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PRESENT

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PERFORMING MONKEY

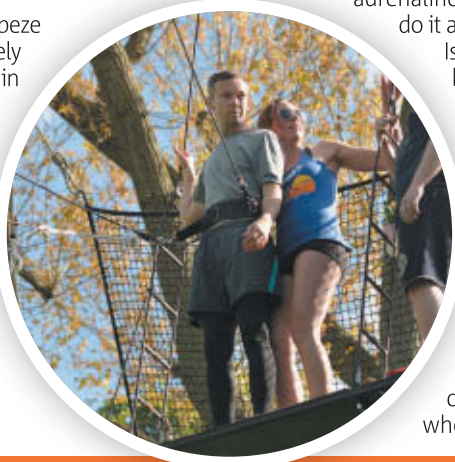
Monkeying around: Chris flies over central London
PICTURE: DANIEL LYNCH

Chris Haslam gets high with **Gorilla Circus**, London's flying trapeze school

I KNEW the enormous grin across my face probably made me look a bit keen and not nearly as cool as I wanted to, but then I'd just done a double backwards somersault on a trapeze. That's two somersaults in a row... backwards! I've seen the video and it looks like me, but if you'd said at the beginning of the day that I'd be doing it later, I'd have wept tears of laughter.

I'm in Regents Park learning trapeze with Gorilla Circus, the only actively performing flying trapeze troupe in the UK. My transformation from desk jockey to daredevil has taken just under two hours.

From May each year, the Gorilla Circus Flying Trapeze School sets up a full-size open-air trapeze in a leafy corner of the park. The surrounding oak trees dwarf the rig, but at 30ft tall and with just a small platform and very long ladder to climb, it's more than high enough.



me the trapeze and reminds me to 'breathe'.

Down below, James gives the orders and, despite my nerves, I drop from the platform and begin to swing, right on command. I am suddenly upside down swinging from my knees. Seconds later, I'm lying on my back cradled by the safety net, heart thumping. I've done it, I haven't snapped and the adrenaline is telling me I should definitely do it again.

Is it first-time luck or am I a born acrobat? Neither. In truth, getting the hang of the basics is easier than it looks. If you're not overcome by fear and you listen carefully to the instructions, you'll be amazed how quickly you can improve.

But credit has to go to James. He controls the rails – a pulley system attached to the safety harness – and can change your speed to make life a whole lot easier.

'YOU DON'T NEED TO BE FIT TO HAVE A GO AT TRAPEZE (GRAVITY IS KIND LIKE THAT) BUT JUDGING BY THE ABS ON DISPLAY, ITS BENEFIT GOES BEYOND THE ADRENALIN RUSH'

Because only one person can 'fly' at any given time, the class is a mix of first-timers, improvers and enthusiasts of all ages. Single gents take note: 90 per cent of visitors are female.

After a warm-up, the lesson moves to the fixed training trapeze where we try a static 'knee hang catch' that involves hooking your knees over the bar, arching your back and stretching your arms out so the catcher can grab you.

Before I know it, I'm strapped into a safety harness and climbing the ladder. Waiting for me at the top is 'voard monkey' Debs, who holds my harness, hands

Not that it is easy. In fact, it's a great upper-body workout. You don't need to be fit to have a go at trapeze (gravity is kind like that) but judging by the abs on display, its benefit goes beyond the adrenalin rush.

After a few more practices, it's time to move onto catching. 'Catcher' Shane gets the unenviable job of plucking my flailing arms out of the air as I swing by my knees. On my first go, I fail to make contact, but on the second try, Shane somehow managed to hold on. The sense of satisfaction was immense; I can only assume he has a good osteopath.

For performance dates over the summer and to book a class visit gorillacircus.com

SEND IT SOARING

Kitesurfing has landed – literally. Ellie Ross checks out the new sport of **kite landboarding**



Flying high: Ellie takes off
PICTURE: CHRIS MURRAY

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THAT'S it! Now, box him in the ears. Harder! Really give it some welly. Be aggressive!' Clive Marriner's technique of teaching me how to fly a kite properly is paying off.

The blue and white canopy floats high above me, billowing in the breeze as I feel the lines tighten and slacken through the handlebar. I have just mastered how to keep the thing in the air, but now Clive wants me to steer it, using punching movements.

'You're not driving a car,' he says, as I accidentally tilt the bar like a steering wheel. 'Keep it horizontal, then punch.'

Channelling my inner Karate Kid, I jab my right hand forward and pull the other one back, sending the kite soaring to the left. I reverse the movements and it glides to the right.

It feels almost therapeutic - boxing out all my aggression and watching the brightly-coloured material sail and dive through the sky at my command.

I have come to The Kitesurf Centre on Camber Sands in Kent, just over an hour's drive from London, to learn kite landboarding.

Essentially, this involves being dragged along by a parachute while strapped to a skateboard with wheels.

The sport has been around for about 30 years, long before kitesurfing was ever popular.

And unlike its water-based offshoot, this variety also appeals to non-swimmers. Happily, there is none of the faff of changing into a wetsuit.

'Have you ever tried board sports?' Clive asks as we make the two-minute stroll from the surf shack-style reception to the beach.

'Yes,' I reply, clipping on a bright yellow helmet. 'I tried snowboarding last year and broke my wrist.' Luckily, safety comes first in our four-hour session.

First, Clive will teach me how to fly the kite, before I use it to power a three-wheeled buggy and finally move onto the landboard.

Keeping the breeze on our backs, he draws a semicircle in the sand to represent the 'wind window'.

When the kite is at 12 o'clock (straight above my head), it is in neutral. Bringing it in front of me or to either side will increase its power.

The aim is to make figure-of-eights to generate enough power to drive my landboard.

My initial attempts end in loud bangs as I over-steer and the kite crashes to the ground.

But it's good practice for re-launching and after an hour of swooping up and down and spinning 360-degree loops, I am deemed ready for the buggy.

I keep the kite high as I clamber into the low seat and find the foot pedals for steering.

Then I make the kite power up and I'm off, bumping across the wet sand like a Wacky Racer.

With the wind in my hair, I feel like I'm speeding along - until someone else from my group sails past with a friendly smile.

I now feel confident with the kite, but balancing on a plank with my feet anchored in foot straps feels pretty precarious.

'Brace yourself as the kite powers up,' Clive says, demonstrating a perfect, controlled landboarding take-off.

My own attempt is less fetching. I feel my backside stick out as I wrestle with the wind, moments before a face plant into the sand.

It's 1-0 to the kite.

Clive's words ring in my ear as I brush myself off for round two. 'Be more aggressive. Steer hard and prepare for the pull.'

Taking a deep breath, I punch hard right and the kite swoops left - but this time I'm ready for it.

I feel the tug in my arms. Then, the board accelerates and I'm bouncing along at what feels like breakneck speed.

For a brief but exhilarating moment I'm in control, part-petrified, but at the same time relishing the feeling of my heart pounding and adrenaline pumping.

Just hours earlier I couldn't even fly a kite, let alone use it to power a buggy and board.

After a windswept morning, I leave the beach feeling triumphant – and high as a kite.

For more info, see thekitesurfcentre.com or call 07563763046

*Promotion available on The All-New Jeep Renegade models registered by 30th June 2015. Introductory Launch Contribution only available in conjunction with Jeep Hire Purchase or Jeep Horizon PCP. 0% APR Representative Hire Purchase available for a 3 year term with a minimum deposit of 13% required. Finance subject to status. Guarantees may be required. Terms and Conditions apply. Jeep Financial Services, PO BOX 4465, Slough, SL1 0RW.