

Jari testing a
prototype wingsuit
above Helsinki



FREE TIME, FREE FLYING

Make the most of your spare time by taking to the air in a wingsuit

Words Dan Tye

Photo Jussi Laine

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SPENDING your free time doing the hobby you love is one thing, but wingsuit flying has to be the best way to get the most excitement out of every second.

Skydiving used to be the ultimate adrenalin rush but now the seconds of exhilaration through freefall can now be extended to minutes by wearing a 'wingsuit'.

These normal skydiving suits have extra fabric sewn between the legs and arms to create an airfoil shape that let the wearers soar through the sky. Wingsuit pilots start a flight from either an aircraft or they can BASE jump (Building Antenna Span Earth). In both cases, initially they drop down like a free faller but moments later the wings fill up with air and the fall turns into curving flight.

The wingsuit pilot then manipulates the shape of their body to create lift or drag. By arching or bending the shoulders, hips and knees they can affect the amount of tension applied to the fabric wings of the suit. They can fly inverted, soar through and around clouds and even make figure of eights.

Of course, the suits don't provide sustained flight; wearers are actually gliding. Most wingsuits have a 2 to 1 ratio (two feet of horizontal movement for every foot fallen). Jumping from 4km, a wingsuiter can fly 10 km horizontally and the time spent in the air is tripled to around 180 seconds before a parachute rip cord is pulled.

Although the sport was once the preserve of the very best extreme skydivers, more and more freefallers are becoming converts. This is largely down to the work of Jari

Kuosma of Finland. In 1998 he and Robert Pecnik of Croatia teamed up to create a wingsuit that was safe and accessible for all skydivers. It was called the Birdman Classic and it was the first wingsuit offered to the general public. Over 2,000 people have now experienced the joy of soaring through the clouds.

Jari says, "Time has certainly changed the acceptance aspect of it all. Ten years ago some dropzones (DZs) in the UK weren't very keen on the wingsuit at all, but now the same DZ's invite me back to host flying seminars and set records. We have even flown as a flock of 71 people."

Potential pilots need to have logged 200 normal skydiving jumps before attempting to fly with a wingsuit. There's no tandem, so the first time you control a wingsuit will happen the first time you jump out with one on. Jari says that because the time spent in the air is tripled by a wingsuit, it messes with skydivers instinct on knowing when it's time to pull the ripcord.

"There is certainly a sense of extended and distorted time when using a wingsuit in relation to normal skydiving," explains Jari. "I teach about this 'distorted' time concept quite a bit to all first flight students as well as all potential BMI (Birdman Instructors). Our inner clock has been programmed to normal freefall time but with a wingsuit we get this illusion that we can 'fly forever', which is not right of course."

Jari says many skydivers who are also pilots/fliers really like the wingsuit and have a better understanding of how it works. In the early days, some skydivers thought the

suit was just about slowing down – they couldn't picture the graceful turns, climbs and descents of flying that pilots could.

Time also takes on a different perspective throughout the whole process. Jari says, "Those moments when you're packed in the aircraft with the smell of farts around you, that smell of fear, can feel really long. But

HISTORY

The origins of the wingsuit can be traced back to 'Birdmen' in the 1930s. It's thought that between 1930 and 1961, 72 of the 75 original birdmen died testing wingsuits made from materials such as canvas, silk and even whale bone. It was only in 1990 when the first safe wingsuit was developed by French skydiver Patrick de Gayardon (nicknamed "DeG"). Jari and the BirdMan team then carried on from his work...

then there's the flying and even after 4500 jumps I still scream as I'm doing it. It just feels that as a human being I can fly. When I land I'm out of breath, it's actually quite physical, but I'm still screaming on the ground. It makes me so happy."

See videos of the wingsuit in action at www.bird-man.com

20 SECONDS OF JOY



PHOTO Peter Mathis/Red Bull Photofiles

A new film called "20 seconds of joy" has just been released and focuses on wingsuiter, B.A.S.E. jumper and freeskiing legend Karina Hollekim. The 31-year-old Norwegian is only recently on her feet again after a near-death experience in August of 2006 when her parachute malfunctioned while skydiving in Villeneuve, Switzerland for the Red Bull Vertigo.

After making a miraculous recovery from 25 fractures in her legs and an infection that nearly resulted in her losing her right leg – it took more than a dozen operations to save it – Karina is now walking again and plans to be back wingsuit flying within a year.



PHOTO Endre Nielsen/Red Bull Photofiles