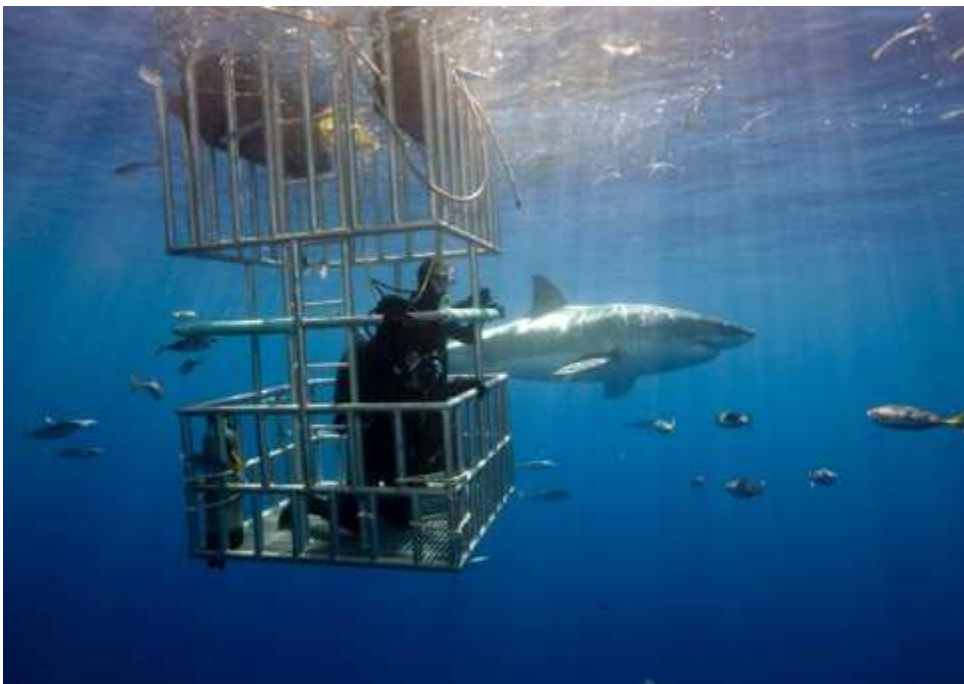


## Travel

# Extreme Excursions

James M. Clash, 11.13.09, 4:00 PM ET



Ernest Hemingway once said, "Auto racing, bullfighting and mountain climbing are the only real sports ... the others are just games." He had a point. Hemingway reckoned that the element of risk is an integral part of the sporting life--perhaps the essence of the experience.

Sure enough, the [edge of our atmosphere](#), the [100-mph barrier in a race boat](#) and the top of the world were all virgin territory a century ago. Today, they are the experiences described in glossy brochures that tout extreme vacations and adventures, at high prices.

Chalk up the popularity of these adrenaline-pumping excursions to a collective midlife crisis of baby boomers armed with enough money and technology to allow them to go where only the world's elite adventurers could go before.

### In Depth: Extreme Excursions

Indeed, if you land in a water hazard on the golf course, the penalty is a stroke or two. Double-fault on the tennis court, you lose a point. But strapped into an open-cockpit race boat, there's the risk of hitting a rogue wave at 100 mph; the boat can flip, at best damaging an expensive piece of machinery--at worst, snuffing out the life of its pilot. Or consider the consequences of losing your bearings while [leaping into the cold, thin air of the upper atmosphere](#) from a plane; a simple tangle of a parachute chord can result in paying the ultimate price for thrills.

That said, you can't eliminate risk entirely from adventure, nor would you want to. As Hemingway understood, risk is a big part of the challenge. But you can be smart about it. A 60-mph crash in a passenger car on the freeway will likely do more damage to the human body than a wreck on a track at twice that speed in a specially built race car with its driver wearing a snug helmet and strapped in with a protective five-point seat harness.

That in mind, your odds of death or severe injury on such an adventure are certainly more apparent, if only slightly enhanced; more likely it is the thrill of a lifetime.

Forbes rounded up several great commercial adventures available today, with prices ranging from a few thousand to several thousand dollars. In compiling the list, we sought out diversity (air, land and water) as well as some firsthand experience (I have done eight of the offerings myself). In addition to significant cost, all involve some sort of risk or hardship.

Speed freaks can head out to the [Bondurant Racing School](#) in Phoenix, Ariz., to learn to drive an open-wheel Formula car on an asphalt road course full of twists and turns. Alternatively, if you want to test yourself on a straight (but more slippery) surface, try Utah's famous [Bonneville Salt Flats](#). Both venues will get the heart pumping, producing an experience featuring

speeds in excess of 120 mph.

If you want to go that fast on water, Super Boat International runs a series of races, like IndyCar, but with high-speed "cigarette" boats. If meandering under the surface is more your thing, [diving shipwrecks](#) with New York-based Mad Dog Expeditions (sometimes with man-eating sharks all around) and "flying" in the ocean in Sub Aviator Systems [personal submarines](#) are equally thrilling options.

### **Not-So-Cheap Thrills**

Robert Peary and Frederick Cook first claimed the North Pole a century ago. Darien, Conn.-based Quark Expeditions runs a summer cruise there annually aboard the nuclear-powered Russian icebreaker [Victory](#). But it will cost you: \$30,000 for one of the "cheap" cabins. Included, of course, are gourmet meals prepared by fine Austrian chefs, and a well-stocked bar serves as a gathering spot for explorers exchanging tall tales of their past endeavors.

Exceptionally brave (or crazy) passengers have the option of taking "the polar plunge": swimming at the North Pole without a wetsuit. I can tell you from experience that it's incredibly bracing and, in the tongue-in-cheek language of the Seinfeld show, there is a fair amount "shrinkage" involved. But in a water temperature of 28 degrees Fahrenheit, that's the last thing on your mind; survival is top priority.

If this is all a bit too terrestrial for your taste, consider space. Las Vegas-based Zero-G Corp. offers clients 15 bouts of weightlessness, 25 seconds each, on a retrofitted Boeing 727 parabolic flight. Price: \$5,000. If you cough up several thousand dollars more, Zero-G says it can even get Buzz Aldrin, second man on the moon, to tag along with you on a private flight.

And should skydiving seem so yesterday, try a HALO (High Altitude Low Opening) tandem parachute jump from 30,000 feet. Donning a mask, bottled oxygen and a warm flight suit, you free-fall for two minutes before your instructor pulls the chute cord a few thousand feet from the ground. The opposite extreme is a helicopter ride 500 feet over Kilauea, the active Hawaiian volcano. The first adventure is incredibly frigid (-30 F when you first exit the plane), the second is incredibly toasty (130 F as you hover, sans doors, above bright-orange molten lava below--be careful as you lean out to take photos).

### **Wild Surroundings, Luxurious Treatment**

On the milder side for the less adrenaline-driven, there are luxury treks in South Africa (Singita Game Drive) and western Canada (Nimmo Bay), where adventures such as helicopter touring, hiking, fishing and swimming reign during the day, but the evenings give way to pampered camps replete with gourmet meals. Depending on the program, prices range from a few thousand to several thousand dollars.

Sure, there's always an adventure that's more dangerous or more expensive, such as a \$30 million ride to the International Space Station aboard a Soyuz rocket, or a \$70,000 guided climb of the world's highest peak, Mt. Everest. But adrenaline junkies without hedge funds or high-tech companies to their names still have plenty to choose from.

And just like a trip to earth's highest peak or around its orbit, all of these trips require time, money, training--and some cajones. Try any of them, and Hemingway would be proud.

*Jim Clash, a Forbes contributing editor, is author of Forbes to the Limits: Pushing Yourself to the Edge in Adventure and in Business (John Wiley & Sons, 2003).*

### **[In Depth: Extreme Excursions](#)**