



SKY FALL

Remember when you were little and wished you could fly? That one time you even built your own wings but chickened out when your big brother dared you to jump off the roof. If you still haven't outgrown that child in you, the answer is skydiving.

**WORDS: ALET JANSE
VAN RENSBURG**

The 90-minute drive through the Winelands from Cape Town to Robertson is one of the most beautiful in the country but the scenery is lost on me today. When we pass through the Huguenot Tunnel, my friend tentatively asks me if I'm doing okay – but all I can muster is a feeble “I think so”. I'm generally not a nervous person, but I've also never hurled myself out of an airplane before.

When we arrive at the airfield on Route 62, the place is buzzing. Skydive Robertson is known for its social atmosphere: this weekend the Old Pharts event is taking place. Skydiving veterans up to the age of 70 years from Citrusdal have gathered for their yearly fun. “If it all goes well, I'll probably jump five times today,” Felicia Webster (57) says. She last jumped 10 years ago, when she stopped shortly after breaking her ankle on landing. “I was never a good lander. I think I just lost my nerve,” she says.

This conversation doesn't do much to set my pounding heart at ease so I search for Andi, the club's marketing agent. She introduces me to Timothy Hutchings, who will be my tandem instructor. With more than 13 000 jumps to his name, Timmy (as his friends and family call him) is one of the world's most experienced skydivers – which makes me feel better.

Up in the air

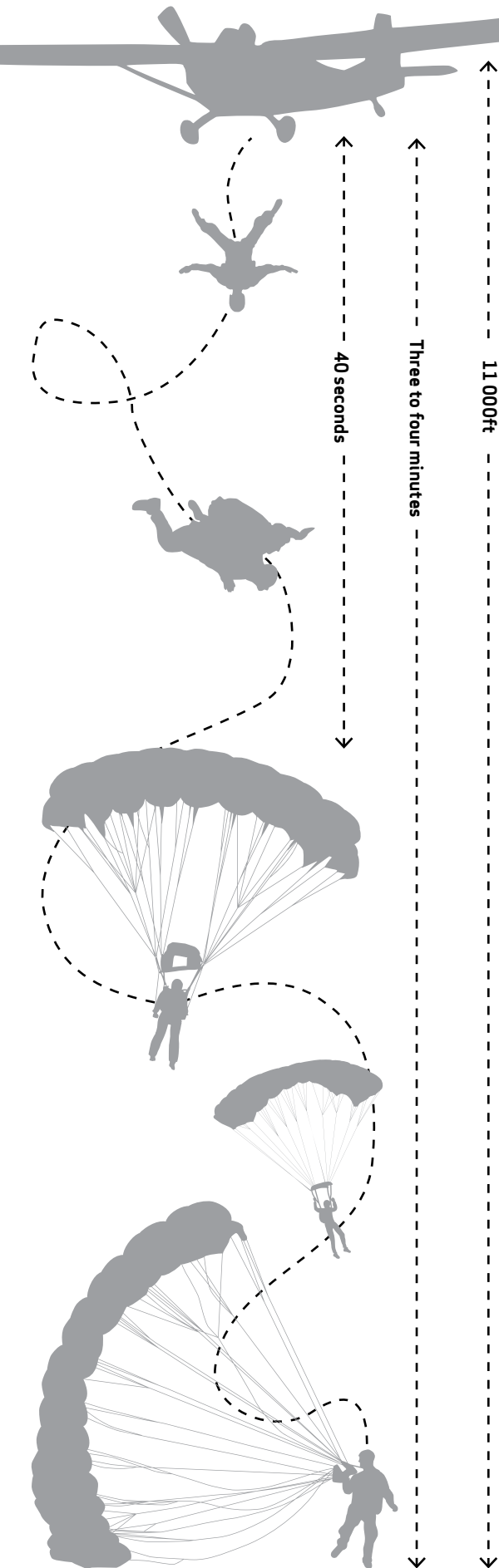
When you're a virgin jumper, the first thing you do is fill out an indemnity form. Afterwards, Timmy immediately hands me a jumpsuit and starts to explain how the skydive will work. I gulp audibly when he says I shouldn't walk into the plane's propellor when we board – and then am surprised when he bursts out laughing.

“Skydiving is a lot safer than driving on the road,” he explains. “The parachutes are put together carefully and the reserve bag is packed by specially trained people. There's also a small computer on the pack that will open the reserve chute automatically if the diver takes too long.”

The South African Civil Aviation Authority requires all tandem instructors to pass a pilot's test to ensure that they are physically and mentally capable of conducting such a jump. The Western Province Sport Parachute Club, better known as Skydive Robertson, is the longest-running drop zone in the country. Some of the best skydivers in the world operate here and also train new divers for solo jumps.

“When it's time to jump, I'm going to ask you to move backwards and sit on my knees,” Timmy explains with a twinkle in his eyes. “We'll then shuffle towards the door and you'll put your feet on the black step outside the plane. When we jump, put your head back against my shoulder, push your hips forward and tuck your legs behind your bum, so you look like a scorpion, with your hands on the straps on your chest.” Halfway through his instructions, I can't contain myself any more and ask him if he still gets nervous. “Nervous? More excited than nervous,” Timmy retorts. “Everyone's scared on their first jump. If you're not, there's something wrong with you. However, the more you jump, the more you're actually aware of what can go wrong.”

Timmy has seen almost everything. He has countless stories about people with strange requests – wanting to jump with their stuffed animals or hand puppets, for instance. Someone recently insisted on skydiving with his giant pet frog. “We had to strap the frog to his chest, before strapping him to my chest. That was pretty strange. But in all my years I've only had one person who was truly terrified,” he says. You ain't seen nothing yet, pal, I think.



Adrenaline rush

The 20-minute flight up to 11 000ft is a mixture of emotions. Six of us plus the pilot are crammed into a small plane that looks like it's seen better days. I'm the only first-time jumper. Two of the other guys are wearing squirrel suits that make you glide horizontally on the wind. They're cracking jokes and talking about the weather. One looks like he has fallen asleep.

"We're all really drug addicts," explains Lehan Bornman, a seasoned jumper from Cape Town. "At first it's about the rush, but later you get addicted to being really focused and doing this well."

You will struggle to find a more breathtaking view of this part of the country. To the one side lies the Langeberg mountain range. To the other, the Matroosberg and Hex River Valley. On a clear day, you can see the ocean. Far down below, the Breede River snakes through patches of vineyards and orchards. Towns like Ashton, Montagu and Bonnievale decorate the countryside.

On a high

The moment of truth finally arrives. We're tumbling forward and falling, head first, through the sky. Nothing can describe that moment when you jump. It's a feeling of total freedom and surrender. The child in you is absolutely delirious with the sense of adventure.

Timmy's tap on my shoulder is the signal that I should spread my arms like a bird's wings. I also take it as my signal to start screaming. We're falling and air is rushing through every pore of my body. Another jumper is waving at me and I wave back, laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation. "Keep your eyes open, otherwise you're wasting your money," I remember Timmy saying beforehand.

When the chute opens, we're jerked back by a strong force and then we're floating. Timmy adjusts our harnesses to make it more comfortable and lets me steer the parachute for a while.

The freefall lasts about 40 seconds and the entire jump only takes three to four minutes. This will be the quickest but also the most enjoyable few minutes of your life. Afterwards I hug Timmy and start the journey back home – high on adrenaline and life.

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Previous spread

Alet Janse van Rensburg and Skydive Robertson instructor Timothy Hutchings fall through the sky.

Below The experience may be nerve-racking but it's also a total rush.



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