be a nice little trip; 16-hour nights with the only source of warmth a smelly Pritchard are not my idea of 'limit-testing'.

After a slow start we pick up speed from almost stationary to painfully slow, but too quickly the sun is wheeling across the valley, the cliff's right wing throwing a long shadow towards us. With two throwing their weight into hauling, hanging a few metres below the belay, there's a sudden loud bang and everything drops a foot. After a lot of swearing Tim finds half the

About B.A.S.E. jumping

Although history records folk have been trying to 'fly like birds' from church towers, cliffs and the like for as long as they've been able, the modern sport began in 1978 when four skydivers jumped off El Capitan in Yosemite, California, representing a key moment when technology finally caught up with man's inner lemming. The sport grew quickly; only two years later in 1980 (the only year during which Yosemite NP permitted BASE jumping) 372 jumps were recorded. Growth has continued steadily since then and jumpers claim the sport has a participation-to-injury ratio comparable with other risky sports like mountaineering. However, like mountaineering, it rarely makes the news unless there's been an accident and, with death the almost inevitable result, it retains a lunatic image to most. Despite its outlaw reputation there are few countries in which jumping itself is illegal, usually it's the trespassing required to reach the 'exit point' that lands jumpers on the wrong side of the law.

The acronym BASE stands for Building, Antenna, Span, Earth, not as some wag suggested, Bones And Shit Everywhere. To become a registered BASE jumper and earn your BASE number you must complete jumps off all four; in 2005 BASE number 1,000 was issued. This does misrepresent the popularity of the sport though, many keen and active jumpers have no interest in the higher risks, not to mention trespassing, involved with jumping from buildings and antennae.

Web Links:

BASE history – a great overview of the development of the sport
www.baseclimb.com/BASE_history.htm

Phoenix-fly – Robbie Pecnik's site with videos of wingsuits in action
www.phoenix-fly.com

BASE fatality list – sobering reading, analysis of every death since the sport began. There have been five deaths just since our trip to Italy, including one at Monte Brento.

http://hometown.aol.com/base194/myhomepage/base_fatality_list

Tim leads round the first big roof as darkness catches up with him.

THERE'S A SUDDEN LOUD BANG AND EVERYTHING DROPS A FOOT... HALF THE BELAY HAS PULLED STRAIGHT OUT...

Tim taking a moment to relax during his 3,000ft plummet.



Setting off for the wall from Café Parete. L to R: Tim, Leo, Ben, Adam.



On the way to the wall, an overloaded hire car driven (at 90mph) by an impatient Leo whilst Ben Pritchard interviews him.

Tim puts his back into hauling whilst Ben eyes the bolts nervously - one of them blew out dropping three people a foot on to a single bolt.



Vertigine Route on Monte Brento

With its low altitude, ease of access and low technical difficulty Brento could be an ideal venue for those wanting to try big walling for the first time. It's certainly a great venue for those, as we were, wanting to experiment with portaledges and general big wall logistics without getting involved with hard aid climbing. The main problem for big wall tyros is the overhanging nature of the headwall which would make retreat difficult, the upshot of this is the fantastic situations and shelter from the weather. Once committed to the headwall the easiest way off is upwards.

Arco, the nearest town is well-known as a great centre for a wealth of superb sport climbing on impeccable rock.

GEAR: Comfy harnesses, 20-25 quickdraws, lots of slings and screwgates. Portaledges, food and water (three or four litres each per day is a good starting point). A fast party with plenty of daylight could bivvy on the ledge and portaledges and avoid much of the hauling; however, this would miss much of the enjoyment of 'extreme camping'. The bolt-to-bolt aiding can be a little tedious, far better to break it up with a bit of hanging out on the wall. A clipstick would be a good insurance scheme against a missing bolt.



belay has pulled straight out leaving all four of us on one bolt, giving shades of *The Italian Job* as we have an 'okay, nobody move' moment and get it backed up. Amidst the nervous laughter Ben somehow keeps filming but his anxious face is no longer concentrated on the monitor. It's a sobering reminder that on an all-bolted wall our safety is no longer so dependent on our own skill and judgement.

Darkness soon descends and we're a long way from the bivvy ledge marked on the topo. Finally, lost in the darkness and fog, we reach a single gnarled tree at the junction with the headwall. One portaledge goes on the tree, the other from a bolt a short way below. After a cramped cooking session I struggle into the ledge and finally relax. Any concerns about the drop underneath vanish in the bliss of a bed, stretching out after a day in harness and etriers. I sleep like a log and the real prize comes in the morning; eating breakfast in bed with the best view in the world.

After our late finish it's another slow start. The overhangs above had protected us from rain in the night, and by the sounds of it, a fair amount of rockfall. Now they make hauling easier though no less tiring, but seconding becomes harder than leading and jumaring scarier. The line of bolts snakes up through the roofs, one bolt every metre, each bolt a 6mm stub with a ring screwed on. Leading is enlivened by the odd long reach and the occasional 'spinner'. After only five pitches darkness again descends and, exhausted, we pitch camp again under a big roof. The logic is to have a short day and good long night's rest, then after eating and drinking most of the weight of the bags, get an early start and blast to the top. It is typical Houlding optimism; light and fast, rest now then 'have it'. I'm not convinced. The plan to reach the top and before dark so that Leo and Tim can jump off is looking increasingly unlikely. To throw another spanner in the works the weather isn't ideal. Long streamers of cloud are moving along the valley below us, occasionally swelling to fill it and shroud us in murk. There can be no jumping in darkness or cloud.

Nevertheless, the final day starts well, we are moving fast and the haul bags just get lighter and lighter. Things are far more enjoyable, the situations spectacular and the belays much less cramped. Cloud fills the valley, the quiet vapours billow around us as we push on, bolt after bolt going by.

Leo and Tim have been keen to check out the route for free climbing possibilities and along the way explain their ideas for combining climbing and BASE jumping into a new sport called Para-Alpinism. The idea had come to Leo after an abseiling epic in Patagonia. Reaching the summit of Fitz Roy only a few weeks after a jumping trip, he had looked down with new eyes and seen a five-minute descent to the valley. Of course, not having a BASE rig he was forced to take the normal route down, a tedious series of 30-odd abseils that almost became an epic when the weather closed in. The same season American, Dean Potter, had gone one further, actually taking a rig to the top of Cerro Torre, only to find he couldn't reach a suitable exit point on the summit's notorious ice mushroom. With Dean's wing-suit experience the future for enchainments could be outrageous.

Monte Brento wasn't looking like a great test site for the other big idea either - free soloing with a BASE rig. The idea was simple, but finding a cliff with the right combination of size and steepness wasn't. The first couple of seconds of freefall are unstable and difficult to control - until a high enough speed is reached. Only on an extremely overhanging cliff would the margin of safety to be high enough to allow such an 'unstable exit'. Brento was certainly steep enough but a combination of blank roofs and frankly terrible rock put paid to the idea.

Two pitches from the top and it's dark again. Tim comes up with a winning plan. Out comes the mobile and he reveals he has 'acquired' the phone number of one of the nice girls in the café... a few minutes later and a taxi is booked to meet us at the top. Nice. But he's only given us two hours to top out, pack up and get to the road, a 40-minute walk. Two hours come and go and we're still on the penultimate pitch, a 45° roof directly under the exit point. Then comes a shock, the last pitch involves free climbing - it's soaking wet and it's my lead. Emerging from the umbrella of the overhangs, wind and rain swirl around until finally my fingers sink into wet grass and I claw up it in the darkness, laughing to myself with relief and the absurdity of it all.

The race is on, Tim sets off at a run to try to catch the taxi driver before he gives up waiting, whilst we cower in a cave and try to re-pack the bags for the walk. Suddenly a tirade of swearing comes out of the darkness, and Tim's footsteps start to come closer again.

"You know I thought I dropped something on that last pitch?"

"Yeah?"

"It must have been the car keys."

Nice, Tim, nice. We'd so nearly pulled it off. Now we wouldn't make the plane, Leo would miss his lecture that was paying for the trip, it all fell to pieces. Sat in a shallow cave on an Italian hillside, at midnight in the rain, we racked our brains for a plan.

"We could eat all the food. It would make the bags lighter," suggested Tim.

It was the best we could come up with, so that's what we did. So much for Para-Alpinism. ♪