

The Dizziness Of Freedom: The Birth And Rise Of Bungee Jumping

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AJ Hackett cased the Eiffel Tower for over a month. He studied architectural plans. He knew the guards' schedules. He memorized the exits, knew when the lights switched on and off. He and his team rehearsed conversation that would intentionally distract security. During a reconnaissance visit, AJ determined the exact distance from the second level to the ground by tying a stone to the end of a nylon cord and tossing it off the side.

The night before AJ bungee jumped down the center of the Eiffel Tower, he and his team entered it at 10 p.m., an hour before closing. Everyone had a role in the stunt, especially the cameraman, responsible for securing the sport's place in history. They paid their entry fees, entering separately so as to avoid detection. Their backpacks were stuffed with rope, bungee cords, carabiners, camera gear, harnesses and sleeping bags. And a bottle of champagne, of course.

“Looking around the faces of the team, I saw a mixture of nervousness and excitement,” AJ wrote in his autobiography, *Jump Start*. “We were enthusiastic amateurs playing some sort of warped espionage game.” He and his team reached the bar on the second level and enjoyed a beer before close. They gulped down the last of their drinks, synchronized their watches and split up. While AJ and two others scaled a fence and climbed toward a roof where they would sleep for the night, others distracted guards with idle chatter, or blocked cameras with umbrellas or sheets of cardboard. AJ's girlfriend, Caroline, and her friend Sara played the role of “eye candy” in the security room where they preoccupied the guards.

Then a security guard strolled dangerously close to the operation. The team pretended to be tourists and after a few minutes the guard passed. The support team exited the tower and congregated at the base, prepared to sleep outside. Just as AJ settled in to sleep an argument erupted: his cameraman was having second thoughts. Apparently the man had just made a film in the Middle East and his nerves hadn't recovered. AJ helped him over

fence. “It was a hiccup,” he said, “but not a disaster. We still had two still photographers on the tower and a cameramen shooting from various points on the ground.” So he tucked himself into his sleeping bag and was asleep within minutes.

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AJ Hackett’s first bungee jump was in 1986 off of the Greenhithe Bridge in Auckland, New Zealand. His friend Chris Sigglekow introduced him to the idea. In the 1970’s Chris witnessed students from Oxford University’s Dangerous Sports Club jump off a bridge in Bristol, England, with a rubber cord tied to their feet. He tried it himself a few years later, bungee jumping off the 33-foot Pelorous Bridge near Nelson, New Zealand, using a parachute cord — the same cord he and AJ used for the Greenhithe Bridge.

AJ and Chris had discussed the cord’s strength and stretch before the jump, as well as the harness, knots and ties. They purchased a parachute harness from a yachting store in Auckland and created a rigging system with climbing gear. They met with researchers at the University of Auckland to understand how long and thick a cord must be in order to be safe. They were told that a strand of rubber cord will break at 6.7 times its length when stretched out. At four times its length it would be at 15% its breaking strain. “That gave us a massive safety margin,” AJ said. To calculate the length of the cord before a jump, they divided the height by four. To account for different weights, they simply adjusted the thickness.

After measuring the height of Greenhithe Bridge, AJ and Chris strapped diving belts to a punching bag and tossed it off the side. They made sure the bags matched their body weights. After watching video footage of the tests, they were sure the concept was sound. “When it came time for us to jump ourselves,” AJ said, “we had no fear at all.” He called the 62-foot bridge a “manageable little drop.” After performing a countdown from five, AJ threw himself over. “I felt the pull of the rubber cord attached to my back.” Then the cord yanked him upward before he hit the Waitemata Harbor. “It was fair to say I was sold on the idea right from the outset.”

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I was on a week-long break from classes at the University of Canterbury as part of a five-month-long study abroad experience in Christchurch, New Zealand. In preparation for a pilgrimage to Queenstown — the so-called adventure capital of the world — my friend and I bought an old Subaru hatchback for \$500, splitting it down the middle. We loaded it up with friends and had another car follow us six hours south.

It wasn’t hard to spot the AJ Hackett Bungee Center when we arrived. It was a kind of Mecca for adrenaline junkies, thrill-seekers and hooligans — people like my friends and me. AJ says his target demographic is backpackers and leisure travelers. “People who are

pretty much living a dream existence for a year or so.”

I dropped a hefty sum of money on a package called the *Thrilllogy*, which consisted of three bungee jumps spaced out over the course of the week. Our first jump was from the Kawarau Bridge, the world’s first commercial bungee jumping site, established in 1988 by AJ Hackett and his partner Henry van Asch, co-founder of the business.

As a staff member tightened my harness, he asked, “Do you want to bob above the water, touch or dunk?” I gave him a hard stare and said, “Dunk me.” He nodded. I stood up and hopped my way to the edge. The man holding the cord stood behind me and began the fast countdown: “5-4-3-2-1.” Without thinking (and that’s the key), I jumped and plummeted 140 feet to the water, dunking myself in the lime-green Kawarau River below.



“There’s a logical process to bungee jumping,” AJ says. “Once you’ve done a couple at any particular height, you want to go higher. “After jumping from Auckland’s Greenhithe Bridge, he and his friends upped the ante and gathered on the 98-foot-high bridge in Hamilton, New Zealand, the next weekend. It was there AJ had his first run-in with the cops. But when they arrived they had no idea what to do, unsure if the thrill-seekers and his insane friends were breaking any laws. AJ told the cops he was reinventing adventure tourism and then offered the police a jump. They turned him down, but let AJ and his friends make the plunge anyway.

AJ chose Auckland's most visible structure next: the Harbour Bridge. It was a 131-foot jump, so he didn't want to "stuff it up," he said. They choose a Sunday. Why? Because there were less cops on Sunday. By that point he understood the science of the cord so well that he was able to adjust the cord to dip in the water. AJ and his friends did a 262-foot jump next, which produced a wild rebound and helped answer a few lingering unknowns with the bungee system.

The next time they jumped from the Auckland Harbour Bridge, the cops arrived by boat, demanding they stop. AJ leapt anyway. Chris recalled, "AJ went before me, straight into his head first dive and I saw the coppers' jaws drop. All these police must have been thinking they were about to fish dead bodies out of the water." But like the incident before, the police weren't certain any laws had been broken. They asked the bungee team if they had been drinking. AJ said they had had a glass of champagne. Then a cop asked, "What's it like?" AJ said, "Bloody great."

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AJ has a history of jumping off stuff. "When we were kids, some of my mates and I would jump off things, often into water and usually without serious injury." He was typical Kiwi male, according to AJ. "Bit of an adventure buff, into rock climbing, speed skating, surfing and anything else that involved initiative and exhilaration."

He worked construction for almost four years after high school, earning an apprenticeship as a carpenter following the mandatory 8,000 hours of work. On a whim, he answered a newspaper advertisement to work as an encyclopedia salesman. He turned out to be a proficient salesman — almost too good, he admits, which made him uncomfortable. He met his first great love, then quit the sales gig and went in search of adventures, building a tiny house in the bed of a pickup truck. They toured New Zealand for about four years, while AJ gradually built a construction business.

In his autobiography, AJ says his father was a quiet man, not particularly loving or communicative. It wasn't until a growth on his father's face began to rot that he visited a doctor. Though he underwent surgery for skin cancer, his condition was too far advanced and he later passed away. AJ says, "The lesson I learned from my relationship with my father was that you have two choices on this planet: you either love life to the max, or you simply exist." AJ's father simply existed, according to him. "He let his loneliness beat him down. I swore when he died that I would live life to the max from that moment onwards."

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My second bungee jump was at night, at the top of a hill just outside Queenstown's center. We took the Skyline Gondola to reach *The Ledge*, a small shack jutting about 15 feet out into the air. According to the AJ's website, the bungee jump was a true example of the

Kiwi's "up-for-anything" attitude.

We stepped out of the gondola and were rewarded with panoramic views of the town below. The bungee harness was specially designed for the jump. It strapped to your waist, giving you a good degree of creative freedom from the launch pad. "Is it okay if I do a gainer?" I asked the staff member, referring to a maneuver where you jump forward then rotate into a backflip. "Yeah, mate," he said, tightening the harness around my waist. "But watch out for your head. I've seen people knock themselves out doing that trick."

I was the first to go of my friends. I huffed and puffed then ran and leapt into the air and rotated backwards. As I dropped into the blackness, there was a brief flash as the automatic camera captured the jump. I bought the picture after. It showed me inverted, the staff member's mouth open wide as he watched my head miss the platform by inches.



In 1987, AJ traveled to France as part of the New Zealand speed skiing team, a sport where competitors are ranked according to average speed over the course of 328 feet. "Racers start with a mammoth drop," AJ says, "tucking into the most aerodynamic position possible before the slope flattens. Then you hold your speed through a 330-foot timing trap."

On the side, AJ and his bungee friends worked with experts to learn more about the rubber bungee material. For their first jump in France, AJ chose the massive Le Pont de la Caille Bridge, an abandoned 482-foot high suspension bridge. It was their highest jump yet — “a big bastard” in AJ’s words. It was also the first time he performed the classic arms out, swallow dive. AJ’s next jump was from a gondola, 298 feet in the air. He dropped toward a blanket of power then smashed fists-first through snow. He had been learning karate, which helped, he said.

As the bungee jumping craze caught fire in France, more and more people began attending AJ’s jumps. Many wanted to try. During one jumping bonanza, a man was about to leap when AJ noticed that his cord wasn’t attached. He was to able stop him before he jumped, but the incident reinforced the importance of safety for AJ.

As the sport gained popularity, a sort of mass hysteria emerged, and AJ knew he could build a business around the sport. After he gave some of his French friends a few cords of their own, European bungee took off. “It was a radical acceleration from zero to 100 m.p.h.,” AJ says. When it was time for the ski team to return home, AJ stayed, saying, “There was another tower in Paris I wanted to jump off.”

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The sport of bungee jumping originated thousands of years ago from the southern part of Pentecost Island in Vanuatu. Legend has it, a woman who was fleeing her abusive husband climbed to the top of a banyan tree to escape. The husband, Tamalie, found her there and climbed in pursuit. Reaching the top, he berated the woman, even dared to her jump. To his surprise, she did, cleverly tying two vines to her ankles. Tamalie didn’t notice the vines and was amazed to see her reach ground unharmed. Not wanting to appear cowardly, he jumped as well, falling to his death.

The story gave rise to the annual land-diving event in Vanuatu. Over the course of 10 days, during the village’s Yam Harvest, the community constructs towers where young boys, newly circumcised, jump from the lower levels as an initiation to manhood. The ritual is thought to ensure a plentiful harvest, as well as improve the strength and health of the divers. It is also believed to ward off evil spirits, including Tamalie’s, which is believed to reside in the tower until all jumps have been performed.

The jump — which consists of leaping off a 20-30 -foot high tower and experiencing incredible g-forces as the vines pull taught at the bottom, missing the ground by inches — is considered an expression of one’s boldness, a sentiment expressed by the *bwahri* or warrior. Each jumper can decide to step down without shame or disgrace. They are not humiliated, not considered cowards. It is their choice.

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Soren Kierkegaard was a 19th century Danish philosopher who explored the concept of choice. Every decision, he said, comes with absolute freedom of choice. According to Kierkegaard, when facing a decision we can either choose to do something, or nothing. Such freedom can cause anxiety, he said, which he deemed the “dizziness of freedom.”

In his book *The Concept of Anxiety*, he illustrates this point using an example of a man standing on a cliff. The man looks over the edge and experiences two fears. The first is the fear of falling. The second, he says, is the fear brought on by the impulse to throw himself off the edge. The man cannot deny that he could easily make the second choice, and that is anxiety-provoking, Kierkegaard claimed. It’s the same choice before Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Should Hamlet kill his uncle and avenge his father, or not? More profoundly, he asks, “To be, or not to be?” The question of course is whether to choose life, or death.

According to Kierkegaard, being made aware of this freedom of choice increases our self-awareness and sense of personal responsibility. But no one can deny its dizzying effect, too, particularly at the edge of something high. Perhaps the appeal of bungee jumping is that it allows us to indulge this second, terrifying choice. The sport allows us throw ourselves off a cliff, a bridge, or perhaps even the Eiffel Tower, free from the consequences.

AJ says, “Every ounce of your being tells you that deliberately tumbling off a high platform is the wrong thing to do. Having an opportunity to overcome that natural reaction is what makes bungee jumping such a special experience.”

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Our last bungee jump in Queenstown was the most epic: the highest in Australasia. To reach to the *Nevis* bungee site we took a van up the side of a mountain and through a series of perilous switchbacks with a sheer drop-off on the side. Once or twice I thought our van would tumble off the ledge, never to be seen again.

When we reached the top we saw a vast gorge, the Nevis River snaking through tiny trees 400 feet below. The staff split us into groups of six then loaded my group into a gondola-sized pod. The pod shuttled us across the gorge on a high wire and stopped in the middle. A section of the pod’s floor is made of glass, which people circled around as if it were air. I was called to a reclining chair, where a staff member strapped a massive cord to my ankles and tightened straps around my chest. I started to wonder if was up for the challenge. Would I chicken out? I had that choice.

As I sat in the chair, deeply anxious, the staff yanked the cord across the pod’s floor and lowered it down toward the distant ground, 439 feet away. I unfolded myself out of the chair then hobbled to a small platform, about shoulder width, sticking out from the pod. I

heard the countdown from some far-away place. Somehow it helped. “Counting down gives you momentum and confidence,” AJ says. “The countdown gives jumpers that little bit of extra help in getting off the platform.”

Against everything I knew to be right, I bent my knees and leapt, bringing my arms into a swallow dive. I fell for eight seconds then the cord recoiled and I bounced a few times. As the staff pulled me up, I leaned toward my legs and unlatched my ankles, so that I could invert myself and witness the awe-inspiring view.

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To this day, AJ Hackett has more or less broken every bungee jumping record you can break. In 1992, he won the Jack Newman award for individual contribution to New Zealand tourism. Though he claims he could jump from anything with the right amount of planning, he admits, “I’m not that fussed about making any more big record-breaking jumps.” Nowadays, he gets more satisfaction from “nice little jump” he says, around 160 to 330 feet.

AJ and his partner have seven [AJ Hackett Bungy Sites](#) around the world, including Australia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Macau, Malaysia and the original site in New Zealand. Over two million people have jumped with the organization, and he continues to build his bungee empire. Every skyscraper or high-rise presents a high-adrenaline business opportunity.

“What other people see merely as a structure for beaming out radio waves or an observation platform with a revolving restaurant, I see as an untapped wonderland in a major city center.” His adventure site in Macau, China, is a good example, where he built a 1,115-foot tower, which provides a smattering of high-adrenaline activities, one of which includes the world’s highest bungee jump, a mind-bending 764 feet.

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AJ wore a tuxedo the day he bungeed from the Eiffel Tower. It was early morning. Though it was dark when he woke, he spotted his team at the base of the tower, rolling up their sleeping bags and unpacking camera equipment. AJ’s alarm hadn’t gone off, so his ground team had been waiting an hour already. Other people noticed the activity, and began to gather, craning their heads upward curiously.

“From high up on the platform I could see all this developing below,” AJ says. There was no turning back now. Only one way down for me.” He tested the height once more, lowering a nylon string from his perch. Then he heard voices, the chatter of staff climbing steps. Security shifts didn’t start for a half an hour, but he took evasive maneuvers, ducking behind metal girders. They passed, oblivious.

AJ did a few more safety checks then bound his ankles with cord. He poured a glass of champagne and sipped silently. Then he set the glass down and hopped to the ledge. He stuck his toes over the ledge and jumped into the brisk morning air. “The ground rushed up and the four great struts disappeared out of the side of my vision.” He fell for three seconds, the only person to have seen the Eiffel Tower from that perspective, and lived to tell about it. “It’s a hell of a beautiful site,” he said.

The French police weren’t so romantic. They ran toward the tower’s center from all directions. As AJ sipped from a champagne bottle, the officers shouted and pointed and accused, flabbergasted. As they tried to figure out how to handle him, AJ did a quick interview for the cameras. The interviewer asked, “AJ, what do you think the police will do?” AJ responded, “They’re reasonable people, and I think they’ll see it as an inspiration for the people of Paris, France and the world.”

The police put AJ in a police van for questioning. But he wasn’t there long. His friend Sophie showed the cops AJ’s passport and an immediate plane ticket back to New Zealand. AJ chimed in, saying he would be out of the country and out of their hair in hours. As it always went with such police matters, the cops were unsure of the legality and let him go after about 10 minutes.

The stunt put bungee jumping on the international map, and New Zealanders were in love. Footage of the stunt was broadcasted across the world, and captured on the front page of the *France Soir*, the headline reading, “*Un Kiwi a fait le yo-yo du haut de la Tour Eiffel .*”

“We were blessed that day,” AJ says. “Fortune favors the brave.”

By Dustin Grinnell

[Bungee by [Enrico Stocchi via/Flickr](#); Auckland Harbour Bridge by [Phillip Capper via/Flickr](#); Le Pont de la Caille by [Daniel Jolivet/Flickr](#)]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dustin Grinnell enjoys all things extreme, welcomes misadventures and greatly enjoys taking the contrary position in conversation. His travel pieces and essays have appeared in such publications as *Verge Magazine* and *Narratively*. He is the author of the science fiction thriller *The Genius Dilemma*, and has written a feature-length screenplay. He is currently a science writer for a biomedical research institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



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