

SPIRITS SOAR ON RIDE IN STUNT PLANE

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It is like watching the world through a fish bowl.

The plane is looping through the sky, and as two G's push me into my seat, I see it all. The green and gold fields in precise geometric formations. The web of roads. The patches of lush greenery. But, for once, no horizon.

Wait, here it comes.

The small, sleek monoplane continues its loop. I feel as if I am inside a glass bowling ball rolling its way down the world.

The voice in my headset tells me that we're going to try flying inverted.

It's Rocky Hill, the pilot of the America Online 4.0 Extra 300. He flew it at the end of June in an unlimited aerobatics competition at AirMichigan, the Wayne County Air Show. Right now, I'm just a reporter along for a promotional ride.

Knowing that this was my first time flying in a stunt plane - heck, I've never even been on a roller coaster with loops or rolls of any sort - Rocky offered to take it easy on me. I took that to mean that he would not send the plane tumbling through space end over end, one of his signature moves.

"We can make this as wild or mild as you like," he said as I got in, promising that I had nothing to worry about.

Then he handed me a parachute. Very comforting.

My boss added to my confidence, informing me that I was not covered by the company's insurance plan. Too dangerous. He encouraged me to go for it anyway as long as I signed a waiver.

I did - too dumb to be scared and too curious to pass up the opportunity. And besides, I was ready; I'd skipped breakfast.

Before I could say "Bullwinkle," the man named after a flying squirrel had me hundreds of feet above the ground.

"Is your seatbelt tight?" he asks as he prepares to twist the sparkling purple plane 180 degrees.

I tell him yes. He asks again. A third time.

I wonder at his concern as the aircraft gently rolls to the side. I lean with it until I'm upside down, and then I understand. I'm hanging about an inch off my seat.

The only part of my body able to defy gravity is my jaw, which is open, stretched to capacity. Speechless. As we return to our upright positions, a smile flashes across my face.

I give a thumbs-up to the photographer shadowing us in a nearby, but less adventurous, plane. She's missing everything - the indescribable sensations, the exhilaration, the awesome power. Rocky rights the plane and then dips his wing to our pursuers. He rolls his carbon-fiber-composite-and-steel bird around the other plane, spinning all the way and leaving a plume of smoke.

It is like a drug, and not the kind the photographer offered before the ride to keep me from getting sick.

Though I'm sweating profusely, I feel fine. Better than fine. Sure, my stomach is fluttering, my heart pattering in time with the loud engine, but I do not notice it. For 15 minutes, I am out of time.

Only once during the trip was this peace briefly interrupted.

The two-seater was designed to be directed by either passenger, and a stick for this purpose was installed between my legs. I had no designs on hijacking my host, but, well, I had a lot of important things on my mind.

Don't touch the throttle. Don't hit the latch that ejects the canopy. Don't throw up.

It was understandable that I might forget about the stick.

During a barrel roll, I allowed my legs to flail about instead of securing them against the bars inside the plane. They bumped against the stick, and for one split second, my legs took control.

I was flying.

There was a slight jolt, a release of adrenaline, and some quick words from my co-pilot: "Don't do that again, OK?"

I didn't but still managed to earn my wings. For now, though, I think I'll stay grounded.

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