

Adventure Sports

BY JESSICA TEISCH



In August 1974, French high-wire artist Philippe Petit rigged a 400-pound, 1-inch-thick cable, crafted a 55-pound balancing pole, and performed death-defying acrobatic feats 1,350 feet above ground—without a safety net—between the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers.

“If I see three oranges, I have to juggle. And if I see two towers, I have to walk,” Petit later explained to the *New York Times*. Today we might call Petit’s caper an adventure sport—or an extreme sport. Yet while he enjoyed risking his life walking between the spires of some of the world’s tallest buildings, other people see cliffs and must jump off, view ice mountains and have to climb, and glimpse hundreds of miles of unforgiving terrain and feel compelled to hike. All require some measure of risk, including possible death; all involve adrenaline-rush thrills. As surfer Laird Hamilton describes riding giant waves in his native Hawaii: “When you’re in that moment, there’s no beginning and no end. ... It’s just pure. You are and it is and that’s why we continually

seek it out, and always search for it, and need it. We need to feel alive and to feel complete.”

We’ve chosen some nonfiction adventure sports books written in the last two or three decades that may—or may not—whet your appetite for such thrills. They are *not* survival stories per se, but rather depict the drives, challenges, and “flows” of such extreme activities. If you find one that interests you, don’t forget to tell us about it.

ADVENTURES ON LAND

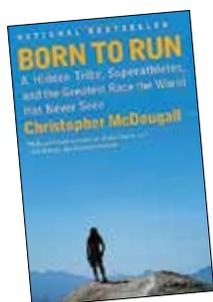
Born to Run

A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen

By Christopher McDougall (2009)

Have American running shoe companies been duping us? This isn’t the main question that McDougall—a journalist

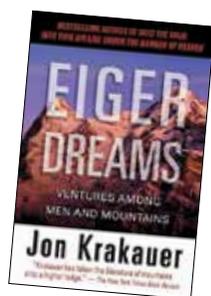
and former contributing editor to *Men's Health*—asks in this riveting best seller, but it's an interesting one. His main subject is the Tarahumara Indians, a tribe living in the isolated Copper Canyons in Mexico. Superathletes, they are legendary for their ability to run extreme distances through inhospitable canyons, almost barefoot, without rest or injury. As the always-injured McDougall set out to uncover their secrets (and run alongside them), he investigates the development of the (cushioned) modern running shoe and the evolutionary claim that humans are “born to run.” There's also the title's show-stopping race between a few American elite ultrarunners and the Tarahumara. “McDougall found a large cast of crazy characters, an exotic setting for drama and discovery, and a tailor-made showdown with which to cap the book,” reported the *Washington Post*. “By and large it's a thrilling read, even for someone who couldn't care less about proper stride and split times and energy gels.”



Eiger Dreams

Ventures Among Men and Mountains
By Jon Krakauer (1990)

Krakauer is best known for *Into the Wild* (1996) and his record of his ill-fated expedition to climb to the summit of Mount Everest in 1996, detailed in *Into Thin Air: Death on Everest* (1997). In his first book, a collection of a dozen articles and essays, many written for *Outside* and *Smithsonian* magazines, he asks a fundamental question: why would you risk your life to climb a mountain? Traveling from Mount McKinley to Pakistan to Switzerland (home of the Eiger), Krakauer introduces the eccentric mountaineering community as they climb frozen waterfalls (in Valdez, Alaska), attempt life-threatening hang gliding and bungee jumping (Chamonix, France), or canyoneering in Arizona's Mogollon Rim. As for Krakauer himself? He nearly died on his solo climb of the Devil's Thumb in Alaska. Casual readers may wish to start with one of Krakauer's heavy hitters. But here, “Mr. Krakauer has taken the literature of mountains onto a higher ledge,” wrote the *New York Times*. “... His snow-capped peaks set against limitless blue skies present problems that inspire irrefutable human experiences: fear and triumph, damnation and salvation.”

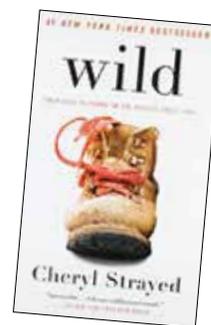


Wild

From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail
By Cheryl Strayed (2012)

In 1995, 26-year-old Strayed's life was falling apart. Then she stumbled upon a guidebook to the Pacific Coast Trail, which spans 2,600 miles between Mexico and Canada.

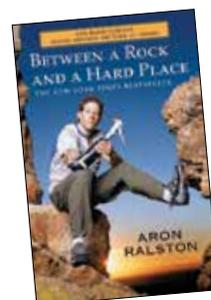
Despite her lack of backpacking experience, Strayed decided to solo hike the trail from the Mojave Desert to the Cascades in Oregon, more than 1,000 miles, as a way to alter her trajectory. *Wild* recounts her three months of solitude, physical hardship, emotional privation, and self-reliance. “I was amazed that what I needed to survive could be carried on my back,” Strayed writes of her mental and physical journey. “And, most surprising of all, that I could carry it. That I could bear the unbearable.” As the *New York Times Book Review* commented, “[S]etting out on a 1,100-mile trek from the Mojave Desert to the Cascades outfitted in brand-new hiking boots—a size too small, it turned out—and with 24.5 pounds of water in a dromedary bag is a recipe for disaster. Fortunately for the reader, it's also a recipe for a spectacular book.” (★★★★ **SELECTION** July/Aug 2012)



Between a Rock and a Hard Place

[retitled *127 Hours: Between a Rock and a Hard Place*]
By Aron Ralston (2004)

In 2003, Ralston, then 27, planned a 30-mile part bike, part hiking, and part canyoneering excursion in Utah's remote Blue John Canyon. Bike part over, he descended into the canyon, only to have his right hand pinned by an 800-pound boulder. He could either sever his arm and risk death—or face certain death. Spending six days in the desert without food and water, Ralston, after long periods of despair and acceptance, amputated his arm with a multitool. “This is gonna make one hell of a story to tell my friends,” he writes, and it does. The book alternates between Ralston's childhood, his past experiences, and his entrapment in the canyon, with his family's rescue efforts. “It seems that there is little the former engineer, graduating with a B.S. in mechanical engineering and a double major in French and a minor in piano performance can't do—including writing a thought-provoking book that will make the reader contemplate life and the human ability to cope beyond what we believe to be possible,” wrote the *Curl'd Up* critic. The memoir inspired the 2010 Academy Award-nominated film *127 Hours*, directed by Danny Boyle and starring James Franco.



The Man in the White Suit

The Stig, Le Mans, the Fast Lane and Me
By Ben Collins (2010)

For years, millions of British viewers wondered about the identity of The Man in the White Suit, or the Stig—the silent, iconic, and anonymous race car driver/presenter made famous on the blockbuster BBC show *Top Gear*.

In each episode, the Stig was a test driver and trainer for celebrity guests like Tom Cruise. In this guilty pleasure, Collins (the second Stig, 2003–2010) tells his story. Born with an attitude, Collins—who competed with the best at Daytona and Le Mans—describes his upbringing, his stint as an army reservist, and his racing and movie stunt career. He also shares highlights of his time in the white suit—how he got there and what it’s like to guide a blind former RAF officer around the track and more. He also gives insight into the making of the show. “For all his skill behind the wheel of expensive metal, Collins is no less of an entertaining writer,” *Autoblog* wrote. “Throughout *The Man in the White Suit*, Collins paints a pretty clear picture of what it was like to be the Stig, and it’s one of loneliness and uncertainty.”



Further Reading

TRACKS: A WOMAN’S SOLO TREK ACROSS 1700 MILES OF AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK | ROBYN DAVIDSON (1980)

BECOMING ODYSSEA: ADVENTURES ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL | JENNIFER PHARR DAVIS (2010)

THRU-HIKING WILL BREAK YOUR HEART: AN ADVENTURE ON THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL | CARROT QUINN (2015)

WHAT I TALK ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT RUNNING: A MEMOIR | HARUKI MURAKAMI (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2008)

NOWHERE NEAR FIRST: ULTRAMARATHON ADVENTURES FROM THE BACK OF THE PACK | CORY REESE (2016)

KILIMANJARO DIARIES: OR, HOW I SPENT A WEEK DREAMING OF TOILETS, DRINKING CRAPPY WATER, AND MAKING BAD JOKES WHILE HAVING THE TIME OF MY LIFE | EVA MELUSINE THIEME (2014)

BREAKING TRAIL: A CLIMBING LIFE | ARLENE BLUM (2005)

THE DRIVER: MY DANGEROUS PURSUIT OF SPEED AND TRUTH IN THE OUTLAW RACING WORLD | ALEXANDER ROY (2007)

AWOL ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL | DAVID MILLER (2006)

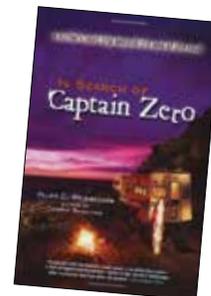
ADVENTURES IN WATER

In Search of Captain Zero

A Surfer’s Road Trip Beyond the End of the Road
By Allan Weisbecker (2001)

“If you are looking for Hunter S. T’s and Kerouac’s long lost cousin, look no further,” wrote *Paste* magazine. In 1996, Weisbecker—a novelist, screenwriter, photojournalist, and surfer enduring a midlife crisis—left his Long Island home, packed his dog and belongings in a camper, and went in search of his longtime fellow surfer friend Christopher. A Vietnam vet who had signed a lone postcard as Capitán Cero, Christopher had disappeared somewhere

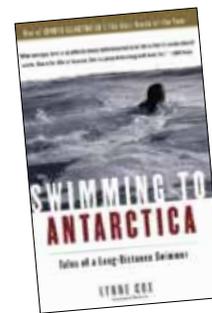
in Central America some years back. As he travels down the coast of Mexico and Central America in search of both friend and wave, Weisbecker nostalgically recalls his global surfing adventures and the drug-running mishaps that fed his and Christopher’s surf habits. When he does find his comrade, he also finds himself—and more colorful adventures ensure. “The author’s flair for describing natural beauty, and his strong sense of narrative rhythm and uncompromising candor, make for a lovely personal reflection that mixes the right amount of dreamy meditation with page-turning allure” (*Publishers Weekly*).



Swimming to Antarctica

Tales of a Long-Distance Swimmer
By Lynne Cox (2004)

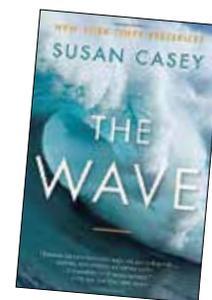
American open-water swimmer Cox is physiologically suited for cold-water swimming. As a teenager, she broke all records for crossing the English Channel. She then conquered the Strait of Magellan, the waters around the Cape of Good Hope, and, in an attempt to “create a thaw in the Cold War,” the Bering Strait. In 2002, at age 45 and dressed in only a bathing suit, cap, and goggles, she became the first person to swim a mile in the icy Antarctic Ocean—symbolizing all of her life’s joys, dangers, and achievements. Her memoir offers intimate glimpses into her mind, as she conquers icy (Antarctic) or rat-strewn (Nile) waters—her doubts, happiness, and observations of unfamiliar surroundings. “As far as I knew,” she writes, “I would only be here once, and I wanted to live as much as I could.” “The singularity of her swims alone makes her book an instant classic of adventure writing,” wrote the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, “but it’s Cox’s ability to get inside her own head that makes it such a valuable work.” (★★★★ May/June 2004)



The Wave

In Pursuit of the Rogues, Freaks, and Giants of the Ocean
By Susan Casey (2010)

Massive rogue waves took the scientific establishment by storm in 2000, when they battered a British research vessel in the North Sea. In her wide-ranging investigation, Casey reviews current research and bizarre new discoveries in “wave science.” She also travels the globe with legendary surfer Laird Hamilton and friends, as they seek out new challenges. Extreme surfers



in search of the ultimate wave have pioneered tow-in surfing, in which Jet Skis provide the force and speed necessary to ride the biggest waves miles offshore. As the world's climate continues to shift, storms will become more volatile, waves will grow larger, and the struggle to understand and predict these giants will be crucial to the survival of millions of people around the world. Part science lesson and part adrenaline rush, "Casey's white-knuckle chronicle—which follows the surfers pursuing the waves and the scientists struggling to understand them—delivers a thrill so intense you may never get in a boat again" (*Entertainment Weekly*). (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2010)

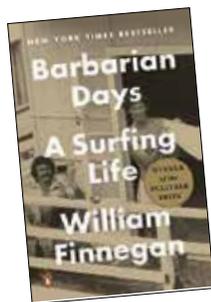
Barbarian Days

A Surfing Life

By William Finnegan (2015)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE FOR AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Finnegan fell in love with surfing as an adolescent in California and Hawaii more than half a century ago, and that love affair has defined nearly every aspect of his life ever since. Infected by an insatiable desire to see the world, Finnegan and his surfing buddies, Bryan Di Salvatore and Mark "Doc" Renneker, pursue legendary waves in Australia, South



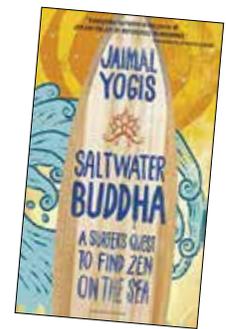
Africa, Europe, and Asia. The author's quest leads him, finally, back to Oahu, where he has a life-altering epiphany after a close brush with death. "They were the object of your deepest desire and adoration," Finnegan writes of the waves he's spent a lifetime chasing. "At the same time, they were your adversary, your nemesis, even your mortal enemy." "Elegantly written and structured," wrote the *Washington Post*, "it's a riveting adventure story, an intellectual autobiography, and a restless, searching meditation on love, friendship and family. ... Finnegan explores every aspect of the sport—its mechanics and intoxicating thrills, its culture and arcane tribal codes—in a way that should resonate with surfers and non-surfers alike." (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2015)

Saltwater Buddha

A Surfer's Quest to Find Zen on the Sea

By Jaimal Yogis (2009)

Back in high school, Yogis—now an award-winning journalist and photographer—decided that he'd had enough. With only a copy of Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* and a pocketful of cash, he ran away from his Sacramento, California, suburb and bought a one-way ticket to Maui. Thus began his spiritual growth—Yogis, of course, visits major surfing



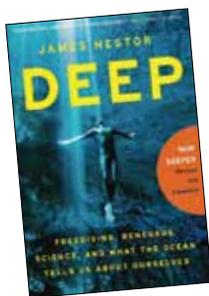
spots—but he also starts to embrace Zen Buddhism. This heartfelt, lyrical bildungsroman captures the culture of indigenous Hawaiians (their gods surfed), the science of surfing, and his own search for meaning, both in and out of the water. “Even land lovers will find Yogis’s lessons resonant and entertaining, but surfers will find this a quick, surprisingly deep tribute to the quest for surf and serenity,” wrote *Publishers Weekly* in its starred review. The book was turned into a feature documentary film directed by Lara Popyack in 2015. *All Our Waves Are Water* (2017), the sequel, follows Yogis in his early 20s from the Himalayas to Indonesia, New York City, Jerusalem, and San Francisco’s Ocean Beach as he “stumbles toward enlightenment.”

Deep

Freediving, Renegade Science, and What the Ocean Tells Us About Ourselves

By James Nestor (2014)

Nestor’s fascination with the links between people and the disappearing marine environments that spawned us began when he wrote about the 2011 Individual Depth World Championships, a freediving competition off the coast of Kalamata, Greece, and the superhuman exploits of New Zealander William Trubridge. Intrigued by the resilience of the human body—on one breath, divers reach depths of 300 feet or more and return to the surface (though often with devastating consequences)—he searches for scientists on the cutting edge of marine exploration. Filled with intriguing details and eccentric, dedicated characters, *Deep* is worth the effort as Nestor provides vicarious glimpses of a world known only from the surface. “Over the course of *Deep*, Mr. Nestor comes to see competitive freediving as ‘egocentric, numbers-driven’ and often foolishly dangerous,” reported the *Wall Street Journal*. “But he leaves the reader with the idea of freediving as a tool to better understand the life of the sea and our place in the water’s eternal rhythms.” (★★★★ **SELECTION** Sept/Oct 2014)



Further Reading

KOOK: WHAT SURFING TAUGHT ME ABOUT LOVE, LIFE, AND CATCHING THE PERFECT WAVE | PETER HELLER (2010)

FORCE OF NATURE: MIND, BODY, SOUL (AND, OF COURSE, SURFING) | LAIRD HAMILTON (2008)

FIND A WAY: THE INSPIRING STORY OF ONE WOMAN’S PURSUIT OF A LIFELONG DREAM | DIANA NYAD (2015)

WELCOME TO PARADISE, NOW GO TO HELL: A TRUE STORY OF VIOLENCE, CORRUPTION, AND THE SOUL OF SURFING | CHAS SMITH (2013)

CAUGHT INSIDE: A SURFER’S YEAR ON THE CALIFORNIA COAST | DANIEL DUANE (1996)

ALL FOR A FEW PERFECT WAVES: THE AUDACIOUS LIFE AND LEGEND OF REBEL SURFER MIKI DORA | DAVID RENSIN (2007)

ROWING TO LATITUDE: JOURNEYS ALONG THE ARCTIC’S EDGE | JILL

FREDSTON (2001)

INSIDE: ONE WOMAN’S JOURNEY THROUGH THE INSIDE PASSAGE | SUSAN MARIE CONRAD (2016)

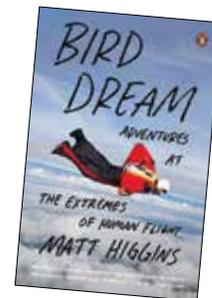
ADVENTURES IN AIR

Bird Dream

Adventures at the Extremes of Human Flight

By Matt Higgins (2014)

Higgins, a journalist, captures the electrifying plunges of the air’s most death-defying (but not always defying) stuntmen. Starting with simple parachuting, Higgins expands to BASE jumping (building, antennae, span, and earth) from bridges and radio towers to thrill-seeking jumpers wearing wingsuits and “flying” between cliffs (think flying squirrel). He focuses on the exploits of two wingsuit BASE pilots: the troubled Jeb Corliss Jr. (who jumped off China’s Mount Jianglang) and Gary Connery, an English stuntman. Through firsthand reporting and traveling the world alongside these daredevil men and women, who glide from cliffs at speeds more than 100 mph, Higgins chronicles the techniques, history, and bloody tragedies of the sport, culminating with the 2012 race between Corliss and Connery. “Higgins has inherently thrilling material on his hands, but he does much more than merely describe the adrenaline-charged feats of jumpers,” wrote the *Chicago Tribune*. “The book is a subtle study of the psychology of athletes engaged in a sport where death is a constant possibility.”



Further Reading

BASE 66: A STORY OF FEAR, FUN, AND FREEFALL | JEVTO DEDIJER (2004)

SUGAR ALPHA: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SEÑOR HUEVOS GRANDES | ROGER AND MELISSA NELSON (2013)

ABOVE ALL ELSE: A WORLD CHAMPION SKYDIVER’S STORY OF SURVIVAL AND WHAT IT TAUGHT HIM ABOUT FEAR, ADVERSITY, AND SUCCESS | DAN BRODSKY-CHENFELD (2011)

FLYING OFF EVEREST: A JOURNEY FROM THE SUMMIT TO THE SEA | DAVE COSTELLO (2014)

LEARNING TO FLY: AN UNCOMMON MEMOIR OF HUMAN FLIGHT, UNEXPECTED LOVE, AND ONE AMAZING DOG | STEPH DAVIS (2013)

FLY LOW, FLY FAST: INSIDE THE RENO AIR RACES | ROBERT GRANDT (1999)

THE BLUE ANGELS: A FLY-BY HISTORY: SIXTY YEARS OF AERIAL EXCELLENCE | NICHOLAS A. VERONICO (2005) ■