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MiGs over Moscow

A Top Gun Experience

Nizhny Novgorod, Russia

Almost anything seems possible in adventure tourism these days—if you have a dream and a big enough bank account. In post–Cold War Russia, even the sky has no limit. Anyone between the ages of 18 and 70 who's in relatively good health can mimic the world's best-trained fighter pilots and fly a Russian military jet high enough to see the earth's curve at $1\frac{1}{2}$ times the speed of sound. Just be prepared to pay for this fantasy flight: A 5-day package costs around \$20,000, not including international airfare. Aviation aficionados who have tried it say it's worth every penny.

Incredible Adventures began offering these Top Gun–inspired flights in 1993 after the company's founder, Kent Ertugrul, then

a young American entrepreneur who traveled to Moscow in search of computer programmers for a software venture, took one ride on a MiG-29 and fell in love with the rush. He signed a deal to market similar flights worldwide, returned home to Florida, and ran an advertisement for them in the *Wall Street Journal*. An investment banker from New York was the first client to sign up, and since then more than 2,000 other daredevils have followed her lead. The company has offices in Sarasota, FL, and Moscow.

To climb aboard your own fighter jet, first you have to take a commercial jet to Russia's capital. After spending a couple of days exploring Moscow's historic monuments and lively city streets, you head to




Reach supersonic speeds in a Russian fighter jet.
Previous page: Ziplining at Cypress Valley Canopy Tours.


Nizhny Novgorod, home of the Sokol Aircraft Building Plant—which is where you lift off for the flight of your life. This place has been manufacturing top-of-the-line Russian fighter jets for more than 70 years and has an air museum that's worth a quick tour. Weather conditions permitting, you go through a final security clearance, safety briefing, and medical check. Then it's time to put on your helmet and flight suit, discuss the flight plan with your Russian co-pilot, and hop into the cockpit. Depending on which aircraft you're flying, you can reach heights of 21,336m (70,000 ft.), race at speeds of 3,862kmph (2,400 mph), roll over in airborne somersaults, and attempt other fancy tricks like a real military jet fighter. As your co-pilot gives directions and keeps an eye on things, you can take control of the aircraft and try some maneuvers yourself.


You have two jets to choose from: the legendary MiG-29 or the high-flying MiG-31. The MiG-29, known for its top gun capabilities, was developed in Russia during the 1970s to counter the U.S. F-16 Fighting Falcon and the F-18 Hornet. Today, the Russian

Air Force and many other nations around the world continue to use this elite model. The MiG-31 is Russia's most advanced fighter, designed to fly high and fast but also perform well at lower levels. Whichever model you select, there's only one way to go—and that's up, at supersonic speeds. Mission accomplished. —JS

 **Incredible Adventures** (☎ 800/644-7382; www.incredible-adventures.com).

WHEN TO GO: Spring, summer, or fall (flights are offered year-round, but the weather can be unpredictable and cause delays in the winter).

 Moscow Domodedova International Airport, with connection by train or plane to Nizhny Novgorod, where you take off from the Sokol Airbase.

 \$\$\$ **Metropol**, ¼ Teatralny proezd, Moscow (☎ 07/499-501-7800; www.metropol-moscow.ru/en). \$\$ **Alexandrovsky Garden Hotel**, 3 Georgievsky Sjezd, Nizhny Novgorod (☎ 07/831-277-8141; www.achotel.ru.eng).

2

Flying High

Virgin Galactic

The World's First Spaceline

Outer Space

Okay, so your spaceship isn't quite ready for take-off yet—it's still in the development and testing stages—but if you want to be one of the first 500 people to get onboard, a future trip with Virgin Galactic, the world's first commercial spaceline, should be on your radar now. Since 2005, when the \$200,000 pioneer tickets initially went on sale, nearly 300 have been sold.

The idea for Virgin Galactic, a company created by travel aficionado and entrepreneur Richard Branson, got off the ground a year earlier—along with the historic flight of SpaceShipOne. The world's first privately

developed and funded manned spacecraft, designed and built by Burt Rutan and Scaled Composites, made three successful voyages into space in 2004, reaching altitudes higher than 100km (62 miles) and winning a \$10-million prize for its accomplishment.

Branson quickly snatched up the exclusive rights to Rutan's innovative technology—including carbon composite materials, a hybrid rocket motor, and a wing feathering reentry system. Through Virgin Galactic, he plans to combine Rutan's advanced design measures with Virgin's aviation, adventure,

and luxury experience to lead the way into space tourism. His goal is to launch non-astronauts into suborbit on a spacecraft known as SpaceShipTwo.


Once SpaceShipTwo is approved for lift-off, your Star Wars-like journey will go something like this: You begin with 3 days of preflight training at the spaceport, intended to introduce you to your crew and fellow passengers as you learn how to navigate a zero-gravity environment. After all preparations are complete, and the morning of your journey has arrived, your adrenaline is pumping as the pilot begins an official countdown . . . 3, 2, 1 . . . blast-off! Your spaceship catches a ride on its “mothership,” a specially designed carrier aircraft, for about 15km/15,240m (10 miles/50,000 ft.) before an unimaginable burst of power pins you back into your seat as you accelerate to speeds of nearly 4,025kmph (2,500 mph) in mere seconds. Suddenly, you’re traveling at more than three times the speed of sound, hurtling away from the earth’s surface, watching the atmosphere transform from blue to black. Finally, the motor shuts off around 110km/109,728m (68 miles/360,000 ft.) and you’re engulfed in silence. You realize you’re floating, completely weightless.

Maybe you try a somersault. When you glance out the window again, your eyes open wider to take in the scene you’ve seen before only in NASA photographs: You’re staring at the earth’s curve.

Before you know it, gravity returns and it’s time to head back toward home. Lying down, you feel a powerful drag as the atmosphere’s force returns. But then the feathering system kicks in and you gracefully glide back to the earth’s surface.

This new adventure will be a historic chance to explore virgin territory. Until the dream trip becomes a reality, keep your excitement level high with a visit to SpaceShipOne—now on display next to Charles Lindbergh’s *Spirit of St. Louis* airplane at the Smithsonian Institute’s Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. You can also check VirginGalactic.com for updates on SpaceShipTwo’s progress. —JS

 **Virgin Galactic** (www.virgingalactic.com).

 Space flights initially depart from Mojave Air and Space Port in Mojave, California, but eventually take off from Spaceport America in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Flying High 3

Thunder City Fighter Flights

Soaring into Space

Cape Town, South Africa

Picture yourself soaring 15,000m (50,000 ft.) above the earth in an **English Electric Lightning**, the fighter jet used to intercept the Russian “Bear” bombers during the Cold War. Ready to go supersonic and break the sound barrier?

Flash through the sky above Cape Town, South Africa, and over the Atlantic Ocean, climbing up to 150,000m (500,000 ft.). Take a look out the cockpit window and see the curvature of the earth. With your

adrenaline pumping and heart pounding, you come back down to earth with thrilling memories and a story to tell.

Thunder City operates the world’s only twin-engine, two-seater (side-by-side) supersonic interceptor, and you can hitch a ride on this Lightning. (Lightning aircraft still hold a number of world climb-to-altitude records.) The day starts with a briefing session, which includes survival training, ejection seat training, and oxygen management.

The flight itself is only about 30 to 40 minutes due to the fuel consumption of up to 500 liters (132 gal.) per minute with the afterburners on.

If you want to fly high, but not touch space, Thunder City offers rides in other types of fighter jets. If you like roller coasters, try a 50- to 60-minute flight in the **Hawker Hunter**, an air-to-air combat jet that's agile and reacts extremely quickly to loops and rolls that create up to 4 g-forces. You can also fly as the navigator in the back of a **Buccaneer**, a nuclear strike attack bomber, assisting the pilot with the selection of transponder codes as you fly in sorties during a mock attack. During the 50- to 60-minute flight, you reach up to 5 g-forces for 5 to 10 seconds while going extremely fast—just subsonic—and low underneath the radar screen. Thunder City also has a **Strikemaster**, a subsonic jet pilot trainer. You get briefed on managing the cockpit and undergo training in the jet, which is great for aerobatics and famous for its spin maneuvers.

Aside from your sky-high adventures, there are plenty of activities and entertainment options in Cape Town. Take the cable car up to the top of **Table Mountain**, which dominates the city's skyline,

for 360-degree views of the region (377). (See 194 for information on abseiling down Table Mountain.) The ferry to **Robben Island**, the prison-turned-museum, takes you where former South Africa president Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 18 years. Oenophiles can spend a day sampling vintages at the many wineries in wine country, which is within a 2-hour drive of the city. Visit the tiny penguins that strut around nearby **Boulder Beach**. If you like sports, you can go surfing, sandboarding, hiking, or mountain biking. —LF

 **Thunder City**  27/21-934-8007; www.thundercity.com.

WHEN TO GO: Year-round.

 Cape Town International Airport.

 \$\$\$ **Radisson Blue Hotel Waterfront Capetown**, Beach Rd., Granger Bay  800/333-3333 in the U.S. or 27/21-441-3000; www.radisson.com). \$\$\$ **The Twelve Apostles**, Victoria Rd.  27/21-437-9000; www.12apostleshotel.com). \$\$\$ **Winchester Mansions**, 221 Beach Rd.  27/21-434-2351; www.winchester.co.za).

4

Flying High

Biplane SkyThrills!

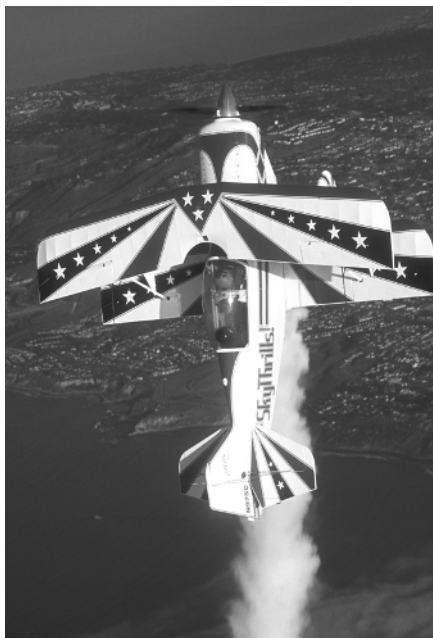
Do Rolls & Hammerheads in a Biplane

Fullerton, California, U.S.A.

Picture yourself flying a biplane out over the Pacific Ocean, diving downward for speed, then heading nose up in a steep vertical ascent until the plane almost stops in mid-air. Next, you make a tight U-turn rolling to the left and plunge straight down toward the ocean. Congratulations! You've just performed a hammerhead aerobatic maneuver and made a flashy 180-degree turn. You've probably seen tricks like these performed at an airshow, and now you can

try them out for yourself at SkyThrills!, a southern California biplane flight school that's been treating clients to thrilling sky adventures since 2000.

Don't worry. You won't be alone in the dual-control biplane as you perform these aerobatic maneuvers. SkyThrills! owner Mike Blackstone is at the other set of controls, coaching you through your aerobatic tricks. During the time you're in the air, you have hands-on lessons on rolling



Soaring skyward in a SkyThrills biplane.

the plane, doing loops and hammerhead spins, and even flying inverted. First, you learn a roll—turning the plane 360 degrees like a corkscrew—then continue on your way. Next comes the vertical loop, where the smoke streams behind (so you can see exactly where you’ve just flown). If you’re game for more, the hammerhead comes next, and then a spin. Your final maneuver is inverting the plane and flying upside down for about 30 seconds. If your heart hasn’t skipped a beat yet, it will now! As for take-offs and landings, leave them to the expert. Blackstone will handle those.

SkyThrills! has two types of biplanes. Both are designed to perform the aerobatic maneuvers but the two have different personalities. The bright yellow Classic Biplane is really a 1996 replica of a 1935 Waco YMF-5 model, with room for two passengers in the front cockpit. It has a spruce frame covered with fabric, and purrs like a big kitten. The Pitts-S-2C, which Blackstone calls the Extreme

Biplane, performs like a Formula 1 racing car with wings. Whichever plane you choose, you’re sure to have a ball.

For the ultimate thrill, ask about the **Astronaut Adventure**, which includes hands-on high-speed dives followed by a 5-g pull-up toward vertical then a push across the top of an arc, which exposes you to weightlessness or zero gravity. You can hold a ball and watch it float out of your hands as you start arcing back down toward earth.

Every flight includes a briefing beforehand, when you learn about handling the plane. All flights are hands on and last between 30 minutes and 1 hour, depending on the program flown. Flights are followed by a debriefing, when you look at the video taken during the ride and see your reactions as you were doing loops and flying upside down.

These flights are an amazing introduction to the world of aerobatic stunt flying. You experience the sensation of flying a stunt plane in excess of 200 mph (322kmph) and feel the g-forces pushing you into the seat. Back on the ground, you leave with a DVD of your experience. The adrenaline rush is intense, and you definitely feel empowered as you fly the plane.

SkyThrills! planes fly out of Fullerton Municipal Airport in southern California. Disneyland, Knott’s Berry Farm, Sea World, Universal Studios, and lots of other attractions are close by should you want to continue your thrill-seeking in the area. —LF

i SkyThrills! (☎ 866-4-SKYTHRILL; www.skythrills.com).

WHEN TO GO: Anytime.

✈ Los Angeles International (34 miles/55km) or John Wayne Airport, Orange County (20 miles/32km).

🏠 **Knott’s Berry Farm Resort Hotel**, 7675 Crescent Ave., Buena Park, CA. (☎ 866/752-2444 or 714/995-1111; www.knottshotel.com). **\$\$\$ Anaheim Plaza Hotel & Suites**, 1700 S. Harbor Blvd., Anaheim, CA (☎ 800/631-4144 or 714/772-5900; www.anaheimplazahotel.com).

Heli-Cycling on High

No Mountain High Enough

Nepal

The magical kingdom of Nepal is, without a doubt, one of the most storied destinations in the world, and a mecca for adventure travelers of every stripe. What better way to see this exotic land than on a mountain bike? Well, actually, there *is* a better way—on a mountain bike that's transported by helicopter to a highland pass, allowing you to cruise downhill through some of the most spectacular terrain on earth. You can now ride through Nepal's magnificent scenery while avoiding the lung-busting uphill rides that would make the trip impossible for all but a handful of oxygen-carrying elite athletes.

Most trips to Nepal begin in Kathmandu, the country's capital and largest (and nois-

iest) city. Heli-cycling programs organized by qualified tour operators who know the terrain are definitely the way to experience this activity; some operators have relatively short 1-day packages, while others offer longer excursions of several days. Thrill-seekers opting for longer tours are able to stop in remote teahouses for breaks, and stay overnight in lodges nestled in isolated villages.

If what you seek is adventure on the road less traveled, you'll find it here. Many of the spots visited by heli-cyclers are tiny hamlets, difficult to reach even by four-wheel-drive vehicles. The landscape is rich and varied: Icy, snow-capped mountain ranges give way to dense alpine forests,




Cycling through mountainous Nepal.


semi-arid steppes, surging rivers, lush farmland, and golden rice paddies. And for sheer death-defying thrills, try crossing a swinging suspension bridge on a windy day with a full pack and a mountain bike—not for the faint of heart.

It's not all hard work and sweat, however. Bikers make frequent stops to sample local foods and teas, including the region's apple ciders and brandies. In addition, there are hot spring pools along some routes that allow bone-weary riders a chance to soothe their aching bodies. And at the end of your journey, the sights and sounds of Kathmandu are yours to explore. —ML

TOURS: **Black Tomato** (☎ 877/815-1497; www.blacktomato.co.uk). **Himalayan Mountain Bike Adventures** (☎ 977/1/421-2860; www.hmbadventures.com).

WHEN TO GO: Oct–Nov.

 Kathmandu.

 **\$\$\$ Kantipur Temple House**, Chusyabahal, Jyatha Tol, Thamel, Kathmandu (☎ 977/1/425-0129; www.kantipurtemplehouse.com). **\$\$\$ Hotel Courtyard**, 67/27, Z-St., Thamel, Kathmandu (☎ 977/1/470-0648; www.hotelcourtyard.com).

Flying High

6

Fly over Water & onto Ice

Helicopter Flight-Seeing in the Southern Alps

Milford Sound, New Zealand

Standing on an ancient glacier, thousands of meters above the earth's surface, is an exceptionally rare experience—typically reserved for expert mountaineers or intrepid heli-skiers. But adventurers up for the flight of their life can have the same thrill in New Zealand by riding high in a chopper as it gracefully slips between some of the earth's most remote and jagged peaks. When you finally land on a massive block of ice nearly touching the clouds, the mind-boggling views, not to mention the dizzying sensation that you're about to slide right off the mountaintop, is sure to get your adrenaline pumping. Flying over Milford Sound, once described by Rudyard Kipling as the eighth wonder of the world, before landing on a nearby beach isn't half bad either.

The Southern Alps in Fiordland, covering the southwestern corner of New Zealand's South Island, are just 35 minutes by plane or about 5 hours by car from Queenstown. There are more than 27 peaks reaching

over 2,743m (9,000 ft.) and about 60 glaciers in this mountain range, melting into rivers and lakes of dazzling blue-green hues. The entire Fiordland National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is full of nature's best: mountains, virgin forests, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, and, of course, fiords (long narrow estuaries with steep sides, carved by glacial activity). The main attraction is Milford Sound, which is actually a fiord, bordered by sheer granite mountaintops including the oft-photographed Mitre Peak. Its waters and the surrounding land have been relatively untouched, and feel almost primeval. Rain or shine, the area is magical. Perhaps that's why Peter Jackson filmed so much of *The Lord of the Rings* nearby.

While cruises and hiking are increasingly popular ways to explore the region, a helicopter ride offers the most exhilarating way to see more arduous sights. For one of the most thrilling overviews, try the **Milford and Fiordland Highlights** excursion with

the locally owned company **Over the Top**. You swoosh past alpine lakes, rivers, forests, glacial valleys, and ice-capped mountains. After flying over the fiords, you land on a remote west coast beach and then a sparkling glacier. This trip takes about 2 hours, but the same company offers other journeys that range from 35 minutes to more than 5 hours. One of its other, and most unique, options is an active scientific expedition flight. On the **Glacier Recline** voyage, you work with a geologist, a mountain guide, and your fellow explorers to determine how New Zealand glaciers, their native flora, and local insect populations are responding to climate change.

Glacier Southern Lakes Helicopters is another reputable company that also takes you to areas that are inaccessible by other means. Upon departing Milford via the Harrison Valley, you swoop and zoom between rocky cliffs with staggering views of bright blue waters before gliding onto Mt. Tutoko's Ngapunatoru Plateau, an exclusive landing spot for this company that very few people have ever stood

upon. As you feel the ice crunch beneath your feet and gaze at the vast white fields, the seclusion makes you feel as if you and your fellow riders are the only people on the planet.

Up, up, and away! —JS

i New Zealand Tourism Board, Lakefront Drive, Te Anau (☎ 64/3-249-8900; www.newzealand.com).

TOURS: Over the Top—The Helicopter Company (☎ 64/3-442-2233; www.flynz.co.nz). **Glacier Southern Lakes Helicopters**, 2 Lucas Place, Queenstown Airport Base (☎ 64/3-444-3016; www.glacier.southernlakes.co.nz).

WHEN TO GO: Sept–May.

✈ Queenstown airport.

🏠 \$–\$\$\$ **Hotel St. Moritz Queenstown**, 10–18 Brunswick St. (☎ 64/3-442-4990; www.mgallery.com). \$–\$\$ **Milford Sound Lodge**, 94 Milford Sound Hwy. (☎ 64/3-249-8071; www.milfordlodge.com).

7

Flying High

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park

Flying over an Active Volcano

Big Island, Hawaii, U.S.A.

The roiling red lava spurts out of a pitch-black lava tongue that extends from the volcano and into the ocean. As the molten liquid oozes into the water, steam rises into the air. While the beat of the helicopter's rotors keep you from actually hearing any hissing sounds made as the lava quickly cools and hardens, you imagine that it sounds like some prehistoric animal spoiling for a fight. But this isn't a long-ago era. You're witnessing history in the making—literally new earth being formed. It's a powerful, breathtaking experience, one you'll never forget.

You're flying over **Kilauea**, the focal point in **Hawaii Volcanoes National Park**. Kilauea has erupted almost continuously from its east rift zone since 1983, and the lava flows that creep into the ocean have enlarged the Big Island by more than 500 acres (202 hectares). When the helicopter pivots, you're within sight of (but not too near) the ash-filled plume rising from a new crater within Halema'uma'u at Kilauea's summit. Flying over this area in a helicopter you can see old houses that were hastily abandoned when Madam Pele, the Hawaiian goddess of fire, lightning, volcanoes, and violence,



Lava flow in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

expressed her fury in the past. Through the years, the lava flows have covered $8\frac{3}{4}$ miles (14km) of highway on Kilauea's southern shore with lava as deep as 115 feet (35m).


By helicoptering over certain parts of the park's 333,086 acres (134,795 hectares), which rise from sea level to 13,677 feet (4,103m), you can see there are actually two volcanoes. The second is **Mauna Loa**, which last erupted in 1984. Today, there's an observatory near the top.

Volcanoes National Park has seven ecological zones where a variety of plant and animal communities—some endangered—thrive. Within the park are several archaeological sites and petroglyphs, reminders of the indigenous people who consider this region a sacred space. Seeing these ancient artifacts in person is a tremendous thrill. These are just a few of the reasons why Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is both a designated International Biosphere Reserve and a World Heritage Site.

Several companies offer helicopter rides over Kilauea. Depending on the package you choose, your plans can include a

flight above the volcano, a stop on the volcano, or an extended excursion that takes you over black sand beaches, cascading waterfalls, and the lush rainforests of the **Hamakua Coast**. No matter which option you choose, you learn a lot about the history and the culture of the Hawaiian Islands. When booking, be sure to ask about the type of helicopter, the size of the windows, and how many people can sit near the windows. The tour routes and sights visited are always dependent upon where eruptions are occurring and the weather conditions. If you're staying on one of the other Hawaiian Islands, check at your lodge's front desk or with the concierge to see if there's a package that includes a flight to the Big Island and a helicopter tour.

The Hawaii Volcanoes National Park website has a section that describes where the eruptions are currently occurring. Stop at the visitor center for information about ranger programs, hike and bike trails, and areas it's safe to go the day you're visiting. —LF

 **Hawaii Volcanoes National Park**
(www.nps.gov/havo).

TOURS: **Blue Hawaiian Helicopters**
(☎ 800/786-2583 or 808/971-1107; www.
bluehawaiian.com). **Paradise Helicopters**
(☎ 866/876-7422 or 808/969-7392;
www.paradisecopters.com).

WHEN TO GO: Year-round.

 **Kona Airport** (96 miles/155km).

 **\$\$\$ The Inn at Volcano**, 19-4178
Wright Rd. (☎ 800/937-7786 or 808/
967-7786; www.volcano-hawaii.com).
\$--\$ **Kilauea Lodge & Restaurant**,
1 block off Hwy. 11 on Old Volcano Rd.
(☎ 808/967-7366; www.kilauealodge.
com).

8

Flying High

Mount Everest Helicopter Tours

Buzzing the Roof of the World

Everest & Annapurna Mountain Ranges, Nepal

"It's like seeing the world through 3-D glasses," is how one person described flying in the mountain range around Mount Everest in a helicopter. The speaker, on a helicopter excursion arranged by Cox & Kings, explained that right after touring the Buddhist monastery in Tengboche, which sits atop a hill in the Everest region, they took off and the ground dropped away. The valley floor was suddenly a thousand feet or so below and the jagged slopes of Mount Everest, and the other Himalayan mountains, loomed larger than life through the helicopter's windows. There's no comparison to the feeling you get seeing a sight like this. And there's only one way to do it.


Airplane flights through the region are available, but the fixed wing planes can fly only alongside the range. Helicopters can weave among the mountains, ensuring both panoramic and close-up views of the Himalayan ranges. **Cox & Kings**, which specializes in private travel arrangements to a wide range of places including Nepal, India, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, offers this 3-hour signature event, Mt. Everest: Roof of the World. The flight also includes a stop in Lukla, in the Khumbu region, the starting point for many visitors to the Himalayas near Mount Everest—a prime spot to photograph the surrounding mountains. A guide who knows these mountains well comes along to provide additional insight


into the culture and geography of the region.

Himalayan Heliski Guides also offers sightseeing trips in the Everest and Annapurna regions of Nepal. Hikers should check into the company's heli-trekking trips, on which clients are flown to scenic spots in the Everest region where they can hike for a few hours before being picked up afterward. This company, which uses Russian and Nepalese pilots that have major flying time hours in the Himalayas, is also offering a "See all the Himalaya in a week" program, where guests will be flown to various regions to see all the 8,000m (26,240-ft.) peaks and other regions in Nepal. —LF

TOURS: **Cox & Kings** (☎ 800/999/1758;
www.coxandkingsusa.com). **Himalayan Heliski Guides** (☎ 33/9-71-39-03-59;
www.heliskinepal.com).

WHEN TO GO: Late fall to spring. Spring is climbing season.

 **Kathmandu.**

 **\$\$\$ Kantipur Temple House**, Chusyabahal, Jyatha Tol, Thamel, Kathmandu
(☎ 977/1/425-0129; www.kantipurtemplehouse.com). **\$\$\$ Hotel Courtyard**, 67/27, Z-St., Thamel, Kathmandu (☎ 977/1/470-0648; www.hotelcourtyard.com).

Zero-G Experience

Into the Wild Blue Yonder

Locations throughout U.S.A.

If the words, “T minus 30 seconds and counting . . .” make your heart race in anticipation, here’s an adventure for you. Leave the gravitational pull of the earth behind and join other would-be astronauts in the same kind of zero-gravity environment that NASA trainers used to prepare Buzz Aldrin, Alan Shepard, and other space jockeys. There’s nothing to compare to the feeling of weightlessness that adventurers can experience on a Zero-G flight—floating, flying, bouncing, and somersaulting through the air is guaranteed to thrill even the most jaded earthling.

The fun begins after check-in and orientation at one of Zero-G’s training facilities located nationwide; past flights have started from Las Vegas, New York, Seattle, and Cape Canaveral, Florida. The 5-hour

day includes a few warm-up periods where fliers experience Martian gravity (about one-third of earth’s gravity), then lunar gravity (one-sixth of earth’s gravity), and finally several periods of zero gravity, which resemble recess at the world’s zaniest playground. Catching a floating blob of water in your mouth? No problem. Executing a perfect 360-degree somersault? Easy. Levitating in midair like a swami? Child’s play.

The weightless environment is achieved in a specially designed Boeing 727 that conducts graceful up-and-down maneuvers called parabolic arcs. After climbing to 34,000 feet (10,200m), the plane slowly levels off, dips, then climbs again. These maneuvers are repeated 12 to 15 times, giving fliers several opportunities to practice their floating and flying skills.



Float with friends in a Zero-G experience.

Besides the most excitement you've had in years, the Zero-G Experience also includes your own flight suit (which looks like something straight out of *The Right Stuff*), other Zero-G merchandise, a Regravitation Celebration, a certificate of weightless completion, as well as photographs and a video of your weightless experience. And if you're thinking about a celebration or family reunion that guests will never forget, group flights can also be chartered. Though the price of the Zero-G flight may be sky-high (around \$5,000 per person), those who would like to join in the fun but stay on the ground can pay less to participate in orientations and post-flight celebrations for a more reasonable fee (about \$200 per person).

Folks like physicist Stephen Hawking and Martha Stewart have described Zero-G flights as "amazing" and "wonderful." Even former astronauts like Rick Searfoss and Buzz Aldrin, who called the flight "exhilarating," claim that they still have dreams of weightlessness. The flights have gained such popularity that a couple in 2009 decided to have their wedding in zero gravity—weightlessness, they decided, is a lot like falling in love. —ML

i Zero-G Experience (📞 888/664-7284; www.gozerog.com).

WHEN TO GO: Flights are scheduled throughout the year at various U.S. locations; charter flights are also available.

10

Leaping & Jumping

The Eiger Jump

A Leap of Faith

The Bernese Alps, Switzerland

There are a number of crazy ways to see the Eiger—you can climb it, jump directly off it with a parachute, or leap out of a helicopter that's flying over it. Of course, of these three death-defying feats, the only one you can even think about attempting without serious mountaineering or skydiving skills is the last option. To try it, you just have to be in relatively good shape and show up with a whole lot of nerve.

Set in the Bernese Alps, between Jungfrau and Grindewald, the Eiger—at 3,970m (13,025 ft.)—looms large, not just because of its natural stance but also thanks to its rich history. In 1858, an Irishman and two Swiss guides made the first successful ascent up its western side. In 1938, an Austrian-German group scaled its north face for the first time. Since then, adventurous climbers have found all kinds of new ways to Spiderman their way up the mountain and Superman back down it. In

2008, U.S. climber Dean Potts free soloed the northern face and then BASE jumped directly from the top with a special parachute. (The acronym "BASE" stands for the different stationary structures from which enthusiasts of this extreme sport catapult themselves: Buildings, Antenna towers, Spans, and Earth.) There are real dangers here, and at least 64 climbers have died trying both new and old feats on the Eiger. The increasing amount of rock fall and diminishing ice fields make it an extremely challenging climb, particularly in the summer—which, of course, is part of the thrill in conquering it.

With this in mind, you can now get even higher than the peak without even wearing out your hiking boots. From your perch in a tranquil helicopter, gliding right above the snow-covered peaks of the Alps, you can enjoy a panoramic look at this picturesque region—before jumping straight into it. In

10 Hot-Air Balloon Rides to Lift Your Spirits

Hot-air balloon rides aren't a cheap thrill, but the experience will undoubtedly knock you off your feet. When French brothers Joseph Michael and Jaques Etienne Montgolfier launched the first modern hot-air balloon in Paris in 1783, they used the smoke from a fire to blow hot air into a silk bag attached to a wicker basket. Today, the same basic engineering plan is used to carry adventure seekers high above the ground.—JS

11 Sacred Valley of the Incas, Peru: A version of a hot-air balloon may have been used 5,000 years ago in Peru's Nazca desert as a tool to draw the famous ground lines that are still visible there today. While there's little if any proof of this theory, the idea was enough to inspire the country's first official hot-air balloon company. Before flying, you make a traditional coca leaf offering to the mountain guides at dawn. Then your pilot will heat up your balloon and off you go from Maras over the Urubamba mountain range and high above its many small villages. www.globosperu.com.

12 The Alps, Switzerland: During the weeklong Festival International de Ballons that takes place in Chateau-d'Oex every January, competitors show off with daring stunts like parachute drops right out of their balloons. But for non-experts, simply climbing into a basket and floating over the snow-covered Alps is one of Europe's coolest things to do. After you take off in Chateau-d'Oex, you travel from Mont Blanc (see 48) to the Eiger (see 10), passing over the Grand Combin, the Cervin, the Jura, the Lemanique, and the Fribourgeoise region. www.ballonchateaudoex.ch; www.hb-as.ch.

13 Cappadocia, Turkey: Flying over this yellow and pink moonscape is surreal. Ever since Mt. Erciyes and Mt. Hasan erupted here more than three million years ago, the wind, rain, and other harsh weather conditions have molded their volcanic ash and soft rock into a strikingly phallic setting of jagged cliffs, oddly shaped peaks, tall pillars, conical formations, and caves—creating what is known today as the Goreme Valley. www.goremeballoons.com.

14 Serengeti National Park, Tanzania: For a bird's-eye view of east Africa's most acclaimed wildlife park, a hot-air balloon does just the trick. Depending on the time of year, you may see herds of wildebeest and zebra thunder across the savannah; a cheetah lurking in a tree, perhaps stalking its prey; a lion and lioness cuddling in the grasslands; or elephants splashing mud on themselves to keep cool. Serengeti Balloon Safaris donates a percentage of its revenue to conservation efforts in Tanzania's national parks and primarily employs locals. www.balloonsafaris.com.

15 Sedona, Arizona: There's only one way to fully appreciate the vastness of Sedona's vast crimson canvas. You have to rise above it. As you climb into a basket at dawn and float through the air as the sun rises overhead, the craggy red rock formations and deep grassy canyons come alive against an increasingly bright blue panorama. As you drift down, you see a wide variety of wildlife climbing over the jagged surfaces far below. Then you rise higher again, marveling at the rush you get from this slow and peaceful flight. www.redrockballoons.com.

16 Napa Valley, California: Like a great glass of wine, this region should be savored. As you leisurely float over vineyards, orchards, and fields in a hot-air balloon, your pilot will give you an overview of the area and point out landmarks. Long lines of grapes, apple trees, and mustard seeds blur into a patchwork quilt of bright greens, purples, browns, and yellows outlined by mountains. As you eventually move back toward earth and land in a meadow of wildflowers, the richness of this fertile area comes to life. www.napavalleyballoons.com.

17 Jackson Hole, Wyoming: It's easy to speed through this part of the Wild West, but from a balloon's perch more than 4,000 feet (1,220m) above the foothills, the natural beauty is profound. Watch as the sun rises over the Tetons. You drift over Jackson Hole, Teton Village, a working ranch bordered by Grand Teton National Park, the Bridger-Teton National Forest, the Snake River, and seven mountain ranges including the Yellowstone plateau. Keep a look out for elk and eagles. www.wyomingballoon.com.

18 Luxor, Egypt: Nearly a dozen balloons take off every morning from the west bank of Luxor and float above the Valley of the Kings—a sort of open-air museum—taking visitors high above the great pyramids, famous temples, and open fields that stretch toward the Nile River. You drift over the Ramesseum, a memorial temple for Pharaoh Ramesses II who ruled during Egypt's 19th dynasty, and perhaps land somewhere in the desert south of Hatshepsut's temple, built for one of Egypt's rare female pharaohs who ruled during the 18th dynasty. *Hod-Hod Soliman* (📞 20/95-370116).

19 Bagan, Myanmar (Burma): Architecture buffs, history lovers, and theologians will be astonished by this hot-air balloon voyage over Bagan's sacred sites. On the banks of the Ayerwaddy River, the ancient city of Bagan boasts the world's largest area of Buddhist temples, pagodas, stupas, and ruins—many dating to the 11th and 12th centuries. As you coast through the sky at dawn, mist swirls around the pagodas and monks line up for their daily procession. www.easternsafaris.com/balloons_over.html.



20 Saga City, Japan: Experience the thrill of hot-air balloons in Saga City during the Saga International Balloon Fiesta. Every year in the beginning of November, more than 3,500 serious competitors gather here to fly nearly 650 colorful balloons along the Kase River. One of the most popular events during this competition is “La Mongtgo!fier Nocturne,” or the Night of Hot Air Balloons, when more than 50 inflated balloons tether to the ground after sunset and light their burners in a choreographed routine of illumination. Throughout the fall, more than 30 balloons take flight here every weekend. www.sibf.info.

Check out spectacular sights from on-high in Bagan.

tandem with an experienced skydiver, you can leap straight out of your ride at 4,000m (13,123 ft.) and soar through the air over the Eiger. With one of the biggest adrenaline rushes you've ever experienced, you race toward the ground in a 1,500m (4,921-ft.) freefall for 30 seconds at 200kmph (124 mph) before your parachute launches and you gracefully float back to earth. —JS

i Switzerland Tourism Board (www.myswitzerland.com, www.grindelwald.com, and www.myjungfrau.ch/en). **Swiss Helicopter**, 3814 Gsteigwiler (☎ 41/033-828-9000; www.swisshelicopter.ch/flights/passenger/special/show/10046).

TOUR: Skydive Interlaken (☎ 41/33-222-5848; www.skydiveinterlaken.ch).

WHEN TO GO: Anytime, weather conditions permitting.

✈ Bern-Belt airport, Basel airport, or Zurich airport, followed by a train ride to Interlaken or Lauterbrunnen, or a drive to Grindelwald.

\$\$\$ Hotel Belvedere Grindelwald, CH-3818 Grindelwald (☎ 41/033-854-5757; www.belvedere-grindelwald.ch). **Eiger Guest House**, CH-3825 Murrel (☎ 41/033-856-54-60; www.eigerguesthouse.com).

Leaping & Jumping

21

Shotover Canyon Swing

A Superman-Like Flight

Queenstown, New Zealand

When it comes to naming the Adventure Capital of the World, there's no contest: Queenstown is indisputably the heavy-weight champion. (See 39, 104, and 139, for more Queenstown adventures.) The list of fear-factor offerings in this city is too long to recount. But the scariest one, by far, is the Shotover Canyon Swing. As co-owner Hamish Emerson says, "The greater the initial terror—the feeling you're going to hit the dirt—the greater the resultant joy when you realize you're going to make it after all!"

The brainchild of two avid rock climbers, the Shotover Canyon Swing is the highest rope swing in the world—with its launch platform attached to a cliff's edge 109m (360 ft.) above the Shotover River. It was designed by innovative structural and mechanical engineers, carefully constructed over several years, repeatedly tested and modified, and finally opened to the public in December 2002. Today, you

can swing in 1 of 10 positions (being suspended and then dropped by a pin-release system is the so-called easiest option, but you can avoid looking down if you go backward).

Whatever style you choose, remember to invoke your inner superman powers. The swing takes you straight down for 60m (200 ft.), a stomach-dropping freefall just meters away from the cliff's vertical face toward a deep canyon, during which you reach speeds of 150kmph (93 mph) and scream like you've never screamed before. As you finally glide into a 200m (656 ft.) arc, and then swing back and forth, you'll thank your lucky stars that you're still alive. Now it's time to simply let your pulse slow and appreciate the sensation of having land beneath your feet—unless, of course, you signed up for two jumps. In that case, get ready to sail through the air again.

The swing is a 15-minute drive from Queenstown, and the company will drive

you there in one of its four-wheel-drive vehicles. After a short walk through the bush, you reach the launch area and are fitted into a seat and chest harness attached to ropes that are strong enough to lift four cars. All of the ropes, attachments, harnesses, and safety devices used here are regularly checked, maintained, and upgraded. But knowing that everything's secure won't be enough to quiet your nerves once you're about to swing. Some trepidation is the whole point here. Queenstown has a reputation to live up to, after all. —JS

i Shotover Canyon Swing, 37 Shotover St., Queenstown (☎ 64/03-442-6990; www.canyonswing.co.nz).

WHEN TO GO: Anytime.

 Queenstown airport.

 \$\$ **The Dairy Private Luxury Hotel**, on the corner of Brecon and Isle sts. (☎ 64/03-442-5164; www.thedairy.co.nz).
 \$\$ **Heritage Hotel**, 91 Fernhill Rd. (☎ 64/03-442-4988; www.heritagehotels.co.nz).



The Shotover Canyon Swing in Queenstown, New Zealand.

22

Leaping & Jumping

Flying over Florida

Skydiving in Orlando

Orlando, Florida, U.S.A.

The world looks different from 11,000 feet (3,353m) above the ground, especially when the airplane door opens and there's nothing between you and the ground below but 2 miles of thin air. And when you're about to make your first solo free-fall jump, the wind rushing past the airplane is drowned out only by the adrenaline rushing through your head.

For visitors to Florida, Orlando has established itself as ground zero for skydiving adventures, with several schools

and centers near that entertainment capital. Those who've never tried skydiving may opt for a tandem flight, in which the diver is strapped to a professional instructor who controls the equipment and the descent—all the diver has to do is enjoy the scenery. (Some training centers dismiss those untrained dives as “an amusement park attraction.”)

For real thrill jockeys, however, the fun that comes from a solo dive can't be beat. Some schools offer both kinds of dives,

while others pride themselves on catering to those who want to take the classes needed to earn the right to an AFF, or accelerated freefall. It takes a little class time before you can jump out of an airplane, so expect to spend some time on the ground reviewing stability, forward movement, loops and turns, and radio-guided landings.

And if, by some chance, you're just not ready to leap out of an airplane, you can still capture the thrill of skydiving by trying indoor skydiving at SkyVenture. A collection of fans forces air at 100 mph (161kmph) through a wind tunnel, which lifts visitors above the ground, effectively mimicking the experience of skydiving for several blissful minutes. The experience requires a bit of training, and safety equipment like goggles, helmets, and jumpsuits are required, but it's

the closest you can get to skydiving without leaving terra firma. —ML

i Skydiving Orlando (☎ 800/691-5867; www.skydivingorlando.com). **Florida Skydiving Center** (☎ 863-678-1003; www.floridaskydiving.com). **Sky-Venture Orlando** (☎ 407/903-1150; www.skyventureorlando.com).

WHEN TO GO: Year-round.

 Orlando.

\$\$\$ Embassy Suites Hotel Orlando, 8978 International Dr. (☎ 800/EMBASSY [362-2779] or 407/352-1400; www.embassy-suites.com). **\$\$\$ Grand Bohemian Hotel**, 325 S. Orange Ave. (☎ 866/663-0024 or 407/313-9000; www.grandbohemian-hotel.com).

Leaping & Jumping

23

Vegas Indoor Skydiving

Holding Your Own in a Wind Tunnel

Las Vegas, Nevada, U.S.A.

The anticipation is half the fun. As you nervously wait, dressed in a colorful flight suit, helmet, gloves, ear plugs, and protective eyewear, while lying on a trampoline-like wire mesh floor of a padded cell, your excitement almost gets the best of you. You're waiting for a giant fan to blow you skyward, a sensation like no other you've ever experienced. You're at Vegas Indoor Skydiving, where their giant DC-3 fan blows so hard (the wind speed reaches 120 mph [193kmph]) you fly high into a wind tunnel. It's as close as you can get to skydiving, without jumping out of a plane.

Before you get to the fun of floating, you begin your hour-long experience with a briefing session, which includes watching a short video, addressing safety concerns, learning proper body position and flight techniques as well as the necessary hand signals in the tunnel, and how to

tuck-and-roll properly in case you fly out of the main airstream and have to land on the padded rim. It seems like a lot to remember, but it's all in the name of safety.


Once in the wind tunnel, you get hands-on help from one of the staff members. As the wind speed picks up, the instructor helps steady you in the airstream. Look! You're flying—arms and legs spread out in a big X so you stay horizontal—and simulating the freefall aspect of sky diving. Just try to wipe the grin off your face.

The actual time spent in the wind tunnel will vary. It's based on 3 minutes per person: Up to five flyers at once are allowed, so grab four friends and you can stay in for 15 minutes. Keep in mind this is an athletic activity, so you might break a sweat as you're flying high. If you're going to get into skydiving, here's where you can learn the basics of body control techniques that


would take far more time (and money) leaping from a plane. Skydivers who want more flight time for less money also come here to learn tricks, from spins and barrel rolls to front and back flips, before heading up in a plane for the full freefalling rush.


This is an activity for all ages, but there are weight and height restrictions. Minimum weight is 40 pounds, and the maximum weight allowed is linked to a person's height. This is important because guests who exceed the maximum may not generate enough lift to fly. Pricing is set so the second flight on the same day costs less than the first. Also available are five-flight packages, family block packages, and coaching packages that include five sessions and a video.

Skydiving in wind tunnels is offered in other cities, too. SkyVenture Colorado in a Denver suburb, Flyaway Indoors in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, and iFLY Hollywood in Universal City, California, all offer indoor skydiving experiences. —LF

 **Vegas Indoor Skydiving**, 200 Convention Center Dr. (☎ 877/545-8093 or 702-731-4768 local; www.vegasindoorskydiving.com). **SkyVenture Colorado**, 9230 Park Meadows Dr., Littleton, CO (☎ 303/768-9000; www.skyventurecolorado.com). **Flyaway Indoor Skydiving**, 3106 Parkway Dr., Pigeon Forge, TN (☎ 877/293-0639; <http://flyawayindoorskydiving.com/pf.html>). **iFLY Hollywood**, Universal Studios City Walk, Hollywood Universal City, CA (☎ 818/985-4359; www.iflyhollywood.com).

WHEN TO GO: Year-round.

 McCarran International.

 **Mandalay Bay**, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (☎ 877/632-7000 or 702/632-7000; www.mandalaybay.com). **MGM Grand**, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. (☎ 800/929-1111 or 702/891-7777; www.mgmgrand.com).

24

Leaping & Jumping

Bridge Day

Jump Together Now

Fayetteville, West Virginia, U.S.A.

For the past 30 years, hundreds of parachutists have been leaping off the New River Gorge Bridge during the world's only legally sanctioned BASE jumping event—Bridge Day. More than 450 BASE jumpers and up to 200,000 spectators attend this fall festival in Fayette County to celebrate and be entertained by the world's second-longest, single-arch bridge.

The acronym BASE stands for the different stationary structures from which enthusiasts of this extreme sport catapult themselves: buildings, antenna towers, spans, and earth. Most times, BASE jumpers run the risk of arrest because they must trespass to climb tall buildings. On Bridge Day, jumpers are safe from arrest,

but the other risks of this adrenaline rush, including death, are as great as ever.

While novices can safely attempt skydiving in tandem with experts because there's time for safety precautions and back-up measures like reserve chutes, BASE jumpers typically have just 2 to 4 seconds to deploy their parachutes because of the low altitudes from which they take off. BASE jumping is a seriously dangerous exploit reserved solely for practiced daredevils.

If you're one of them, you must pass strict requirements to qualify as a jumper off the 876-foot (267m) New River Gorge Bridge. You must have already completed at least 100 skydiving parachute jumps

10 Skydiving Adventures: Thrills on High

Skydiving has always attracted thrill-seekers and daredevils. Whether you're interested in overcoming a fear of heights or feeding an adrenaline-sports addiction, skydiving won't disappoint. Below are areas and outfitters who offer some of the best skydiving in the world. As usual, before you make the leap (er, fall) be sure to inquire about instructor experience and certification as well as about company safety records. —CL

25 Gruyere, Switzerland: Not only is the region in southwest Switzerland home to some of the world's most delicious cheeses, but it's also the launch-point for some of the world's most daring adrenaline junkies. It's hard to imagine more stunning scenery than the Swiss Alps. Good thing, because you'll be hurtling toward them after jumping out of a plane at 4,000m (12,800 ft.). **The Ecole de parachutisme de Château-d'Oex** keeps things interesting for its divers by moving around from location to location within the area on various weekends. ☎ **41/22-366-18-70**; www.epco.aero.

26 San Diego, California: Only 25 miles from downtown San Diego, **Skydive San Diego** offers a unique diving experience. Where else can you take off and land in the same spot? Because they're located at a dedicated skydiving airport, Skydive San Diego allows your friends, family, and others you want to impress to watch as you hurl yourself from sky high and float gracefully back to earth. Launch a tandem jump or an AFF Solo jump, depending on your level of experience (and nerves). The views are amazing. From 13,000 feet (3,900m) you can see downtown San Diego, Coronado Island, and the San Ysidro mountain range. ☎ **800/FREE-FALL** [373-3325] *in California* or 619/216-8416; www.skydivesandiego.com.

27 Oahu, Hawaii: Although it offers only tandem jumps (no soloing here), it's hard to beat the setting for skydiving over the island of Oahu. Known for its amazing surfing and the big city of Honolulu, the most urban of the Hawaiian isles is also spectacular from 14,000 feet (4,267m) in the air. From your sky-high vantage point, you can see the entire island, including Pearl Harbor, the North Shore, and all the way to Diamond Head. The experienced staff at **Pacific Skydiving Center** will outfit you and excite you for your amazing island adrenaline-inducing dive. ☎ **808-637-7472**; www.pacific-skydiving.com.

28 Motueka, New Zealand: Thrill-seeking newcomers can go for tandem jumps. Those with higher aspirations (no pun intended) can participate in a nine-stage AFF qualification course. And if that's not good enough for you, **Abel Tasman** offers AFF-qualified divers the opportunity to work toward their New Zealand Parachute Industry Association license, which allows divers to solo anywhere in the world. All jumps here afford divers brilliant views of New Zealand's Southern Alps, Abel Tasman and Kahurangi National Parks, and endless miles of beaches and ocean. ☎ **64/3-528-4091**; www.skydive.co.nz.

29 Interlaken, Switzerland: A city known for adventure opportunity, Interlaken also has arguably the most beautiful drop zone in Europe. Your jump will usually be from approximately 3,900 to 4,200m (13,000–14,000 ft.) and the trip up is almost as

wonderful as the one down. From that height you can see multiple countries, including Switzerland, Austria, Italy, and France, and view some of the world's great mountains, such as the Jungfrau, Eiger (see the Eiger Jump 10), and the Matterhorn. **Skydive Inter-laken** (☎ 41/33-222-5848; www.skydiveinterlaken.ch). **Skydive Switzerland** (☎ 41/33-821-00-11; www.skydiveswitzerland.com). —LF

30 **Gardiner, New York:** Though the skyscrapers of Manhattan offer some pretty impressive views, the vistas from 13,500 feet (4,050m) up in the air in upstate Gardiner, New York, are amazing. Located next to the Shawangunk Mountains, **Blue Sky Ranch Skydiving** offers Tandem jumps and training for AFF dives. When the weather gets cold, Skydive The Ranch operates in cooperation with a sister company in Florida. (☎ 845/255-4033; www.skydivetheranch.com).

31 **Marion, Montana:** It's hard to beat the scenery in Montana when you're on the ground, so imagine the views from 9,000 feet (2,700m) nearby gorgeous McGregor Lake. Whether you're jumping tandem or solo, the rush you feel when freefalling is incomparable. **Skydive Lost Prairie** is an experienced outfitter in the area. Their highly qualified instructors are on hand every step of the way. (☎ 888/833-5867 or 406/858-2493; www.skydivelostprairie.com).

32 **Guam:** Anybody can travel halfway around the world to a Pacific isle and call herself an adventurer. But the adrenaline adventurer takes it a step further and checks out the stunning beauty of the West Pacific from 14,000 feet (4,200m) in the air. Priced on a graduated scale based on the altitude from which you're jumping, Skydive Guam offers "unparalleled views" of the island and surrounding blue waters. For a few extra bucks, they'll throw in photos and a DVD of your dive so you can earn your bragging rights back home. (☎ 671/475-5555; www.skydiveguam.com).

33 **Seville, Spain:** Home to world-class paella and gorgeous Moorish-architecture, the Andalusia region of Spain is hard to beat in terms of tourism bang for your buck. But why not be a tourist who takes in the sights from a different point of view? Say, from 4,500m (15,000 ft.)? Skydive Spain offers all manner of diving opportunities, from one-time tandem jumps (sometimes you just want to be able to say you've done something!) to AFF certification and solo parachuting. (☎ 34/687-726-303; www.skydivespain.com).

34 **Montalla, Oregon:** In Montalla, just south of Portland, Oregon, in the scenic north-west United States, **Skydive Oregon** takes flight from a dedicated private skydive airport. From up high you can jump tandem or solo (AFF certified divers only), as well as with a group. Imagine you and your friends (up to 23 can go at one time) careening toward earth from 13,000 feet (3,900m) with mile-wide smiles on your faces. For pals too chicken to join you, they can stay on the ground in a designated spectator area and photograph your antics for posterity. Group discounts are available. (☎ 800/934-JUMP [5867] or 503/829-3483; www.skydiveoregon.com).

and attend an advanced training session called “Bridge Day First BASE Jump Course (FJC)” or be trained by an approved mentor. The Snake River BASE Academy (www.snakeriverbase.com) teaches training courses right before Bridge Day. To learn more about BASE jumping preparations, sign up for classes, or register for a jump pass; visit www.bridgeday.info.

If you're not ready to make your own BASE jump, coming to Bridge Day as a spectator is still a total rush. The first time you see a human body tumble off the bridge is enough to make your heart skip a beat and an involuntary “ohmygosh” to escape from your mouth. Watching hundreds of people soar off the bridge for 6 hours, deploying their colorful parachutes and sailing to graceful landings in less than 10 seconds each is mind blowing.

Of course, at this high-energy festival, even spectators don't stay on the sidelines.

A local outdoor adventure company, **Passages to Adventure** (www.passagesto-adventure.com), sets up a special 1-day 600-foot (183m) zipline that drops 200 feet (60m) off the bridge, and anyone can try it. You can also rappel off the bridge or try rafting in the river below. —JS

Official Bridge Day Festival (📞 800/927-0263; www.officialbridgeday.com).

WHEN TO GO: The third Sat in Oct.

✈️ Yeager airport in Charleston, West Virginia.

🏠 \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$ **The Resort at Glade Springs**, 255 Resort Dr. (📞 866/562-8054; www.gladesprings.com). \$ **Holiday Inn Oak Hill-New River Gorge**, U.S. 19 and Oyler Ave. (📞 304/465-0571; www.ichotelsgroup.com).

Leaping & Jumping

35

HALO Jumping

The Ultimate Skydiving Experience

Lumberton, Mississippi, U.S.A.

If you want to get high, *really* high, try HALO jumping out of a DHC-3 “super otter” airplane at more than 30,000 feet (9,000m) above the earth's surface. That's the cruising altitude for most commercial airlines, more than 1,000 feet (305m) higher than Mount Everest, and almost 6 miles (10km) from the ground.

HALO stands for a High Altitude, Low Opening parachute jump, which the U.S. military has been using for years as a way to insert Special Forces into enemy terrain. Using this maneuver, troops can drop stealthily because their aircraft is hidden by the clouds, invisible to ground-level observers, and looks like a commercial plane on radar screens. The technique

was first used in combat during the Vietnam War, though its development began during the Cold War. But it's a relatively new adventure for adrenaline-seeking civilians, and currently the world's highest parachuting experience available to them.

At this jumping altitude of 30,000 feet (9,000m), the temperature is somewhere between -25°F and -35°F (-32°C and -37°C). You only have about 30 seconds of useful consciousness before blacking out from the lack of oxygen and risk severe brain damage or death from hypoxia. Not to mention, of course, there's the obvious risk of death if your parachute malfunctions. You must be in excellent shape, go through a full afternoon of training, and



HALO jumping over Lumberton, Mississippi.

wear a specially fitted oxygen mask for the duration of your entire journey—up and down. Even though you'll be taking a leap in tandem with an expert jumper, you need to learn some skydiving basics and practice pre-breathing techniques. (For instance, you need to breathe 100% pure oxygen on board the aircraft to prevent the sort of "bends" you can get while scuba diving if you're not careful.)

After you take off into the sky, try to ignore the waves of adrenaline crashing over you, and keep breathing calmly to get that adequate oxygen supply. When the jump master finally gives you a nod, get ready to exit. Depending on the weather conditions, you freefall for about 2 mind-boggling minutes before releasing your chute and settling into a floating mode. The

earth appears in patterns and colors far before you can make out any detail of the landscape. But this jump isn't really about appreciating scenic views. It's just about jumping out of a plane as high as you can, and enjoying the outrageous experience of having a G.I. Joe fantasy come true. —JS

i Incredible Adventures (☎ 800/644-7382; www.incredible-adventures.com).

WHEN TO GO: May–Nov.

✈ Gulfport-Biloxi International Airport or **Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport**.

\$\$\$ Hilton Garden Inn Hattiesburg, 133 Plaza Dr. (☎ 601/261/3770; www.hiltongardeninn.com).

Canyon Swing in Nepal

Swing Time

Bhote Kosi River, Nepal

If you have any fear of heights whatsoever, skip this adventure and just keep moving—there's nothing for you here. If, however, jumping off a bridge that's 150m (500 ft.) above a raging river and swinging back and forth across a rocky canyon at speeds approaching 161kmph (100 mph) sounds like a good idea, then have we got an adventure for you! Where the Bhote Kosi river comes surging down from the snow-capped mountains of Tibet, **The Last Resort** (a travel destination for daredevils and spa lovers alike) has built a 163m-long (544-ft.) steel suspension bridge over a

gorge, then added a swing set that's definitely not for kids.

The Last Resort is located about 3 hours' drive from Kathmandu, and is perched above a lush river gorge near the Tibetan border. The site was chosen for its stunning natural beauty as well as for its potential as an action-sports center: Bungee jumping, canyoneering, whitewater rafting, kayaking, and mountain biking excursions are all available at the resort. There are also plenty of chances to unwind; massage therapists, sauna treatments, and other relaxing pursuits are available here.

This is the world's highest swing, and safety is an important goal. Those who dare are strapped into a full body harness and attached to a pair of ropes, each of which is capable of holding 2 tons of weight. Then, you simply walk out onto the jump platform, take one step forward, and let gravity do its stuff. After falling over 90 terror-inducing meters (300 ft.), the swing does something amazing—it smoothly lifts you up, so there's no jerking sensation. Instead, you're treated to a high-speed view of the canyon while suspended on a pendulum hundreds of feet above the river.

After several long, graceful swings, you will come to rest at a recovery rope near the bottom. All that's left to do now is pull yourself to the recovery platform, unstrap yourself from the harness, and sit quietly until the sound of your heart hammering gradually subsides.

For more bungee jumping thrills, turn to the box on p. 26. —ML



Taking a leap of faith over the Bhote Kosi River in Nepal.

i The Last Resort (☎ 977/1/443-9501; www.thelastresort.com.np).

WHEN TO GO: Sept–Dec.

Auckland SkyWalk

Use the Force, SkyWalker

Auckland, New Zealand

Maybe there's something in the water down in New Zealand, but Kiwis seem to have a perverse attraction to scary, adrenaline-rush-inducing sports and events. Among these is the SkyWalk, the latest "terrortraction" from the land that brought jumping off a bridge with a skinny elastic band to the rest of the world.

Auckland's iconic SkyTower—the tallest structure in the Southern Hemisphere at 328m (1,076 ft.) tall—is the home of this affair. Guests are taken out to an open-air platform where they're strapped into a safety harness that's attached to an overhead rail by two safety tethers. They are then invited to walk over to the edge of the thin metal grate that holds them up.

Through the openings in the grate are views of the pedestrians below who are blissfully ignorant of the petrified human suspended 192m (630 ft.) overhead. Guests can walk over to the edge of the grate, if they dare, and lean over the edge for an unobstructed view. Most decline the offer.

There are other skywalks around, notably in Macau and Sydney, but those have handrails and other boring safety features. Guests are advised to wear comfortable clothing and shoes—diapers are optional. No cameras or other loose items are allowed on the platform. Reservations are suggested, and guests should allow themselves 75 minutes to enjoy the sound of their heart jackhammering.



Views from the SkyTower in Auckland are breathtaking.

10 Bungee Jumps for Joy

The guaranteed adrenaline rush of bungee jumping for fun is a fairly new phenomenon—first attempted just 30 years ago—and not an activity for the faint of heart. Modern bungee jumping supposedly began in 1979, when members of the Oxford Dangerous Sports Club attached bungee cords to themselves and dived from the 75m (245 ft.) Clifton Bridge in Bristol, England. Today, the activity is offered around the world, and these are some of the top 10 spots to do it. —JS

38 Verzasca Dam, Switzerland: James Bond fans will recognize this place from the opening scene of *Goldeneye*, when 007 plummets 220m (728 ft.), daringly close to the solid concrete side of a dam. Now you can re-create Bond's experience and dive from the Verzasca Dam's edge, freefalling for just 7½ seconds at nearly 200kmph (125 mph). At that speed, you probably won't have time to fully appreciate the spectacular views here, so make sure to explore the area in this Italian-speaking region of Ticino. www.trekking.ch/eng/007.asp.

39 Kawarau Bridge, New Zealand: Home to the world's first commercial bungee jumping operation, the Kawarau Bridge—just outside of New Zealand's adventure capital Queenstown (see **21**, **104**, and **139**)—offers a 43m (141-ft.) drop. In 1988, when New Zealanders Henry van Asch and A.J. Hackett (Hackett still runs it today) started attaching rubber bands to jumpers' ankles, people called them crazy. Twenty years later, this jump is one of the area's most well known and popular. www.bungee.co.nz/index.php/pi_pageid/17.

40 Ottawa River, Canada: This jump starts at the top of the bungee tower in Morison's Quarry, Wakefield, Quebec, more than 46m (150 ft.) above a deep aqua blue lagoon surrounded by limestone walls. This picturesque point is only 20 minutes from Ottawa, but it feels peacefully remote. After attaching your harness, leap head-first toward the water. This is the only jump in the Americas where you can submerge your head or your entire body 60m (200 ft.) into the river before a boat comes along to transport you back to dry land. www.bungee.ca/packages.php.

41 Bloukrans Bridge, South Africa: At 216m (709 ft.) high, the Bloukrans Bridge is the tallest bridge in Africa and the largest single span concrete arch bridge in the world. To reach the jumping-off point on the top of the arch, you can either walk along a unique 216m (709-ft.) roadway with breathtaking views or zip along a 200m (656-ft.) cable line called the Flying Fox. www.faceadrenalin.com/bloukransbridge.asp.

42 Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe: The Victoria Falls Bridge, which crosses the roaring Zambezi River, was originally built in 1905 to connect Zimbabwe and Zambia. Its more recent claim to fame is a small platform at its center, 111m (360 ft.) above the water, from which bungee jumpers freefall for nearly 5 seconds before rebounding. With the crashing Victoria Falls on one side of you and the turbulent Zambezi churning inside a gorge on the other, this may be the world's most spectacular setting for bungee jumping. www.afrizim.com/activities/victoria_falls/Bungee.asp.

43 Macau Tower, Macau: This 233m (764-ft.) plunge keeps jumpers screaming as they descend just a few meters away from the concrete side of Macau Tower. It has been deemed the highest commercial bungee jump in the world by the Guinness Book of World Records, and it is also the most technically advanced, with a special attachment and vertical wire cables running on either side of the jump platform. Jumpers fall at a speed of up to 200kmph (124 mph) for 5 seconds, before rebounding a few times approximately 30m (98 ft.) above the ground. A guided cable system allows a slow landing onto a specially designed airbag. www.ajhackett.com/macau/bungy.html.

44 Old Colorado River, Costa Rica: Just about an hour-long drive west from San Jose, this scenic spot is a haven for adventure seekers. From the Old Colorado River Bridge, gaze at lush jungle surroundings and powerful rapids rushing far below your feet—80m (265 ft.) below—before pushing off a platform and plunging toward them on a bungee cord. Tropical Bungee opened this picturesque jump site in 1991; today, it's the longest-running and highest bungee operation in Costa Rica. www.bungee.co.cr.

45 Viaduc de la Soulevre, France: In picturesque Normandy, along the Channel coastline, this area was the landing site for the liberation of Europe from Nazi Germany during World War II. Although the original Soulevre railway bridge, which was built between 1889 and 1893 by Gustave Eiffel, fell into disrepair and was ultimately removed in 1970, the 61m (200-ft.) stone columns that supported it still stand tall today. Around 1990, a suspension footbridge was constructed, providing access to a jump deck off the highest pillar and an official bungee operation opened for business. The site is open on the weekends from March through November, and every day from mid-June through mid-September. www.ajhackett.fr/va/bungy.htm.

46 Pacific Northwest Bridge, Washington State, U.S.A.: Just south of Mount St. Helen's in Washington state—about 2½ hours from Seattle and 1 hour from Portland—this private bridge in a forested canyon over a beautiful river offers the highest bungee jump in the United States (equivalent to about 20 stories). It's also the safest and most respected; Bungee Masters has been an industry leader since 1988, and its stunts have been featured on MTV's *The Real World*, *Road Rules Challenge*, and CBS's *Amazing Race*, among numerous other shows. Jumps from the bridge are offered all year on the weekends, and at other times by reservation. www.bungee.com.

47 Double Six Club, Bali: On the coast of Bali, Kuta beach is the only place in the world where you can party and bungee jump at the same time. The energy level really revs up when the sun goes down. Just off the white sands of the Double Six club, you can hop on an elevator and ride to the top of a 45m (150-ft.) tower, built by A.J. Hackett. As the music blasts and you gaze out into the darkness, you can dive toward a swimming pool, even dunking into it if you want to, before the rubber bands snap you back up. Night owls rejoice. www.ajhackett.com/bali.

The views from the SkyTower are breathtaking. Visitors can see the bridges and boats of Waitemata Harbor, Rangitoto Island, the skyscrapers of downtown Auckland, and depending on the weather, Mount Eden and the lush green slopes of the Waitakere Ranges in the distance.

Want more? No problem. There's also a gangplank made of glass—thin, transparent glass—that guests can walk out to for a real freak-out. What's that? More, you say? Fine. After your SkyWalk, if you have any adrenaline left, go upstairs and try the

SkyJump, a type of bungee jump that drops you at 81kmph (50 mph) over the edge of the SkyTower. —ML

 **SkyWalk**  **0800/759-925**; www.skywalk.co.nz.

WHEN TO GO: Nov–Apr.

 Auckland.

 \$\$\$ **Aachen House**, 39 Market Rd.  **0800/222-436**; www.aachenhouse.co.nz. \$\$ **Duxton Hotel**, 100 Greys Ave.  **0800/655-555**; www.duxton.com.

Gliding, Coasting & Floating **48**

Mont Blanc by Cable Car

Hanging Out over the Alps

Chamonix, France

Sure, you could hike up or ski down the French Alps—both adrenaline rushes in their own rights. (In fact, if you suffer from severe acrophobia, you really should keep your feet on land with one of those two options.) But if vertigo doesn't typically bother you, hop on the world's highest cable car for the ride of your life. As it ascends 3,842m (12,604 ft.) up to the Aiguille ("needle") du Midi, and then into Italy, you have the most astounding panoramic views of Mont Blanc, Western Europe's tallest peak, at 4,810m (15,780 ft.). At several points during this exhilarating full-day journey, your cable car is suspended 500m (1,640 ft.) above the ground.

The skyward route begins in the celebrated town of Chamonix, where skiing was allegedly invented and the world's first Winter Olympic Games took place in 1924. Not far from the meeting point of France, Italy, and Switzerland, this alpine valley framed by rows of towering snow-covered peaks is a near utopia for outdoor enthusiasts and nature lovers.

The cable car's steep ascent immediately displays the region's spectacular views. But this first part of your trip, a 9-minute run to

the Plan des Aiguilles at 2,300m (7,546 ft.), is relatively relaxing compared to what comes next. During the ride's second segment, as you soar to the Aiguille du Midi station in about 10 minutes—your pulse will undoubtedly quicken and your stomach might drop as you climb such great altitudes so quickly. You traverse the Les Pelerins glacier and travel up the north face.

When you reach the top, you're on **Piton Nord**, where you find a cafeteria and one of the world's highest restaurants called "3842" (which is, of course, the altitude of the Aiguille du Midi in meters). Before or after getting a bite to eat, walk upstairs to the **Chamonix Terrace** for breathtaking views of the French, Swiss, and Italian Alps. When you've had your fill of the scenery here, walk across a perilous wooden footbridge covered with ice and snow to **Piton Central**. On this peak, you can take an elevator inside of the rock straight up to the **Summit Terrace**, about 100m (328 ft.) from Mont Blanc's peak—the closest you can get without climbing. On a clear day, you can see the Matterhorn, Monta Rosa, and the Grand Combin. There's just one more lookout point that

you won't want to miss, **Mont Blanc Terrace**, where you're most likely to catch a glimpse of intrepid climbers scaling the summit.

Before heading back down to town, you can travel another 5km (3 miles) through the air on the panoramic Mont Blanc gondola over to Pointe Helbronner, Italy, at 3,462m (11,358 ft.). The three cable cars that run along this route provide a rare look at the high mountain landscape with its jagged snow-covered crests and valleys, and vast icy expanses sparkling in the sunlight. You might even see trekkers traversing the Valle Blanche glacier. You can disembark the cable car and explore the station's terraces without your passport, but remember to bring it along if you plan to spend more time in Italy. If you're planning to

return to Chamonix, you can go back the way you came and make it in time for dinner. —JS

 **Compagnie du Mont-Blanc**, 35 Place de la Mer de Glace (☎ 04/50-53-3080; www.compagniedumontblanc.fr).

WHEN TO GO: Mid-May to mid-Oct; that's the only time the route to Pointe Heilbronner operates.

 Geneva airport.

 **Les Chalets de Philippe**, 718 Route du Chapeau (☎ 33/06-07-23-1726; www.chaletsphilippe.com). **Le Morgane**, 145 Avenue de l'Aiguille du Midi (☎ 33/04-50-53-5715; www.morgane-hotel-chamonix.com/en).

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Gliding, Coasting & Floating

Kitty Hawk Kites Hang Gliding

Channeling Orville & Wilbur

Nags Head, North Carolina, U.S.A.

Dreams of flying are as old as mankind, and the same thrill Orville and Wilbur Wright felt over 100 years ago when they lifted into the heavens and made that dream come true can now be yours. The two brothers from Ohio had their pick of places to stage their first flight, but they chose Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, for its steady winds and miles of soft beach sand—because landings, back then, weren't always guaranteed to be smooth.

Kitty Hawk Kites offers hang gliding lessons from Jockey's Ridge State Park in North Carolina's Outer Banks, just a stone's throw from where the Wright brothers flew, and where steady breezes and soft sands can still be found in abundance. Beginner classes include 1 hour of ground school followed by 2 hours on the dunes with about five flights per student. Though in the past children under 85 pounds were restricted from going airborne (hang

gliders need more weight to maneuver), Kitty Hawk Kites is able to offer kids' lessons by having instructors assist in the controls.

For those who want an unparalleled sky-high experience, tandem lessons take participants and an instructor up to 2,000 feet (610m) or more in a hang glider towed by an ultralight plane. Once unhooked from the tow plane, the flyers can practice dives and turns that were once experienced only by soaring birds. And if you find you've been bit by the flying bug, Kitty Hawk also offers a series of hang gliding camps lasting a full week, and special clinics can be arranged to perfect your launching, landing, and aero-towing skills.

If your body is still hungering for more adrenaline, Kitty Hawk Kites offers lessons and camps in kiteboarding, power kiting, surfing, wakeboarding, and parasailing. Had enough? Throw in some sailing,





Learning to hang glide at Kitty Hawk Kites.

jet-skiing, and aero-tours, and you've got a one-stop shop for all your adventure tour needs. —ML

i Kitty Hawk Kites (☎ 877/FLY-THIS; www.kittyhawk.com).

WHEN TO GO: Classes offered year-round.

 Norfolk (80 miles/129km).

 \$\$\$ **The First Colony Inn**, 6720 S. Virginia Dare Trail (☎ 800/368-9390; www.firstcolonyinn.com). \$\$ **Cypress House Inn**, 500 N. Virginia Dare Trail (☎ 800/554-2764; www.cypresshouseinn.com).

Gliding, Coasting & Floating **50**

Rocky Mountain High *Hang Gliding in Colorado*

Denver, Colorado, U.S.A.

Imagine flying like a hawk, gliding over the landscape as thermals lift you and move you along. And imagine that landscape is some of the most dazzling on earth—the Rocky Mountains, to be specific. This is how it feels when you're soaring for miles in a hang glider high above the mountains of

Colorado, some of the most breathtaking in the Western hemisphere. It's just you and the earth, with only the sound of the wind for company. This is a singular and solitary thrill—an experience that will linger in your memory.

Airtime Above offers hang gliding experiences in Colorado. While the company is based near Denver, arrangements can be made to learn at several training sites along the Front Range and the Western Slope. When hang gliders are soaring off Lookout Mountain, you can see them from downtown Denver, about 20 minutes away. Other popular spots are on Kenosha Pass, where you can glide over the vast South Park, and on Williams Peak by Green Mountain Reservoir.

Hang gliders have a frame structure that holds the wings in a rigid configuration, so they won't collapse. The pilot is suspended below the frame in a harness. You can foot-launch hang gliders off a hilltop or mountainside, or get an aerotow by an ultralight plane. Once you're airborne you can glide or soar for up to 400 miles (644km) riding the ridge lifts and the thermal lifts.





If you're uneasy about hang gliding solo, sample the sport during a tandem ride. You and an instructor will share a hang glider. The two of you and your craft will be towed by an ultralight plane up to about 2,000 feet (966m), and then let

loose. As you soar through the skies, the instructor may let you handle the controls yourself. Meanwhile, enjoy the quiet and the views of the earth below you.

If you like the experience, start taking lessons. First you learn what's involved on flat ground, then progress to a small hill and finally to a hill with a 600- to 1,000-foot (180–300m) drop. It can take several months to be properly trained, but experienced hang glider pilots say there's nothing like the feeling when you take advantage of the wind—a gliding flight can become a soaring flight that can last for hours. —LF

 **Airtime Above**  303/674-2451; www.airtimeabove.com).

 Denver.

 \$\$\$ **Brown Palace Hotel**, 321 17th St.  800/321-2599 or 303/297-3111; www.brownpalace.com). \$\$\$ **The Timbers Hotel**, 4411 Peoria St.  800/844-9404 or 303/373-1444; www.timbersdenver.com). \$ **Innkeeper of the Rockies**, 1717 Race St.  303/861-7777; www.innkeeperrockies.com).

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Gliding, Coasting & Floating

Hang Gliding in the Alps

On a Wing & a Prayer

Interlaken, Switzerland

Interlaken is Europe's nerve center. The array of spine-tingling adventures available in this staggeringly pretty place makes it something of a mecca for adrenaline junkies. But before you get busy with the many ground-level activities here (hiking, biking, rafting, sailing, or canyoning, just to name a few), get a bird's-eye view of the greater Jungfrau region by hang gliding over it.

Set between two lakes (Thun and Brienz) in the Berner Oberland, Interlaken began as a summer resort more than 300 years ago. Since then, it's evolved into a hotspot for outdoor enthusiasts. Today, hang gliding in

tandem with an experienced pilot is actually one of the easier extreme sports to do here—if you can muster the courage to try it. A 10- to 20-minute flight provides a huge rush while displaying the most thrilling views of the sparkling white snow-covered peaks, bright turquoise water, and green grassy meadows.


After getting into a helmet and sturdy harness with multiple ropes and carabiners, you go through a pre-flight training with your pilot and then together are attached to a colorful wing. Side by side, the next step is just to run. As you jog


down a hill for a few paces, suddenly your legs are spinning through thin air. And as the adrenaline gushes through your body, you realize you're flying. You can even reach your arms out and soar like an eagle as the pilot steers your flight and you just take in this amazing new perspective of the earth far below. But before you've had too much calm, your pilot can get your stomach flip-flopping again with tricks like stalls and spinners that take you on a roller coaster ride through the sky. You speed up and go higher, then drift back down, and then fly straight ahead, until finally, you make your way toward the ground and coast toward a grassy landing pad. With a few gentle bumps, the wildest ride of your life comes to a smooth end. —JS

i **Interlaken Tourism Office**, Hoheweg 37 (☎ **41/033-826-5300**; www.interlaken.ch) and **Bernese Oberland Tourism** (<http://tourismus.berneroberland.ch>).

TOUR: Hang Gliding Interlaken, Brunn-gasse 30 (☎ **41/079-770-0704**; www.hangglidinginterlaken.com).

WHEN TO GO: Mar–Oct.

 Zurich Airport or Geneva Airport, followed by a 2-hr. train ride to Interlaken.

 \$ **Hotel Rugenpark**, Rugenparkstrasse 19 (☎ **41/033-822-3661**; www.rugenpark.ch). \$–\$\$ **Hotel Lotschberg**, General-Guisanstrasse 31 (☎ **41/033-822-2545**; www.lotschberg.ch).

Gliding, Coasting & Floating

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Hang Gliding in Rio de Janeiro

Landing on Rio's Beaches

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

One minute you're standing there like any normal person, both feet on the ground, and the next you're running off the side of a tall cliff—like any abnormal person. Then, without a word, you're suddenly floating, quietly, aloft like a bird hovering over the majestic cliffs and beaches of Rio de Janeiro. There's nothing between you and the lovely statue of Christ the Redeemer, the spires of Sugarloaf Mountain, and the sparkling sapphire Atlantic except a balmy tropical breeze. This, you realize, is the closest you'll ever come to realizing that age-old dream of mankind: flying.

There's a lot to see and do in Rio, so it's easy to forget that this is one of the pre-eminent places on the planet for hang gliding. The ocean breezes that lift up over the Sierra do Mar mountains create near-perfect conditions for liftoff. Most full-service hotels can put visitors in touch with a

reputable hang-gliding operator, and in most cases, operators can provide hotel pickup and drop-off—just ask at the front desk of your accommodations for recommended tours or contact those listed below. It's also a good idea to check the weather before booking a flight, and wear athletic shoes—sandals and bare feet are not recommended.

Your flight will probably begin on a tall ridge in **Tijuca National Park**, one of the largest urban rainforest parks in the world, where toucans and monkeys are common sights. No experience is needed for many hang-gliding tours, because tandem flights allow the instructor to operate the control on the hang glider—all you need to do is, well, hang. Though there is usually a minimum age (around 7), there's no upper age limit. The flights can last up to 30 minutes, depending on weather conditions, after



Hang gliding in Rio offers views of the ocean, mountains, and city.

which time you touch down gently on one of Rio de Janeiro's soft, sandy beaches—which, when you think about it, is not a bad way to land. —ML

Riotur (☎ 021/2217-7575; www.riode-janeiro-turismo.com.br).

TOURS: **Just Fly Rio** (☎ 021/9985-7540; www.justfly.com.br). **Hang Gliding Tour**

(☎ 5521/9343-3380; www.hanglidingtour.com.br).

WHEN TO GO: Apr–Nov.

✈ Rio de Janeiro.

Pestana Rio Atlântica, Av. Atlântica 2964 (☎ 021/2548-6332; www.pestana.com). **Copacabana Sol Hotel**, Rua Santa Clara 141 (☎ 0800/254-447; www.copacabanasolhotel.com.br).

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Gliding, Coasting & Floating

Canopy Walk

Up Among the Treetops

Kakum National Park, Ghana

Ghana is one of the most exhilarating places in West Africa—with vibrant cities, dense rainforests, picturesque coastlines, historic UNESCO sites, and heart-pounding traditional drum and dance performances.

At times, it can be a solemn place, given its tragic past as a major shipping point for Africans being sent to America as slaves. But mostly, it's lively and inspiring, renowned for its friendly people and

10 Ziplines to Make Tarzan Proud

Climbing trees and swinging from their branches is exciting, but zippering between them is even better. For centuries, miners used cable-and-pulley systems to transport supplies through inhospitable terrain. For decades, biologists and researchers in Central and South America used similar mechanisms to get themselves across low narrow river valleys and into the rainforest's high canopies. Finally, ecotourism companies got wind of the idea and developed a way for travelers to explore areas that were once impenetrable. Now, in places all around the world, you can hook on a harness, attach to some ropes, and embark on a flight made for speed lovers and tree huggers alike. —JS

54 Monteverde Cloud Forest, Costa Rica: Here's where it all started. In 1997, the Original Canopy Tour opened just below the peak of Monteverde. Though there are dozens of canopy tours offered in Costa Rica today, there's something special about the original course. After a short, guided hike through the cloud forest, you climb up to a platform attached to an enormous tree and fly through the sky. After a few zips, just when you're starting to relax, your heart begins pounding again as a steep cable takes you rushing down toward the forest floor. From there, it's back above the treetops before a final rappel from what the guides refer to as the "scary tree." www.canopytour.com.

55 Ziptrek Ecotours, Canada: The winter is the best time to take the 3-hour Zip-trek Eagle tour that takes you all the way from the wilderness back to Whistler Village at speeds up to 80kmph (50 mph). Soaring between the snow-covered Whistler and Blackcomb mountains—over the choppy waters of Fitzsimmons Creek in the valley below, surrounded by enormous Douglas fir trees and Western red cedars—is pure exhilaration in a winter-wonderland setting. www.ziptrek.com.

56 Flight of the Gibbons, Thailand: This zipline course is set in a 1,500-year-old rainforest just outside of Mae Kompong village, an hour from Chiang Mai, Thailand's largest northern city. From here, you spend about 3 hours crossing sky bridges, dangling from cables, and gliding between 18 platforms in the treetops, flying above the lush forest and swiftly moving streams far below. Along the way, your guides will fill you in on the story of this ancient ecosystem, which the company works to restore and maintain. www.treetopasia.com.

57 Flying Fox Neemrana, India: This is the world's first heritage zip tour and India's first zipline course. You fly above old forts, majestic palaces, and the rolling countryside while learning about the enchanted region of Rajasthan, once home to India's kings and queens. Flying Fox opened in 2009 at the Neemrana Fort Palace, originally built in 1464 and reopened in 1991 as a heritage hotel. Spend 2 hours whizzing across five long cable lines with spectacular views of the more than 2 billion-year-old, Acacia-covered Aravalli hills. www.flyingfox.asia.

58 Haleakala Skyline Adventure, Hawaii: The hottest thing to do on Maui is zip down the side of a massive volcano called Haleakala ("house of the sun" in Hawaiian). After hiking through the gorgeous upcountry for about a half-hour, you cross a long

swaying footbridge, and finally sail across five super-fast ziplines far above sea level. This exhilarating journey showcases Maui's rocky nooks and crannies, abundant greenery, waterfalls, valleys, and rare vegetation. To help protect these rare natural wonders, this company donates 1% of sales to conservation efforts. www.zipline.com.

59 Scream Time Ziplines, North Carolina: In Boone, North Carolina, you'll find the only three-person-wide zipline course in the U.S.—and three times the rush. You meet at a pickup spot off U.S. 421 North, hop in the company's all-terrain vehicle, and take a bumpy ride across rolling hills at the outer edge of the Great Smoky Mountains. After a safety briefing on site, start off with a course of six ziplines—each running between 450 and 800 feet (137–244m) in length, about 150 feet (46m) above the ground—before embarking on the 2,000 feet (601m)—or about a half-mile—“super zip” line where you can reach speeds of more than 50 mph (80kmph). www.screamtimezipline.com.

60 Mokai Gravity Canyon, New Zealand: After a 15-minute climb up to your take-off point, don a required pair of goggles, strap into your harness next to two other passengers (three people can be attached on one zipline), and take a leap of faith. Before you know it, you'll be speeding along a 1km (0.6 mile) cable, 175m (574 ft.) above the Rangitikei River, at nearly 160kmph (99 mph). The velocity and views will render you speechless. www.gravitycanyon.co.nz.

61 ZipRider at Icy Straight Point, Alaska: This is North America's longest and highest zipline. At 1,330 feet (405m) above the ground, an innovative braking system maintains your speed at around 60 mph (95kmph) as you zoom along on one of six parallel cables for 5,330 feet (1.6km). You whoosh over a cliff, above woodlands and open spaces, with amazing views of Port Frederic and Icy Straight, for a full 90 seconds. www.ziprider.com/rides/icy-strait-point.

62 Iguazu Forest Eco Aventura Canopy Tour, Argentina: After you spend time exploring the wondrous wet Iguazu Falls, you might want a break from being waterlogged. Dry off with a zipline tour in the nearby jungle along the Parana River coast, just 7km (4½ miles) from Puerto Iguazu and 15km (9½ miles) from the falls. The cables here run about 800m (2,625 ft.) long at heights between 15m (49 ft.) and 25m (82 ft.). This excursion will take you high above the trees, where you might see birds (such as the great dusky swift) and vibrant butterflies in this dense green forest. www.iguazuforest.com.

63 Cypress Valley Canopy Tours, Texas: At this private reserve outside of Austin, you can zip all the way home sweet home—straight into your own luxury tree-house for the night! After you soar over the gorgeous landscape, cross two swaying bridges constructed of narrow slats and cables, take a short hike, fly through the sky again on increasingly challenging lines, it's just one more zip into Lofthaven, your special sleeping quarters deep in the wilderness. www.cypressvalleycanopytours.com/index.php.


a government that's often cited as a model of democracy on the continent. After becoming the first sub-Saharan African nation to gain independence, it experienced some instability but then peacefully transitioned into a stable democracy during the 1990s.

While Ghana is politically calm, it doesn't lack excitement in other areas. For the biggest adrenaline rush, head to **Kakum National Park** in the Central Region, about an hour north of Cape Coast and Elmina. More than 200 species of birds and countless butterflies have been spotted in this pristine rainforest, and monkeys often swing from the tree branches. For your own bird's-eye view, venture across the long and wobbly **Kakum Canopy Walkway**. You might feel like a tightrope walker as you balance on this set of swaying bridges—suspended 40m (130 ft.) above the ground. It stretches for 330m (1,082 ft.) between seven trees with viewing platforms. As you step along the narrow wooden planks, attached to steel cables and netting, try to ignore your sweaty palms and shaking legs long enough to look around. Surrounded by lush, green plants and chirping birds, you'll be awed by the unforgettable perspective up here. Established in 1990 on 350 sq. km (135 sq. miles) of land, the Kakum National Park is protected by the **Ghana Heritage and Conservation Trust** (www.ghct.org.gh).

After you've survived your sky-high adventure, keep the energy level up by heading to Elmina for a Bakatue dance and drum performance. Every day, at 5pm, a small local troupe holds rehearsals in the


west wing of **St. George's Castle**. Common instruments include a tall kaganu drum, a squat round kidi drum, and a cowbell-shaped gangkogui. Dances often include a call-and-response routine, and audience members are almost always invited to join in.


When the festive dancing isn't going on, St. George's Castle is a more somber place. This site, like **Cape Coast Castle**, was one of the major stops along the Atlantic slave trade route. Today, both structures have been extensively restored by the Ghanaian government and are recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These important remnants of a grave history are well worth visiting. But after you've seen them, head over to **Kotokuruba Market** for a brighter look at modern-day Ghana, where people enjoy lively commerce, rich cultural traditions, and, most importantly, freedom. —JS

 **Ghana Tourism**, P.O. Box GP 4386, Accra (☎ **233/21-222-153**; www.touringghana.com) and **Kakum National Park**, Dunkwa Rd. (☎ **233/04-232-583**; www.ghana-net.com/kakumnationalpark.aspx).

TOUR: Expert Travel and Tours, P.O. Box 0823 Osu, Accra (☎ **233/21-775-498**; www.experttravel.com.gh).

WHEN TO GO: Year-round.

 Kotoka International Airport in Accra.

 **Coconut Grove Beach Resort**, Mmoframa Akyinim, Elmina (☎ **233/42-401-005**; www.coconutgrovehotels.com.gh).