

# JETGALA

LIFE BEYOND FIRST CLASS



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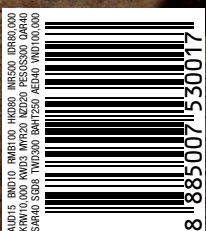
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# 12

May June 2012



WINGSUIT FLYING

by Roger Norum

# ON A SUIT AND A PRAYER

HIGHER SKIES  
AND LOFTIER GOALS  
FOR THE BIRDMAN  
AND HIS WINGED SUIT



Jari Kuosma's Birdman wingsuit works because it remains rigid in flight, due to the suit's zero porosity and ripstop nylon fabric

All images courtesy of BIRDMAN® Ltd



“ALL EXTRAORDINARY THINGS ARE OPPOSED AND RIDICULED AT FIRST,” says Jari Kuosma as he muses on the Wright brothers’ pursuit of flight. He might as well be talking about his life’s work. Kuosma is the inventor of the Birdman wingsuit, a radical suit that has facilitated an entirely new kind of skydiving and brought man closer to his oldest dream.

At 43 years old, the very public life of this Finnish skydiver, entrepreneur and adrenalin junkie is hardly over. Having succeeded in making wingsuit flying a safe and popular sport among skydivers and BASE jumpers, Kuosma now plans to design “wingsuits for the next generation”. He also hopes to draw non-divers to the sport. “It’s the stuff dreams are made of and everybody should experience the beauty of it at least once. I believe it makes us better human beings when we are close to life and death and see things from a perspective,” he says.

Kuosma long hoped to make a suit for human flight; jumping from astronomical heights is something he has wanted to do for as long as he can remember. Kuosma recalls an old school paper that his mother found in their attic only a few years ago: “It was a short story about what I wanted to do when I grew up. I clearly stated that my dream profession would be a professional parachute jumper, since I loved speed and thrill. I was 12 when I wrote that.” His fate was sealed when he witnessed skydivers at the airport where his father flew his private plane.

While working as a full-time professional skydiver in his 20s, Kuosma got wind of Frenchman Patrick de Gayardon, who was rumoured to have devised a way of stringing webbing between the limbs to facilitate flight. Attempting to jump off buildings with wings was nothing new — the earliest birdmen used everything from wooden wings to >>



KUOSMA IMAGINES A FUTURE WHERE ONE CAN FLY WITH JUST A WINGSUIT AND SMALL POWERPACKS

FROM TOP  
Many have risked their lives to develop the wingsuit in pursuit of greater heights

Wingsuits increase lift by adding surface area to the body

Images by Jussi Laine



KUOSMA PLANS TO DESIGN  
“WINGSUITS FOR THE NEXT  
GENERATION” AND DRAW  
NON-DIVERS TO THE SPORT

| The wingsuit's front and back air inlets allow flyers to glide smoothly


Image by Mike Harris

>> single strips of canvas stretched between hand and foot. But Kuosma's idea, a sleek white suit with red webbing between the legs and triangular wings between the torso and the arms, amalgamated de Gayardon's wing concept with the aerodynamic jumpsuits of parachute jumpers.

Kuosma's ripstop nylon wings fill with air once the flyer spreads his limbs, taking the form made by the position of the arms and shoulders. With this streamlined body shape, wingsuiters are able to fly horizontally, reducing the downward speed of a free fall from 193 km/h to 60 km/h and tripling air time before they must pull the rip cord and parachute down to a safe landing. Launched in 1999, the wingsuit's record flight so far is from Morocco to Spain across the Straits of Gibraltar, a distance of some 20.5 kilometres.

Listening to Kuosma speak about his invention reminds one of bullish thinkers like the Wright brothers, curious innovators with a limitless passion for flight. His other heroes include greats of flight and ascent, such as Leo Valentin, Charles Lindbergh and George Mallory, and dreamers like Nelson Mandela and Steve Jobs. As Kuosma explains: "The human trait I admire in them is that these people never gave up their dream that was bigger than any personal gain, no matter how hard it was."

It is the idea of a world without limits that so inspires Kuosma. His ultimate dream is for wingsuit flyers to be able to take off and land without a parachute. Kuosma imagines a future where one can fly with just a wingsuit and small powerpacks — similar to jetpacks now in production, but much tinier and more controllable.

Kuosma's next jump will be at an airshow on Phuket's Patong Beach for Thai New Year, but his sights are always aiming higher. Plans include a stunt with world class acrobatic pilot, Les Vorosmarthy. "The stunt includes a very special type of aircraft piloted by Les and myself attempting something very crazy and very beautiful," says Kuosma. He doesn't give more details, saying he needs more practice. But like the daredevil thinker that he is, he confides: "I generally like to keep myself busy creating something that hasn't been done before." 



Kuosma currently lives in Phuket, Thailand. He has achieved 5,022 jumps and counting

Image by Nina Strömberg

AT FIRST FLIGHT

On 25 February this year, Birdman wingsuit inventor Jari Kuosma married Swede Nina Strömberg, his girlfriend of seven years. Although Strömberg has been parachuting before, she is far from an active skydiver. Still, Kuosma admits that "she has known my profession since day one, so I guess she decided the whole package was worth the risk". Although he had planned to appear at the wedding descending from the skies, the proper permits from the Thai authorities did not arrive in time. Kuosma ended up walking the aisle like the rest of us mortals — a move which admittedly came as a relief to his now wife.

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MUST PARACHUTE  
DOWN

