



# Friends in High Places

On the rooftops above the avenues and arrondissements of **Paris**, a parkour collective reveals what freedom of the city really means

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Words by ANNA RICHARDS  
Photos by TOM YOUNG



It's strange to be in the heart of Paris and hear nothing but silence. From up here, we can see the whole city: a garish blue building resembling a giant hamster cage that houses the Centre Pompidou; the skyscrapers of La Défense; the scaffolded spires of Notre-Dame. Silhouetted above it all is one of the world's most visited monuments, the Eiffel Tower. The sky hangs heavy and grey, and I feel as if I've stepped into the Paris of a silent movie.

Photographer Tom Young and I are seven storeys above the French capital, accompanied by the French Freerun Family, a group of Parisian parkour and freerunning enthusiasts. Beneath our feet are television aerials, terracotta chimney pots and the sloping zinc rooftops of Paris's lean Haussmann buildings.

Paris is the home of parkour. The first group was founded here by David Belle in 1997. Yamakasi, as the original nine named themselves, drew inspiration from Asian martial arts and military combat training to repurpose ordinary objects and buildings as an obstacle course. They used suburban car parks, rooftops and railings to replicate boulders and natural barriers to help develop physical and mental strength. It was more than a sport: it was an art form and a way of life.

In 2003, Yamakasi's Sébastien Foucan moved to the UK and starred in the Channel 4 documentary *Jump London*. He found that the military basics of parkour limited his self-expression, and instead chose to find the most creative ways to travel from A to B. Freerunning was born.

"Rooftops were made to be walked on," says Simon Nogueira, French Freerun Family's founder, who started freerunning aged 13. "They have to be – otherwise, how would people get up here to repair them? That's why they're peppered with ladders and access points." ►►

## "Rooftops were made to be walked on"







I haul myself inelegantly through the skylight, crawling out onto the roof and clutching at anything that looks stable. The chimney pots, which sprout from every building like pegs on a travel solitaire board, are ominously cracked. I straighten up, adjusting to my “sky legs” and dare myself to look over the edge. I catch my breath; the street is a long way below. A passing delivery van looks like a stray piece of Lego.

Simon, Athina and Cynwal spring noiselessly onto the rooftop as though on padded paws. Their eyes are bright. Although they’ve seen this view countless times, they are drinking it in with almost childlike wonder. The group moves harmoniously – a leg-up here, a hand outstretched there – anticipating each others’ movements. They’ve all been freerunning for years, and it shows in the power and ease with which they propel themselves. There are 10 of them in total: seven freerunners and two videographers as well as an osteopath, to help minimise the risk of injury.

“We’re always looking for a faster or more creative way to get from place to place, so it’s impossible to get bored,” he says. “In the winter, when fires are burning, sometimes you can warm your hands on a chimney pot. On a still summer morning, you’ll often smell the flaky pastry of fresh-baked croissants wafting up from the street below.”

Back in March 2020, the city’s streets fell as silent as they now seem from the sky. The frenetic hum of tourists and traffic was replaced by wide, empty boulevards. The freerunners’ rooftop playground, however, came alive. During the sunny days of the first lockdown, heat rose from the tarmacked streets and Parisians, largely deprived of green parks and gardens, followed suit. The freerunners met people reading, drinking, picnicking, sunbathing and even copulating. ►►



Simon and his gang, meanwhile, slid down the marble domes of the Sacré-Coeur, leaping over gargoyles on the steeples of the French capital's 200-odd churches, turning backflips on the flat, graffiti-scrawled roofs of Sixties tower blocks. A row of chimney pots became a line of bongo drums, as they were hit and tested for stability. Window ledges were monkey bars. A pipe suspended between two buildings was a swing. (Ironically, Simon confesses that he hates swings, and they make him feel sick.) It's difficult to believe as he dangles by one arm from a metal bar some 20m above street level, nonchalantly tugging his hood over his topknot. Watching the group use mundane objects as climbing blocks reminds me of how children often reject toys in favour of playing with the cardboard box that they came in.

We're off to the Sacré-Coeur ourselves next, looking down on Amélie Poulain's Montmartre. Simon has scaled the outside of the building to get here, but, guided by Cynwal, we've taken the more traditional route: six flights of stairs and a ladder through the skylight. Our view is steel grey flecked with the gold of the gilded domes of the Hôtel des Invalides, l'Opéra and Napoleon's tomb.

The top-floor apartments here, once the *chambres de bonne* (maids' rooms), are now some of the priciest real estate in the city, or indeed the world. The first floor of Haussman blocks was generally the domicile of shopkeepers, allowing easy access to their businesses just below. The second floor was where the wealthy lived and, in the age before elevators, it was the servants who climbed the steep, winding staircases and enjoyed the panorama of Paris from the rafters. These views now belong to the freerunners. ▶▶







We clamber onto our final rooftop as the light is fading, navigating the giant spikes of a wrought-iron fence. The Eiffel Tower is so close that you could lob a ball from here and hit it. We're joined by Arnaud, one of the youngest members of the French Freerun Family, who has a serious face but a body that turns each obstacle into playground apparatus. "The gym was too regimented and restrictive," he explains. "Freerunning lets me express my personality through movement."

Back on the ground, a wall of noise suddenly hits us, the peace shattered. Simon and the freerunners are unperturbed. They swing around lamp posts, vault lithely over railings and skid down slopes.

"Everywhere can be a playground if you make use of it," says Arnaud.

The windows of the City of Lights illuminate one by one, like a giant urban constellation. The Eiffel Tower is one of the last buildings to sparkle into life, and my spirits rise to match its height.

### THE LOWDOWN

Freerunning is not illegal, but access to rooftops and abandoned buildings often involves trespassing and has inherent risks. In light of this we recommend trying freerunning on the ground, at least initially. The French Freerun Family offers street-level freerunning classes all over Paris. Classes cost £50-65. One-to-one rooftop explorations are available with Simon for anyone that buys one of his NFTs through OpenSea.

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