

BLUE SKIES MAG

— ISSUE # 43 • MAY-JUNE 2013 —

\$4.99



OPENING KUWAIT

BY CHRIS “DOUGGS” MCDUGALL

It all started with a random email from Kuwait asking if I could jump from their tallest building. “Of course I can, no worries,” I replied. Then came the follow-up phone call, where I asked, “So how did you find out about me?” Camille Bacha from Camco Global Events answered, “I googled the top 10 BASE jumpers in the world and they are all dead, except for you!” That cracked me up and so the journey to be the first ever BASE jumper in Kuwait began. As with every event like this, there was a hell of a lot of behind-the-scenes work to make it happen.

I flew to Kuwait to check out the building, the weather, and the client to see if all this was a joke—as often is—or the real deal. I was also worried that maybe they had read my book and wanted to cut my hands off for my past and present life of debauchery and fun.

The flight there was a disaster. Four-hour delay in Zurich followed by another wait in line at the Dubai airport from 3 a.m. to 7 a.m., only to miss my connection. After being awake for way too long I finally arrived in Kuwait 12 hours late and had to dress up straight into my suit and meet with the owners of the building. My first impression would be the decider in getting this display underway, and it worked. Armed with knowledge and a new-found professional attitude (I blame the suit) we got the go-ahead for the event.

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Ryan Brownlow bringing it home during the FLCPA Meet #3 at Raeford Parachute Center.
Photo by Chad Wilcox.



("OPENING KUWAIT" continued from front cover)

OPENING KUWAIT

The exit point posed the biggest challenge because there wasn't one that would suit a crowd of people on the ground and the media at the top, and most importantly, one that would allow me to exit safely. I knew though, once I was in the air I would be fine, as the building is 1,358' (414m) at the top—what a beautiful monster this was! It is the tallest building of its type in the world and is recognized by Guinness.

Unfortunately I couldn't exit from the top, as they wanted me to go from somewhere else. So I let them know what I needed for exit and headed home leaving Camille to sort out the sponsors to cover the event.

After a million emails and phone calls and changes, we finally got the go-ahead for two complete sets of sponsored gear, a tracking suit, and a helmet. It was so last-minute that the tracking suit had to be sent straight to Kuwait only two days before the jump!

The rest of the gear arrived at my home in Suisse a week before, which gave me enough time to do a practice jump on each of them to see if I had connected them together correctly! I did and had two beautiful openings, one with the logo of Zain, the largest communications company in Kuwait, and one with the logo of Al Hamra Tower, which would be the building that I would soon jump from.

I flew back into Kuwait Mar. 5, this time without incident, to the awaiting media and a brand new Escalade with driver that would be my personal ride for the next week. It doesn't happen very often but I must say, I enjoyed the initial rock star treatment!

The next couple of days were full on, lots of media commitments. Interviews for magazines, TV studio interviews, and a very funny radio interview with Mohammad Al Refaei (the soon-to-be first Kuwaiti BASE jumper!) and the building owner's son, Talal.



One thing I was quickly learning though was that things don't happen too fast in Kuwait and they can change at any time. So all of a sudden there is no ramp built on the decided exit point and I now could not even jump from that place. Not quite panic stations but almost! The building manager Richard was a Brit and able to make stuff happen so we changed exit points, played around with some designs, and in the final hour had managed to fix a plywood board to the window washing basket at the 1,329' (405m) point. It wasn't ideal but it would have to do. I needed some skateboard grip tape for the exit point, and that turned into an epic mission the night before because there is only one small skate shop in the whole country! But I came through with the goods in the end!

The exit point was ready, but the other main issue was the wind. It was crazy! In the days before we had dust storms and winds over 40 mph (70 kph). It wasn't looking good. The only window we would have would be on the actual

jump day in the afternoon as the next day would be also very bad.

As BASE jumpers know, jumping in wind in an urban environment is a recipe for disaster and death as has happened in the past. So to give myself the best chance of knowing what the wind was doing I had to put up my own wind indicators wherever I could. Richard helped me out with the low stuff but in the end I had to break into a building site and climb a 250' crane to put my flag on. Well of course, the cops came and that was the last thing I needed, but Camille told them what was going on and next minute they had us in the back of the car showing us the sirens and speeding through the city. It was heaps of fun!

Everything was set and I headed back to the hotel to make sure I had everything, and to get some rest before the big day. The wind blew like crazy through the night but in the morning it steadily died down and I couldn't believe it. This jump would actually happen. My hands got sweaty



and my mouth got dry—the fear never changes no matter how many jumps you have done!

The road was closed to traffic and the barricades put up. A lot of people started showing up—far more than I thought. No pressure, I chuckled to myself, just don't fuck up!

After too many photos and too much nervous water drinking everything was set. I was to arrive in a hotted up car but it was a surprise. I was thinking to myself, "How cool is this going to be? I am going to rock up in a Lamborghini or something!" But no. Nearly everyone in Kuwait has a car like that so they had me in a pimped out F250-like truck, the same type as every American owns! D'oh! Oh well, it was still pretty cool.

The emcees of the event were now in full force as I arrived to the cheers of the ever increasing crowd. I was ushered inside by my personal security team, which was something different, as I am normally getting ushered OUT by security. Once inside the building we went up to the 55th floor so I could

take yet another nervous pee. There waiting were all the heads of police and all sorts wanting to come to the top and get way too many photos with me. Quite different from my own country where the cops just treat you like you're a lowlife scum. Once on the 78th floor we had to walk up nine flights of stairs to get to the roof. I now know that if I want to outrun the cops in Kuwait, all I need to do is run up the stairs. Everyone smokes in Kuwait, I mean everyone, and I never saw the cops again, I don't think they made it near the top. It was classic!

So now it was time to shine. I slowly geared up, making sure everything was perfect as it was now solely up to me whether BASE jumping gets a good or a bad name in the country of Kuwait. Again, no pressure on me!

Before I was to jump there was a medical team near the exit to take my blood pressure, temperature, and a sample of blood to make sure I was fit to jump. Now if there is one thing that scares me more than BASE jumping, it is needles.

The road was closed to traffic and the barricades put up. A lot of people started showing up—far more than I thought. No pressure, I chuckled to myself, just don't fuck up!



MOHAMMAD AL REFAEI

Mohammad Al Refaei is the first Kuwaiti skydiver to head out on his own and travel. He has about 400 jumps now and has done large flag jumps with the Kuwait flag in the U.S., but never on his home soil. With the help of this BASE jumping display, the people of Kuwait and the rest of the Middle East will be seeing a lot more from Mo as I am sure he will be flying the Kuwait flag high over his city next year. If we can get the sponsors, I will be teaching him to BASE jump in the very near future so he can become the first Kuwaiti to jump from his city's highest building—and every other building for that matter! Stay tuned as this story is far from over...

"Chris McDougall made history in Kuwait by being the first man to BASE jump in Kuwait. I am very proud to be a part of this successful event which brought 5,000+ people to watch!

"Many people in Kuwait have not heard of skydiving nor BASE jumping. I am extremely glad that through this event the people of Kuwait now have an idea of who we are what we do.

"I have been traveling to USA and Europe on my own expenses to skydive since it is not available in Kuwait. This event exposed me to big companies in Kuwait that have never heard of a Kuwaiti skydiver. They were extremely happy to support a Kuwaiti with a passion for skydiving, and moreover, pride for Kuwait. They are willing to help me get trained with Chris Douggs to be the first Kuwaiti BASE jumper and return to Kuwait to BASE jump the highest building. Through this I will be representing Kuwait wherever I go. I will do whatever it takes for my country.

"GOD BLESS KUWAIT"

— Mohammad Al Refaei



I am getting sweaty hands just thinking about it now! After a small temper tantrum like a 6-year-old I got the tiny pin prick blood test and headed to the exit point. It was game time!

I didn't know it then but they had cameras on me the whole time so I must have looked like a right numpty when I got into the basket and clambered on top of the plywood sheet on my hand and knees, scared out of my brain! I then got the crane operator to move the basket over the edge of the building and into position, holy shit, I hadn't been this scared since my last BASE jump!

I let go of two toilet rolls to confirm the wind direction and speed. It was perfect and by the sound of the cheering crowd below they were ready. I held onto the support cable and gave the call. Count me down when ready!

There was a minute call then a 30-second call. The exit point was so wobbly that I didn't know what was going to happen when I jumped. I was suspended over 1,300' (400m) in the air and once again was questioning why I didn't stay in school and get a normal job.

Then came the count.

10, 9, 8...Oh shit, here we go!!!

I think I could hear the crowd counting down too—or maybe it was the voices in my head, I am not sure—but when it came to the 1 count I leaped into a small piece of BASE jumping history...but not in a very stylish way!

The exit point was so wobbly that when I left it wanted to put me unstable and I kicked for the first couple of seconds trying to not fall onto my back! But the rest of the jump was amazing! I fell for over eight seconds, still opening my parachute

super high for the crowd below. There were massive cheers on opening as I gave a little giggle to myself, thinking, "If my old school teachers could see me now!" Apparently you could hear a pin drop on the ground when I exited the building but now there were just screams and cheers. I later found out that some women were crying and everything because no one realized that I would be in freefall for that long. Crazy stuff!

The landing area was massive and the weather was perfect so without even thinking I gave the crowd a one-handed landing, not that they noticed. Then it got a bit crazy! I was mobbed and my security team was put into action, it was fun but a little crazy!

This wasn't a one-jump event though, it was a two-jump event, so I was again ushered inside, grabbed my second set of gear and up I went! On the exit point again and I was even more scared because this time I was to jump off on my back.

I did my usual 20 pilot chute checks when on the exit point and the countdown began! At least I knew what to expect this time, as I casually hopped off on my back and made eye contact with everyone on the exit point. I got a nice track on this time and had a great deployment and once again giggled to myself after opening.

I came in sweet to the same landing and it was all done and dusted! I was safe, uninjured and had just completed the first two BASE jumps in Kuwait. For the next two hours I was to be the monkey in the zoo, onstage getting photos with everyone, literally thousands. It got a bit crazy there for a while but the security team did a great job, although at times they were mostly photographers. It was cool to see everyone happy, from young kids

to the elderly—everyone had a smile on their face and so did I. It was a complete success and will now open the doors to more legal events in Kuwait and the Middle East.

That night everyone was relieved that it all went well and although Kuwait is a dry country where alcohol and everything else is illegal we were still able to have a good time. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge!

I headed home a happy and proud BASE jumper for being able to show our amazing sport in a good light for a change and being able to start the sport from the ground up in a good way! It is nice to give back for a change, although handing the two parachute systems, the tracking suit, and the helmet over to the sponsors, never to be jumped again, brought a tear to my eye!

I must say a huge thanks to Camille, Wimpy, Mo, Zeina, all the families that took me in, and all the sponsors that made this event happen. Everybody was super nice and very welcoming and I look forward to doing more legal events over there in the future!

But for now it is back to my paradise in the Swiss Alps to stay current and prepare for a crazy 2013! 🍷

Big love,
Douggs

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

You're not seeing things; this is Douggs's second contribution this month. He's as entertaining as he is prolific as he is badass. Seriously, see more at www.basedreams.com.

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