Embracing The Edge



Photo by Alex Krause

Between a Rock and a Cool Place: Urban adventuring can be as transcendent as it is dangerous, but the rewards outweigh the risks if common sense balances the lure of life on the ledge.

People find adventures throughout the cityscape, below the streets to high in the sky

By Wes Modes

"My friend did it in heels and a skirt," Susan says. Philip and I nod appreciatively. We imagined it could be done with nothing less than ropes and suction cups.

We have everything we think we need, which isn't much. We meet her at her office at 5pm to climb the tallest building in town. Timing is critical. At 5:30pm, the elevators automatically unlock for the janitors.

We ride an elevator to somewhere in the teens. Philip darts around with an imaginary gun drawn, making like a '70s cop drama. The *Mission Impossible* tune plays in my head.

The security lockout stops us at the next bank of elevators. Susan presses the button for the top floor, but it won't take. We've missed our window of opportunity.

She darts downstairs.

In a few moments, she bursts out of the elevator, motioning us to follow. She used her connections, bluffing one of the security guys. "He just tick-ticked on his computer," she says. "Everything's under computer control." She flicks the button for the top floor, and we hurtle upward.

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The doors open on the top floor--a plush, glass-walled board room with the highest view in the city. But we mean to go higher. Much higher.

We head into the women's restroom, through an unmarked door and up a ladder. We snake up another ladder and through a door that reads "Fan Room, Authorized Personnel Only." We emerge in a fluorescently lit room filled with huge metal ventilation ducts and humming bright pink, orange and green machinery.

We clamber up another ladder, and what I see takes my breath away. It's a big, big room, large enough for the world's highest game of half court basketball. The perimeter is studded with floodlights. A steep stairway of switchbacks ascends out of sight. Clusters of floodlights climb the stairs.

Philip turns quiet. Susan erupts into jumping jacks of excitement. We begin our climb. Up, up, up. Looking down from the narrow landings, I watch the floor drop further and further beneath me--and then whack my head on a floodlight above the stairs, on which someone has courteously scrawled, "Watch your head!"

We arrive at a catwalk near the top and push through a door against the wind. We're outside in the blue-skied, early evening. We cross a bit of the roof, crunching gravel, and follow Susan up a steel ladder.

I watch my head as I duck under some supports, climbing to a steel grating. We share a cramped platform with a red aircraft beacon. We're at the top--the highest people in the city on the tip of the tallest building in town.

Big City Know-How

Urban adventure, as Alan North says, "will change the way you see your urban environment. The structured, asphalt-and-concrete, developed world will become your wilderness playground." North wrote the book on it, *The Urban Adventure Handbook* (Ten-Speed Press, 1990), the definitive urban adventure "how-to" manual.

An old brick building becomes a cliff face to scale. The clogged rush-hour streets become rapids to navigate on two wheels. A grim steel and glass office building turns into a fortress to penetrate with cunning and stealth. The city sewers are a labyrinth to explore.

I'm walking around downtown with Philip, and he's pointing out buildings to climb and grates to lift up. "We can climb that," he says. "Just chimney up those two vertical things, maybe get up on the roof. That rock wall there makes a good climbing surface, rough stone with lots of holds." He looks down a sidewalk grating as we walk over it. "Hey, there's a ladder down there. Help me lift this up."

People are walking by in ties and coats. They only see *city*. We see a million possibilities for mischief and play. He scoots up out of sight while I use the ATM. In a few moments, he is 20 feet above my head.

Why risk life and limb for adventure? North says it's a "genetic imperative. People want to push. They strive for what's new and exciting. And there is nothing like an adrenaline rush."

I'm hanging off of a church wall 30 feet off the ground. My legs shake and my fingers cramp. People gather down below on the sidewalk. "Crazy," says the homeless guy

down there. He has a point.

"I won't say urban adventure is the greatest thing," North says. "I'd much rather be climbing in the Sierra or hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. I think it's a great thing because it's available."

Urban adventure is anti-elite. You don't have to have a lot of money. You don't have to have a lot of time. You just go and do it. And if you are young and poor and a wage slave, that's really attractive. You have maybe an hour between one job and the next and you can go out and do something: ride through traffic, perhaps, or climb a building.

"There's nothing wrong with spending money for adventure," North says. "It's one of the best investments I can think of. But you don't *need* to spend the money. You don't need any special tools or shoes or anything. With urban bicycling, for instance, just any old bike will work. One speeds work fine."

At lunch time, Alex and I head for a skyscraper under construction. We hop a fence and realize there is an open gate. There are construction guys standing there, but that's okay because Alex and I have on hard hats as a disguise. We wave and walk past them. There are no sides on the building yet, and it resembles a bombed-out shell, like a backdrop in a post-apocalyptic cityscape. We scramble up 30 stories and enjoy an adventurer's picnic in the fresh breeze high above the city.

It doesn't take much to have an adventure. A good pair of tennis shoes, a flashlight sometimes. A map might help. What else? "Just an attitude," North says. "All you need is a creative view toward the sculpture that is all around you, a few free hours and the will to be an adventurer."

Nothing New Under the Sun

Julie takes me to a railway tunnel under the freeway. She dances up, across and then down the stone face. "Try it," she says. "It's a good surface. I climb here to keep in shape for other climbing gigs. Free climbing, without ropes, is refreshing."

Climbing opportunities are everywhere. Big concrete buildings are often irresistible. These are the structures that parents are always pulling their kids off of. The county building, the federal building, the arena--architecturally ugly, but oh so interesting when viewed as a challenging climb.

"When I was growing up, we used to climb a lot at Stanford University," says Peter Carrick of Pacific Edge in Santa Cruz. "We'd climb all over the buildings. They're all rough-cut sandstone. A perfect surface for rock climbing. In Palo Alto, there are a lot of crack climbs downtown between the buildings. Thin hand cracks that are 15 to 20 feet high and an inch and a half wide." You climb a hand crack by jamming your hands and toes deep into a thin crack in the wall and inching upward a step at a time.

Old alleys, Victorian buildings, towers, rock and concrete walls of all types are waiting to be climbed. Construction sites and industrial plants shouldn't be overlooked.

Julie looks up at the stone wall. "When I conquer a particularly difficult building climb, I feel like both a renegade and a tremendous athlete. When I was a kid," she says, laughing, "I remember wanting to be Spiderman." We're still sitting there talking when a train bursts out of the tunnel, its whistle howling.

One, two, three. I count the steel rungs as I climb below street level. I lower the grate over my head back in place. Four, five, six. My boots squish down on the muddy leafy floor. I look around. Tunnels disappear in the murky distance in two directions. I am standing 15 feet below ground. My heart is racing double-time. I am equipped with my trusty flashlight and waterproof boots. Two minutes ago, I stood looking down through the bars of an unlocked grating covering a hole that descended into the depths. I asked myself: Well, why the hell not?

Urban underground exploration has been around as long as cities have. Paris and Rome have catacombs. New York City has abandoned sewers and train tunnels. People have been urban adventuring underground for centuries.

"Sewer tours" are standard fare for adventurers in almost every medium to large city in the nation. The tour usually is a visit to the city storm drains, rather then the sewage system itself. Sometimes creeks and rivers run underground through the city and provide tunnels to explore. When I was growing up, we never left town without a walking tour of the creek as it passed under the length of downtown. Just to make things interesting, we often made the trip blind--that is without flashlights in almost total darkness. We emerged on the other side of town rather wet.

College steam tunnels form a Minoan labyrinth beneath many campuses. There is even an Internet newsgroup solely dedicated to the discussion of college tunnels. Security is often high, but tunnelunkers, as they call themselves, believe getting caught is worth the risk.

On a late-night burrito run, we pass the Bank of America, where several guys are jumping benches, or attempting to, with their in-line skates. They skate down the stairs along the side of the planter and leap up and over the length of a small bench, landing--more often than not--sprawled out on the sidewalk. They're having a blast.

Skaters have long transformed the urban environment into their private playground. Around town, it's not hard to find skaters jumping, spinning and flipping their boards over curbs, walls, stairs--virtually anything concrete.

However, the city-as-playground view is not embraced universally. "Kids don't skate in public places like they used to because of fines," says Rob Brown of Skateworks in Santa Cruz. "It's a $40 ticket for possession of pot, but it's something like 65 bucks if you're caught skateboarding in a business district."

In the '70s and early '80s, the need for a place to play, safe from angry merchants and cops, spawned freestyle skateboard parks. "Eventually, liability wiped them out," says Russ Tokiwa of Gremic Roller Hockey in San Jose. "It required not thousands, but hundreds of thousands of dollars' insurance.

"Every now and then," Tokiwa says, "some people get together and put up a ramp somewhere in a parking lot and say, 'Hey, let's do some grinders and some freestyle stuff.' And, of course, on nights and weekends on any school parking lot, you'll see people playing roller hockey."

Bike riders also have found a home in the blacktop jungle.

It used to be kids on tiny BMX bikes jumping curbs and homespun ramps. Next it was 10 speeds out there with the cars, braving the vehicular rapids. And then it was mountain bikes. Everyone rode heavy-duty, fat-wheeled bikes, most of which had

never gotten near a mountain. But they were perfect for riding down stairs and over sidewalks and curbs. They were geared with 15 and 20 speeds and could keep up with traffic.

Now, it's BMX bikes again. "The freestyle stuff is flashier," says Tokiwa. "It's much more interesting to see someone on a bike doing a somersault six feet off the ground than watching someone pedal down a street."

Safety, Etiquette, and the Law

Urban adventuring is inherently dangerous. A four-story fall to the sidewalk would truly ruin your day. Underground steam pipes are hot and can sear flesh. The unwary can drown in storm drains. Arrest is certainly a very real danger.

But with care, adventurers can reduce their chances of getting hurt. Don't climb higher than you care to fall. Plan your route carefully. Test your holds before you commit. Don't touch hot pipes. Don't open valves. Tell someone where you're going. Trust your intuition. All common sense.

The safest thing is to know your own limits. When you adventure, you do so at your own risk.

Urban adventure has a certain etiquette. This is just simple respect for the urban environment and good common sense. Alan North suggests a simple guideline: "Make sure your adventuring does not burden other people," he says. "Be respectful of other people and their property."

This adds up to never damaging property, not breaking locks or windows. The less hassle one creates for property owners, the less hassle one can expect to receive.

Good adventurers leave behind what they find. A basement spelunker finds a roll of good but used carpet. He thinks, "Hey, that'd be perfect for the back porch." But if the building owner comes back and finds the roll missing, how likely will it be for future explorers to find that freight loading door unlocked again? Urban adventure is about thrill and exploration, not booty. Leave any found treasure so the next adventurer can have the thrill of finding it, too. In the eyes of the law, uninvited guests who pick things up aren't just trespassers, they're burglars.

One evening we go downtown, bar-hopping, looking for mischief. On a dare, I chimney up two pillars of a bank building and onto the roof. I don't see the squad car. A voice booms over the PA: "Come down from the roof ... very slowly." I spend the next half hour sitting on the curb explaining to the officers that I wasn't trying to break into the bank.

A word about urban adventuring and the law: Expect to answer a lot of questions. Frequently, adventuring involves trespassing. But that's usually the extent of how far you've run afoul of the law. It raises some eyebrows and not a few questions. You may need to do some explaining to convince the authorities that you were only climbing the building for the fun of it.

The best thing is not to get caught. But, if you do, be honest and respectful and have your ID. Says North, "Many law enforcement officers choose not to issue citations to polite urban adventurers if a crime has created neither damage nor victim."

Going Legit

For those who feel the itch to adventure but don't want to go the rebel route, there are outlets for more legitimate adventure. Climbing gyms, caving clubs, skate parks and roller hockey rinks, for instance, all offer a taste of adventure for a price.

"The tendency now is to want adventure, but want it watered down," North says. "I just read an article in a mountain bike magazine. It said, 'If you want adventure, go night riding.' But then the whole article was about the big, powerful lights you use."

True, in adventure sport magazines the talk is of safety. For an adventure sport company, it comes down to liability. A commercial venture can't find affordable insurance if someone will likely get hurt. Also, many consumers as well want to reduce risk, not pursue it, so adventure sport companies work to convince them that their sport is safe. But perhaps the ultimate bottom line is sales. Safety equipment for adventure sport is a large and growing market. Shoes, harnesses, lights and helmets aren't considered optional. Safety is big business.

North says, "I have nothing against people who play it safe, who do indoor climbing, for instance. But it's all so protected. All the adventure is really gone from it."

James Scheh, manager of Planet Granite in Santa Clara, disagrees. "The adventure is in challenging yourself and what you can do," he says. "You can always get better. Indoor climbing is attractive because it's available and safe. You don't have to deal with crumbling surfaces and loose holds. You are belayed and safe if you fall. Plus, you won't get arrested."

"I'm not saying you have to forgo all safety," North says, "The question is, how far do you want to push the limit? The people who want adventure are the people who are going to want to go closer to the line. That's the most interesting place, right on the edge. Of course, if you go too far then you've really screwed up. You could die. But on the other hand, if you're way back from the edge, you don't get that great view."

And what a view. I am looking over that edge, hanging over, actually. Hanging on for dear life. I've climbed up a foolhardy six floors, an easy combination of stemming and chimneying. Easy so far, but now I am trying to work my way around a serious overhang.

I hadn't really thought this far ahead. My legs are beginning to shake. I'm afraid. I know there is no one I can turn to for help. I have to look for an inner strength I don't know if I have.

I stretch an arm up for a hold. I am leaning way out over the space, a potential 60-foot drop. I am almost paralyzed with fear, barely driven by the knowledge that I have to act quickly before fatigue sets in.

I stretch the arm up. My fingers feel for the edge. It's small but I have it with my fingertips. I'm trusting my feet and this edge can hold me while my other hand seeks the new hold.

The universe holds its breath for a few moments.

I have it with two hands. I get a good grip and let my feet swing out. I am dangling from the edge. And the view from here is out of this world.

I channel the last of my remaining strength into a single pull-up. My leg is over, now both legs, and I roll onto the roof. I might just have a heart attack right here. I am lying on my back looking at the sky and I begin to laugh. I'm not sure if I am laughing at death or at my own stupidity. But I laugh and laugh and it feels real good to be alive.

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