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Leisure

Flying High

A new breed of thrill-seekers—ranging from college students to corporate executives—are sending one New England skydiving business sky high. By Matthew Broderick

Mauricio Galante has never been one to climb the corporate ladder. He's never had that top floor corner office view. That's not to say, of course, he hasn't seen life at the top. In fact, most days Galante—the chief operating officer of Boston Hartford Fun Skydiving—views the world from 13,000 feet up. He estimates that during his lifetime, he has made nearly 4,000 skydive jumps. And he is not alone.

As adventure sports have become more mainstream, skydiving has become increasingly popular. The United States Parachute Association (USPA) boasts more than 30,000 members nationwide. Collectively, they made more than 2.1 million jumps in 2006.

Galante, who bought the Danielson-based Boston Hartford Fun Skydiving in

2005, has seen a steady increase in business over the past two years. His company attracts people from across New England, with nearly 60 percent coming from the Boston, Providence and Hartford regions. "We're seeing three times as many people today as we did in 2005," he says, noting his company draws between 1,500 and 2,000 people each year during skydiving season,

which runs from April 1 until November 1.

And it's not just the twenty-something crowd that's taking the plunge. While adults under the age of 35 still comprise the majority of skydivers nationwide, the number of Baby Boomers testing the skies has steadily increased. In fact, according to the USPA, nearly a quarter of its members are age 50 or older.

"I've seen more and more people in their 60s and 70s—people who are retired—trying skydiving," Galante says. "Many of them realize they need a new challenge, a new experience." One of his clients has made 18 jumps—at age 82.

The new class of first-time skydivers, both in Connecticut and nationally, is a diverse group that includes business professionals, teachers, mechanics, doctors and college students. The reasons that different people skydive, Galante contends, vary greatly.



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freedom you can have in life," he says of skydiving. Within 10 seconds of jumping, he explains, skydivers are rocketing to earth at 120 miles per hour, freefalling for 55 seconds before a parachute is deployed. "It seems like time stops. It's really indescribable."

Equally indescribable is the feeling most people have when they land. "People have all sorts of reactions when the jump is over," Galante says. They scream. They dance. They swim in the grass. "Everyone is glad they did it, and they have a great sense of accomplishment," he says. "Most importantly, they see the world from a different perspective."

Unlike other adventure sports, like scuba diving or rock climbing, skydiving requires minimal training, which in part explains its growing popularity. "A first-time skydiver can come to us and be jumping from a plane with 20 minutes of training," Galante explains. That's because many skydiving companies, like Fun Skydiving, provide tandem jumps, the most popular method of jumping, where a novice is attached to a trained and experienced skydiving professional, who handles everything from deploying the parachute to

"Some people do it for a sense of adventure, others to face a challenge or just to do something special and fun with a group of friends," he says. "But the most common reason is stress relief."

He also points to the growing number

of people with terminal illnesses who try skydiving to fulfill a lifelong dream. "Some people realize they haven't done some of the things they wanted to do in life." Like freefalling from three miles up.

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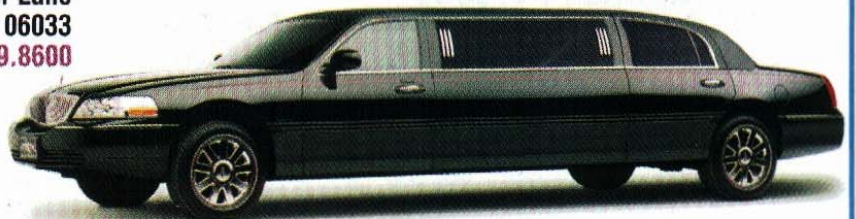
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orchestrating the landing. Last year, more than 330,000 people tried tandem jumping nationwide.

For most of them, Galante says, it will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. On a national average, he estimates, only about 1 percent of skydivers return for a second jump, a trend that his company seems to be beating. "We been getting about 3 percent to 5 percent of our jumpers returning," he says. Part of that success, he notes, is due to an increasing number of families that schedule time to skydive annually, often on Mother's Day or Father's Day, he explains. Some people also train over the course of 11 classes to make solo jumps.

One of the most appealing aspects of skydiving is that it has very few restrictions. While jumpers must be at least 18, age is not a limiting factor. In fact, Galante's oldest customer was 92. However, he cautions that people with high blood pressure or heart problems—what he terms "high motion restrictions"—should carefully consider the potential dangers. "Skydiving causes such an adrenaline rush and can [temporarily] change the chemistry of your body," he says. "People with heart

problems, for instance, aren't necessarily prohibited from jumping, but they need to know the risks."

And while skydiving remains a relatively safe adventure sport—in 2006, there were 962 reported injuries out of 2.1 million jumps according to the United States Parachute Association—there are things that first-time skydivers can do to mitigate

at things like the cleanliness of the waiting room and the quality of the equipment. "Most skydiving equipment is good for 10 years," Galante says. "You just don't want to be flying in something from World War II."

But skydiving is less about the flight than the fall. And for around \$100 (in addition to the skydiving cost of \$215), many companies, like Fun Skydiving, can record those

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those risks. Galante points out that the USPA, the self-governing body that regulates standards of skydiving training, equipment and safety nationwide, maintains a list of all professional skydivers in America.

"Skydiving is not the kind of thing you want to buy on e-Bay," he says, noting that customers should ensure that a company has a skydiving license before using its services. They should also, he suggests, look

55 seconds of, as Galante puts it, "pure freedom." For some, it's a memento of a unique life experience. For others, it's a chance to recapture a different view of the world. And for those climbing the corporate ladder, it's a reminder that there's one obstacle that they can't overcome, no matter how high they climb: gravity.

Matthew Broderick is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in *Hartford Magazine*.



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