



# CROSSING THE LINE

by Ben Jordan

## “WOULD YOU LIKE TO DANCE?” I ASKED.

From that point on, only two outcomes were possible: *exhilarating success* or *epic failure*.

Except that this was not grade six—this dance was in the sky, and the girl towards whom I hesitatingly shuffled was none other than the Bugaboo Spire herself.

This is how an aerial novice like me wound up on the aerial adventure of a lifetime.

I travel around the world in search of places to fly long distances, safely. “How’s the flying up in Canada?” fellow addicts often enquire.

“Great, if you enjoy flying over tiger country, without landing areas or roads to escape,” I respond cynically. The conversation always ends there. But that’s what I love about

Canada and, in particular, British Columbia’s Slocan Valley. The local flying community, all two of us, routinely launch from the majestic Idaho Peak, do a couple of turns over the lake, and land at the local campground, the only clearing for 30 km in any direction.

A couple of weeks ago, I slipped into a deep state of depression. At first, I thought it stemmed from after having traveled for two years, I returned alone to the home I had once shared with the love I had lost during that time away. But my sad feelings turned out to be caused by something far different. Through journaling, I realized I was feeling like a mouse on a wheel, stagnating—not in life, but in the sky. I hadn’t flown cross-country in months and, however beautiful my narrow valley of trees and lakes was, I was shackled there,

as long as I feared paragliding over remote terrain.

I imagined for a moment walking in the shoes of Will Gadd, the only pilot I know to have taken this landscape by the horns, most notably on his 2011 hike-and-fly from Vernon, BC, to his Alberta home, 300 bear-laden kilometers east. What made Will tick? What did he know that I did not? Where did he draw the line?

However intimidating the gap between Gadd and me, one thing was certain. Getting from here to there would begin with a single step. For me, this looked as if I needed to be flying with food, a long rope, and a sleeping bag. To my surprise, no longer did the fear of a forced landing in a tall tree or high alpine meadow feel like a life-or-death situation. Routes across the wilderness were becoming obvious. The landscape of opportunity was being transformed before my eyes.

My opportunity began with an 80km flight from Idaho Peak to Nakusp and back, which I later learned had never been done. The next step was committing to flying over the mountain pass, east to Kaslo, across 30 km of beautiful nothingness—also a paragliding first. I couldn’t stop. Every day was bigger and bolder; my fear became ambition, and depression surrendered to awe. But there had to be a line not to cross, a point where bold became stupid and risk was no longer manageable. Perhaps this was a natural and psychological border I would not know, until I’d flown far beyond it.

It began like any other flight, with my eye set on the next possible landing, just 10 km beyond my previous flight—over the Goat Range, to the fertile fields of Argenta. Late-summer forest fires, burning far and wide, painted the sky with smoke and my ambitions with doubt, as they prevented the sun’s energy from creating the thermal lift required to fly high and far. It was getting late and, since the hitchhike home would only become more difficult as the sun set, I resigned myself to a prior landing area and began my descent.

Just then, a bubble of warm air was released from the forest below. The pine trees a-bristle, their lovely scent stoked my heart to respond like a junky who had just scored. Slowly, I guided my kite to richer and purer scents until its dopamine receptors were throbbing as well—not from the rush of what now felt like huffing Pine-Sol cleaner, but by the vast expanses of glaciated summits that lay out like red carpets to adventure. It was late, I was tired, and there were so many reasons not to continue. Was this the line? There was only one way to find out.

In bewilderment, I bounced from peak to peak, mouth agape, drool smearing my frozen cheeks. Below were ancient

glaciers, revealing secrets as they morphed into massive waterfalls. The sun pierced through the smoke, as birds swirled around whitetail deer grazing in high alpine meadows. I’d seen nothing like it and felt as though I’d arrived at the greatest party on earth. As the fool, or guest of honor, was still unclear. About 25 km north of Argenta, sobering turbulence broke the trance. As a section of forest was burned below my feet, the lift became weaker, and my only landing options were now a dirt road, too narrow for my glider, or Duncan Lake. I needed a diaper.

Just then, it appeared: a grassy, domelike feature, oddly jutting out between two intimidating rocky ridges. Without thought, I used what little height I had to make a single turn and land softly on this remote island in the sky. No words could describe the high, as peak-joy flushed from my heart out to my extremities. Not only was I safe, I’d just bought myself another day of flying this incredible landscape and was now within one 50km mountain range of safe landings in the Columbia Valley.

Elated, I set out on foot, marveling at the lush home these vast glaciers and alpine flowers had welcomed me into. Along the way, I discovered a turquoise lake and was struck by a memory of seeing a similar one the first time I’d taken a passenger jet over the Rockies. The idea of swimming in one had planted the seed that ultimately flowered into my leaving my home in the East for Canada’s Rocky West. Everything was beginning to make sense. That evening, I digested ramen



LEFT Day 1: Crossing the north end of Kootenay Lake.

RIGHT Getting dirty in the clay-lined lake.





noodles and experienced a new sense of self, as I lay back and marveled at the Perseid meteor showers dancing the night away.

At daybreak, I observed that the ridge I'd chosen to launch from was not facing east, meaning I would have to wait until mid-day for conditions to become thermic enough for me to avoid landing in the lake below. The smoke had gotten heavier; it wasn't until 2 p.m. that the lift broke through the smoggy inversion and cumulus clouds appeared in the sky like beacons of hope.

I quickly packed up camp and launched back into the big air and spectacular views. My first move north was a 10km valley gap that put me on a low ridge lining the beach-less body of water below. I worked hard to get up but could never regain the kind of height needed to escape. At 4 p.m., still staggering at the same elevation, I was suddenly overcome by intense frustration. Bottled up feelings of hurt and betrayal came bubbling to the surface, while faces from incomplete past relationships whizzed by my periphery, demanding that I put more and more energy into the one-sided conversations cluttering my mind. I was miserable. Splashing down into Duncan Lake felt like a great way to end a situation that was tearing me to shreds.

Right then, a small, red-tailed hawk flew below me and, as if she had said it herself, a voice in my head reminded me: "If

you want to produce the same results, keep behaving the same way." Feeling desperate, I began channeling love and gratitude toward the same situations that had upset me. In time, my spirit lifted, and soon I was back to flying 100%. I watched as the bird flew over a shallow part of the ridge that I dared not cross so low. She was headed for bigger hills farther north and, to my surprise, was not sinking at all. Though I knew my glider couldn't perform as well, it was the lightness of heart that gave me the self-confidence to follow her lead.

Before I knew it, I was in those big hills, too, and banking hard turns in massive lift. I watched my GPS in awe, as the bird and I climbed shy of 2000 meters in just a few minutes. My body trembling with excitement, I no longer needed to force feelings of love; I had simply become it.

There they were—Bugaboo and Howser Spire—the crown jewels of the Kootenay region, within 25 km of the magnificent, glaciated landscape below my dangling feet. The bird took off in the opposite direction, leaving me to my own devices and with a tough choice to make. Considering the unforgiving nature of the terrain, most pilots, including me, would have thought that committing to this line was a bad idea. Very, very bad.

"I'll just go a little way," I thought. A few selfies later, suddenly committed, I was just 10 km from the spires when I realized I was trying to fly southeast ridges late in the afternoon,

while the lift was coming from the opposite, northwest side. And while there were a few logging slashes on my side, the opposite, lifting, valley was remote-beyond-remote, and my ramen noodles had no business being there. The increasing wind and dropping sun worked together to worsen my situation. Still 35 km from the Columbia and long past the chance to make wise decisions, I chose to roll the dice and soar the ridge between evil and less-evil, until I found myself staring straight at the "Bugs!"

*Quick! Where's my camera? Shit! Where's my wing!...*that's a summary of what followed. The converging of so many valleys, all at one pass, had charmed my relatively safe, En-B glider into a snake of turbulence I could barely recognize. I had just enough height to clear the mountain pass and, unsure of what lay beyond, I went for it, thinking my situation couldn't get much worse.

The west wind rushed over the Bugaboos and dragged me down the eastern side like a lead weight. Without a doubt now, the line was that mountain pass, prescribing failure as my fate. Though frightened, I smiled in satisfaction, proud of myself for simply making it so far. With at least another minute before impacting a tree or stream, I relished a state of bliss, feeling as if my accomplishment had won me a temporary place alongside my paragliding heroes.

Then, like some impossible plot twist in a cheesy superhero flick, there, deep in the valley was what looked like a giant Swiss chalet, complete with mown grass and an airstrip! In order to avoid the helicopter shuttling tourists to and from the lodge, I hopped to the far side of the valley and, to my surprise, the air was lifting. I played around until reaching ridge height and realized the wind was too strong to get above it. With that knowledge came the stark realization that it was also too strong to make it back to the lodge. This was a one-way valley, and the direction was set to get the f\*\*k out!

Ridge by ridge, I vividly recall soaring up one face, then hopping to the next, doing everything I could to manage the turbulent transitions. When I reached the last one, I looked back upon the Bugaboo's great spires, said thanks, and got flushed out into one of the first landable cut-blocks of the great Columbia Valley.

And while the mosquitoes tried to bring me back to a place of darkness, their efforts were fruitless, as I had already asked her to dance and she had shown me the light. For when crossing that line, there is not just Failure or Success, but a wide spectrum of stumbling blocks in between, each with its own lines to cross, each presenting opportunities to become exactly what I have always wanted to be. 🇨🇦

**OPPOSITE** Day 2: Crossing the Bugaboos **TOP** Ramen and dry socks are a man's best friend. **MIDDLE** About to launch from Mt. Macduff. **BOTTOM** What a prime bivy spot looks like in the Canadian Rockies.





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