



LEAP OF FAITH

BRAVE THRILL SEEKERS FROM FAR AND WIDE VISIT SKYDIVE ALABAMA IN VINEMONT, LOOKING TO TAKE A PLUNGE THAT IS SURE TO RANK HIGH ON THEIR LIST OF LIFETIME ADVENTURES.

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AT SKYDIVE ALABAMA, MOST FIRST JUMPS ARE TANDEM, MEANING JUMPERS ARE SECURELY FASTENED TO AN INSTRUCTOR AND THE PARACHUTES ARE LARGER AND STURDY ENOUGH TO HANDLE THE EXTRA WEIGHT OF TWO PEOPLE. BUT ONCE YOU'VE GOTTEN A TASTE FOR THE THRILL, YOU MIGHT FIND YOURSELF WORKING TOWARD EARNING YOUR SOLO PARACHUTING LICENSE IN A COURSE OFFERED BY SKYDIVE ALABAMA.



Driving north from Birmingham, on my way to jump out of an airplane, the landscape I would be leaving behind seemed especially beautiful, nature's colors unusually vivid. Certain mortality-related questions came to mind. If my life were about to end, what would I regret never achieving or experiencing (it didn't include jumping out of a plane)? What kind or complimentary things might people say about the late me (and would they mean them)? Would I live to see the completion of the colossal I-65/I-22 interchange and the rest of Corridor X to Memphis (will any of us)?

It was a beautiful day to skydive—sunny, light wind, high ceiling of puffy clouds—and a fine location, the rural airport at Vinemont (north of Cullman) that is home to Skydive Alabama. The operation draws parachutists from Alabama and

beyond, notably for spring and fall “Boogies” that offer opportunities to skydive from a helicopter and a hot-air balloon. This is where the state record for a multiple-diver formation was set, with 47 people linking up in freefall (this season, 67 divers will try to set a new record). Skydive Alabama—and skydiving in general—draws people from all walks of life into a fellowship of flight, a camaraderie based on shared risk.

Before leaving I'd called to confirm that conditions were good to go. “Drive safely,” said my contact, which seemed comical at the time. In fact, you're likelier to have an accident on the way to or from the airport than during your skydive. The Federal Aviation Administration requires skydive instructors to be fully certified and to have at least 500 skydives. This is key, because at Skydive Alabama most first jumps are tandem dives—you're harnessed snugly





to your instructor, who controls the entire experience from freefall to chute deployment to landing. The parachutes (rectangular, not circular) are larger than usual to handle the weight of two people. And they're equipped with an automatic activation device, which automatically deploys the reserve parachute if it detects that skydivers are still at freefall speed below a certain altitude.

Still, it's a leap of faith. To make it at Skydive Alabama you must be at least 19 years old, weigh 250 pounds or less, and sign a release acknowledging that skydiving may result in injury or death and waiving every right your lawyer would wish to retain. After that it's pretty simple: a briefing by an instructor, an orientation video, and getting equipped with jumpsuits and harnesses. Holding a harness, my instructor, Brandon Moore, pointed to its nylon webbing and said, "This is rated for



a 2,600-pound load—you could pick up a school bus with it.” A lot of good that would do, I thought, if both chutes failed.

For the standard tandem skydive, you and your instructor exit the plane at about 14,000 feet (Skydive Alabama also offers an “extreme tandem” jump from 22,000 feet) and freefall for about a minute, reaching a speed of 120 to 130 miles per hour. Guided by the altimeter strapped to his wrist, the instructor deploys the parachute at 5,500 feet, and you descend for four to five minutes, then glide to a legs-up landing in the grassy drop zone.

I was encouraged to see those who jumped before me reappear with the big smiles typical of first-timers, giddy from the thrill and (I imagined) deliriously happy to be back on terra firma. “Actually, a lot of people say it was over too soon,” Brandon said. Some get hooked and sign up for an Accelerated Freefall Course to get their solo parachuting license. And they’re not all adrenaline-stoked thrill junkies. Several work in Huntsville’s low-drama high-tech sector, like the computer programmer who told me, “I find skydiving relaxing.” “I’m a surgeon,” a seasoned woman jumper explained. “I work 80 hours a week. This is one thing I can do that totally clears my mind. When you skydive, you’re totally in the moment.”

I certainly was. Strapped to Brandon (who told me he was afraid of roller coasters), I had only a moment to contemplate the countryside far below through the open door of the Beechcraft 99. Then we dove into the ocean of air, arching our backs and legs as we plummeted down for sensational seconds. I would have liked more freefall time, as after the chute deployed I was keenly aware of my unfamiliar condition, bobbing high above the green earth. As we descended I breathed deeply and enjoyed the view, then lifted my legs as we came in for a surprisingly easy landing.

And yes, I wore the big smile. It was totally exhilarating. Life was sweet. Many first-timers are celebrating milestones such as birthdays (a good friend of mine just made his first dive to mark his 70th). A video record of the event costs extra, but how else will you prove you took the plunge? The philosopher Kierkegaard said, “To dare is to lose one’s footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.” Skydiving may not be on your bucket list, but, if you dare to try it, you may find yourself feeling, oddly enough, more grounded.

For more information, visit skydivealabama.com.

