

Heads in the clouds

Iain Boyd has an adrenaline-fuelled weekend in Coffs Harbour in which he meets some of Australia's best and most daring skydivers.



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"Are you cheating on me?" she muttered, her eyes narrowing in on me. "Ever since that Coffs Harbour trip..." she continued, "...you've been acting weird."

She was right. Not about cheating on her. But weird? Well, if weird equals happy, then yes. Guilty as charged. I felt like Brad will feel when he finally escapes Angelina. I'd started living my life. At 33, I was taking some risks and I was loving it.

Two days ago, I wouldn't drink milk the day after its expiry date but now, I gulp it down as if cows are going out of fashion. Two days ago I'd have been tucked up by 9pm on a Monday night but last night I gatecrashed a Channel 9 function, and necked tequilas with Eddie McGuire until the Tuesday sun came up. Two days ago, I wouldn't let the boss go to answer machine but now I let that bastard wait, along with said girlfriend who needs money for shoes and wants to talk about 'us'. Yawn.

You see, two days ago I was a pussycat, but now I'm a lion. Let me tell you what happened in Coffs.

"Meet Fiona," he said, an obvious Australian twang defying his nickname of 'Pom'.

I make a mental note to find out about Pom's name, but it could wait. Now I needed to give Fiona my full, pent-up attention.

Fiona McEachern is as charming as anyone you'll ever meet. She is softly spoken, almost shy, but with a confident underbelly. A grin lurks beneath as she speaks, an inner glow that intrigues and defies her exterior. "I'm a vet by trade," she tells me. "Well, part-time anyway." It's the other 'part' that grabs me. "I've also completed around 7,400 skydives."

Say what?

It was Thursday morning when I took the call from my editor, not letting it go to voicemail because I was still a pussycat then. "I need you to go to Coffs Harbour. Australia's best skydivers are getting together for a week of record attempts and displays. They call it a 'Boogie'. We'll also get you to jump out of a plane."

Say waaaaaa?

And there I was. Whisked off in a plane, and now

sitting across from one of the world's best female divers, one of 2,500 registered in Australia and breaker of the Australian record with 112 of her buddies in June this year, waiting for my call to go tandem. It was all a bit surreal. But as Fiona explains, it's not often your choice to go skydiving – more often than not, skydiving chooses you. "I met this guy," she says, laughing. "Bloody men. He was performing at a demo event like this and I hung around the dropzone for two days, praying for rain. Twenty-six years later, I now instruct flat flying (or 'belly to earth', to the lay feet-on-the-ground man)."

It's been a long week for these guys at Coffs City Skydivers and, as the sun blazes down on us just next to the dropzone, our conversation is drowned out by the noise of a plane taking groups of instructors and trainees up into the blue yonder. It's then I realise, my stomach dropping, that the weather isn't going to save me either. One of many instructors here this weekend, Fiona is teaching two to three students at a time about formations. It's not only training for record attempts but it is a chance for progressing divers to clock up some air miles and learn from the best in the business.

"If you wanted to learn tennis you wouldn't get Lleyton Hewitt to teach you," Pom explains to me later. "But in skydiving, that is exactly what happens... you learn from the best."

What I start to realise as I hang out watching instructors coming back from jumps four, five and six of the day is that this crazy stuff is far safer than it looks. "To get in that aircraft, you have to be significantly trained," explains Fiona. "It's one of the most regulated sports around. I've had five malfunctions in 26 years but rather than worry, you get excited, because you get to practise what you train for."

As if on cue, Brett Newman lands with his reserve chute deployed. As part of a demo, he'd cut his normal chute loose. It was an awesome feet to watch – deliberately releasing a good parachute!

"He was just showing how easily and quickly it can be done," Pom later explains to me. ☺



“...it was more about the scenery. In a plane, you get a little window but in freefall, you get the world.”

As day becomes night, we all gather in the plane hangar to scull some well-earned cold ones and watch the day's highlights on video. While not earned, my beer-sculling fools a few into thinking I'm one of them. I'm not – hell, no – but as the ales flow, I'm mixing better than a Kenwood and feel as welcome as Bono at The Edge's nana's house. Following a hectic day, my jump will be tomorrow morning now, says Steve Hill, the owner of the place.

This helps to prolong both my agony and my excitement.

Chutes are tucked away around us with meticulous precision. It's a fascinating process to watch, even on the 10th viewing. The screen shows a chute tangle mid-dive; the instructor swivels to untangle it and then comes a big cheer. They're trained for stuff like that, I remind myself, praying that mine opens normally. The music cranks and two guys are flying like bits of bread in an empty but far from boring sandwich: one facing up, the other facing down while both travel at 200 kilometres per hour. Cool stuff. Then something weird: two guys flying feet down like two dudes squaring one another up.

“What the hell is that?” I blurt. “James does that,”

Pom explains. “You can chat to him tomorrow.”

The next morning I meet James. Made redundant from his arborist job in Melbourne in 1996, James got into the skydiving industry in 1998, working the Boogie circuit and teaching other divers until 2005. Coming full circle like one of his aerial manoeuvres, he's now climbing trees in Brisbane. James Bond films inspired this Val Kilmer lookalike, and with images in my mind of Bond chasing parachutes and tackling stunt-double roles, I couldn't wait to find out more.

“It wasn't so much the stunt,” he says. “It was more about the scenery. In a plane, you get a little window but in freefall, you get the world.”

James has completed 7,500 jumps in some of the world's most beautiful countries. Once, he landed on a beach in Vietnam, to the bemusement of the locals, who were witnessing their first festival. You can only imagine the joys stored in his brain. Formations and scenery are what it's all about for most of these guys. “If you want thrills, go base jumping, it's a totally different sport,” Fiona said just yesterday.

Free flying, James explains, is his discipline of choice, though he is skilled in the others. It's a relatively new area in the sport, and the fastest of its disciplines, with free-flying divers reaching speeds of between 250 and 300 kilometres per hour, flying head or feet first.

Like Fiona, James is one of Australia's finest: in July 2009, he set a world record with 108 people, all flying



vertically in formation. The logistics were incredible. "The planes were at 18,000 feet so we had oxygen masks," he explains. "When everyone started charging out at incredible speed, it looked like a big swarm of bees converging." On the seventh jump, they secured the record.

The next morning, as I stand on the beach after my jump, I'm still in shock. My main man, Lawrence, (aka Pom), is up on the promenade keeping everyone informed as incoming divers with beautiful paint streams trailing from their ankles land on the beach. "This is the third year we've held the Boogie," he says. "The public feel a bit removed from skydiving, so we've tried to put it in a format where people can experience the sport and chat to the divers."

One of the few self-professed adrenaline junkies I meet, Lawrence came over from England as a backpacker, finding work as a scuba instructor. But even as a kid he was tackling speedway, whitewater rafting and mountaineering, all of which still excite him.

"Next year we'll have more events for the public to enjoy, such as motocross and jet skiing, and the scuba guys might put on an underwater photography competition," he says.

At 42, he's a member of the current 13-way Aussie wingsuit record. "It's a new discipline but the capacity is massive," he explains. "You can chase each other but it's not just two dimensions. You can build 3-D shapes

– of pyramids or cubes of people."

Pom recalls stories about quiet housewives on their first jumps. "Some swear like troopers; it's hilarious," he says. "When they get on the ground, they get embarrassed and realise their kids are going to see the video!"

And it isn't just the housewives who are shocked. "People get a reality check; they realise they have been worrying about stuff that doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things," he says. "If they overcome the challenge of a skydive, they will approach other challenges in their lives a little differently."

To this end, Lawrence is planning a personal development program, Soul Flyers, that incorporates skydiving and life coaching. "In life, people can get quite negative," he says, "but around a bunch of skydivers, everyone is positive. So we hope to help people through diving. If you spend your life in your comfort zone, you'll never discover what you are capable of!"

An hour earlier, strapped to my tandem master Tony, I ask him if anyone ever bails. "No!" sounds a lot like "Go!" as the plane door opens – a massive blast of wind assaulting us. Three guys somersault into nothingness. Three life-changing minutes and 14,000 feet later, I decide that I've found a metaphor by which to live for the rest of my life. And the first thing to 'Go!' will be that dull, high-maintenance girlfriend of mine. I just hope she knows how to fly solo. ☺

Above and below:
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