

Skydiving in Costa Brava

Take to the skies and put your guts to the test in the adventure playground of North-eastern Spain. *By Nellie Huang*

The only sounds I hear are of the droning engine and the howling wind. But they are quickly drowned by the loud drumming of my heartbeat. Through the opened door of the aircraft, I see emerald green patches, towering mountains and tiny houses resembling Lego pieces in the far distance.

We are just about to jump off the plane, at a dizzying height of 14,000 feet over the shimmering coastline of Costa Brava, Spain. Beside me in the aircraft, a group of professional skydivers from the Belgian national team – clad in black neoprene – nimbly climb out of the aircraft like Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible. In no time, they are leaping off the plane one by one and just as quickly, they disappear into the thin air. I shudder at the sight; the Mission Impossible soundtrack that played in my mind comes to an abrupt halt.

"It's time." My instructor Joan says, flashing a wide grin bordering on sadistic. I stand up but my head spins deliriously and my knees go weak – it's too late to back out now. The strong wind slaps me back into reality and before I know it, we are standing at the edge of the opened door. This is the point of no return.

Joan painstakingly guides me towards my take-off position: torso backwards, feet off the ground and face up. Before the faithful leap, his last words are, "Remember to smile for the camera!"

Within seconds, we are air-bound, freefalling towards the distant land and body-surfing the overpowering winds. Waves of adrenaline shoot through me like an electric current, powering me up with an overdose of energy. The Mission Impossible soundtrack comes back on again, blasting through my head louder than before.

In the intense sixty seconds of freefall, I experience bouts of emotional rush, a sweeping sense of gratification and the most amazing feeling of freedom. Somehow, I had always set skydiving as my limit, the boundary of my fears, the edge of my valour. And if I could ever conquer it, I would be able to overcome anything in this world. I've never felt this empowered.

After the freefall, Joan releases the parachute – my harness tightens and my body rebounds upwards for a second. Suddenly, the strong winds are replaced by a calm, peaceful breeze. We float dreamily in mid-air and the sights below me appear clearer now: the Mediterranean coast curves in the form of a crescent-shaped bay, while the Pyrenees Mountains sawtooth the horizon before me.

"That is the border between Spain and France. The peak there belongs to France." He points out the mountain range, the towns and the rivers that run below us. Joan is a native from Empuriabrava, one of the best drop zones in the world thanks to its proximity to the bustling towns and cities. Costa Brava, which literally means 'rugged coast', is packed full of isolated beaches and mountains, providing an abundance of adventure sports opportunities for active travellers.

As we descend, Joan lets me manoeuvre the parachute – tug the strings to the right if you want to turn right and vice versa.



I squeal like a child in a candy store, thrilled to be flying on my own. Seeing my enthusiasm, Joan decides to perform a stunt which sends me spinning in a dizzying 360 degrees.

Back on land, I'm met by an applauding group of fellow skydiving virgins. Huddling in a group, we rave about our rides, all buzzing from the natural high and beaming with self-confessed pride.

I can't believe I've done it, and I've got Tom Cruise to thank.



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