

# PDNEWS

BY DAVID WALKER



## UNUSUAL ASSIGNMENT CAPTURING HIGH-FLYING THRILL SEEKERS IN ZERO GRAVITY

On contract for an adventure flight company, Steve Boxall photographs passengers experiencing weightlessness on a Boeing 727 jet. By David Walker

SO UBIQUITOUS ARE IMAGES OF COSMOLOGIST Stephen Hawking in his wheelchair, that the chair has become part of his identity. But there he is without it, in a photograph by Steve Boxall, floating weightlessly in the belly of a jet with joy on his face. It seems so unlikely (Hawking has had a debilitating neurological disease for decades) that viewers are bound to do a double take: Is that ... Stephen Hawking?

And indeed it is. Hawking recently took an

adventure flight with Zero Gravity Corporation (aka Zero-G), a Virginia-based company that charges passengers \$4,950 for the thrill of experiencing weightlessness. For 90 minutes, Zero-G's modified Boeing 727 jet flies through a series of parabolic arcs. Thirty-second intervals of weightlessness start at the top of each arc, allowing passengers to float freely around the cabin of the plane. Boxall is Zero-G's contract photographer, documenting everyone for company



Steve Boxall's mission is to capture a portrait of each passenger floating in weightlessness. On this 2010 flight out of Cincinnati, passengers float amid Ping-Pong balls.

## Online News Digest

The following are excerpted from breaking news stories recently posted on PDNOnline and PDNPulse. To read the complete stories and to find more news, check out [www.pdnonline.com/pdn/News.shtml](http://www.pdnonline.com/pdn/News.shtml).



The World Press Photo of the Year shows two boys who were killed when their house was destroyed by an Israeli missile strike, November 20, 2012, Gaza City, Palestine.

### Paul Hansen Wins 2012 World Press Photo of the Year

Hansen, a staff photographer with the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* of Sweden, won Photo of the Year honors for an image that shows a group of men carrying the bodies of two dead children in Gaza City, Palestine. The boys died after an Israeli missile attack destroyed the family's home. <http://bit.ly/XdjL38>

### And Hansen Also Wins POYi Newspaper Photographer of the Year

Hansen won for a portfolio that included coverage of the conflict in Gaza City, Palestine, and a series on individuals whose lives were affected by the mass murders on the Norwegian island of Utøya in July 2011. <http://bit.ly/UY7XHo>

### Paolo Pellegrin Named POYi Freelance Photographer of the Year

Pellegrin won for a portfolio of 50 images that included selections from projects that mostly explore the wrenching consequences of economic hardship and political and military tensions. Runners-up were Tomás Munita and Paolo Marchetti. <http://pdnpulse.com/?p=6693>

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BOTH PHOTOS © STEVE BOXALL

**The intervals of weightlessness last about 30 seconds each. Left: On a 2008 flight, a passenger (and her hair) float freely. Right: Passengers on a 2010 flight chase water, which gathers in spherical forms under weightless conditions.**

publicity, and to provide customers with mementos they (hopefully) pass around their social networks.

“Having this as a job is fantastic,” Boxall says. “It’s so much fun. To literally be flying around the cabin like Superman is a wonderful feeling.”

A prerequisite for the job is an iron stomach, and an ability to handle a lot of stress. Boxall has to photograph up to 33 passengers per flight as they float around for a total of about seven minutes. (The planes do 15 or 16 arcs; after that, motion sickness starts to ruin the fun). Boxall and the passengers have only limited control over their positioning. While he’s trying to shoot stills, he also has to keep in working order the six mounted video cameras that the passengers frequently knock out of position. Because customers are paying a steep price, Boxall can’t miss anybody. “They say that every time I shoot, it’s a mission critical project.”

He covers three or four flights per month. He estimates he’s flown 200 to 250 flights in the last several years. Boxall flew the first time because he knew someone who worked for the company. “He got me on a flight. I took a camera, and shot in the best way I could,” Boxall says. Back at home that evening, he rushed to post his images and video on a website, and sent a link to everyone on the flight, as well as everyone at Zero-G. “I included a page about me and my work, my phone number and address—everything but my DNA sample,” Boxall says.

A few months later, he got a call from Zero-G’s head of operations, who told Boxall that his images were better—and posted faster—than those of another photographer the company had been using. “He asked me, ‘Do you want to shoot for us?’ And a week later I

was standing there with gear, ready to go on another flight,” Boxall says. “I made a bit of my own luck doing that website.” (He had a flight-by-flight arrangement the first year, but now works on contract year-to-year.)

The plane is a passenger jet with all but the rear seats removed. Boxall says it’s a struggle to manage camera gear between the weightless intervals, because the flight path creates almost 2G of force. That makes everything seem about twice as heavy as normal.

“The lesson I learned was to keep it simple,” he says. He shoots still images with a Canon 5D Mark III, and a 24-105mm lens. That’s not as sharp as the 24-70mm, he notes, but the 24-105mm focuses more quickly, and he needs to work fast. He shoots at f/4, mostly with a shutter speed of 1/30 of a second. For light, Boxall uses an on-camera flash with a white reflector card to push light forward, as well as bounce it around the walls, floor and ceiling.

He photographs passengers floating around the middle of the plane, which is equipped with white pads all around. “The plane is kind of a nightmare for lighting,” he says. “In back, there are two windows, so that’s daylight. The plane is a white tube, and toward the front, it gets progressively darker. Near the cockpit, there are fluorescents down the side, and tungsten [lights] in the roof. It’s just a mess.”

Adding to those complications are the dark flight suits that everyone wears. Against the white walls, Boxall says, “It’s incredibly contrast-y.”

Boxall says he has the technical challenges worked out. “The real trick is to be in the right place to take the picture,” he explains. “That’s the hardest thing—just

navigating, because when gravity goes away, it’s incredibly difficult to navigate yourself. The skill is in bobbing and weaving, ducking and diving, and getting in place to place so you can frame up and shoot people. It’s a question of being familiar with the environment.”

With up to 33 passengers per flight, Boxall has to execute an average of two portraits during each 30-second interval of weightlessness. And he notes, “Everyone wants a picture of themselves floating free and clear of all handholds.” To get everyone, his strategy is to get groups of people to lie down on their stomachs at one end of the plane, and push toward him as they begin to float. “With a huge group of people floating all at once, I can get five or six people looking perfect,” he says.

On full flights, Boxall also hands a second camera—“rigged and ready to go”—to one of the flight coaches, who are on board to help the passengers. That helps ensure that Boxall has pictures of everyone by the end of the flight.

He ends up shooting 320 to 350 images per flight, keeping a mental list the whole time of which passengers he’s successfully photographed. Afterwards, Boxall edits, processes and delivers from 250 to 280 images. “I shoot everything RAW, and edit and process it into high-res JPEGs,” he says. “I will [color] correct every single frame.”

Boxall says he’s seen a number of celebrities on the flights, but his most memorable flight was when Hawking was on board. “For him to be weightless was a miracle for him,” Boxall says. “You could see he was thoroughly enjoying it. It was a privilege to be two or three feet from him, shooting.”