



R
O
O
F
T
O
P

RUSH

Hong Kong thrill-seekers
scale the city's skyscrapers in a
quest for the perfect photo

S

caling a 60-storey building and teetering on the edge of its roof is the stuff of nightmares for most people, but not for a group of thrill-seekers in Hong Kong.

“I have seen people hang off a building with one arm, and another time I saw a person hang off the edge as a person holds his arm,” says Manuel Kniepe, a photographer, web designer and avid “rooftopper”.

Rooftoppers are thrill-seekers who climb to the top of buildings without any safety equipment to take selfies, photos and videos, which they then upload to Instagram or YouTube for their thousands of followers.

The rooftopping craze started in Russia but quickly moved to Hong Kong, which has the most skyscrapers of any city on Earth – more than 300 in total.

As rooftopping grows in popularity, more and more thrill-seekers are prepared to risk injury, arrest or even death



Photo: Manuel Kniepe



Kniepe, a 32-year-old German, had never heard of rooftopping before moving to Hong Kong earlier this year. He discovered the phenomenon through Instagram, and now that he posts his own rooftopping photos under the Instagram handle @manuelkniepe, he has amassed nearly 13,000 followers.

“I found it so interesting. People are crazy about rooftopping here, and it’s obvious why because there are so many skyscrapers,” he says.

Kniepe says he’s in it for the photos – not for the thrill. In fact, he admits to having a fear of heights.

Rooftopping is a subset of urban exploration. Urban explorers in Hong Kong have visited buildings such as Queen’s Pier and Wan Chai’s landmark Tung Tak Pawn Shop before they were demolished.

However, where urban explorers visit abandoned ruins or buildings scheduled for demolition to document what they find, rooftoppers scale buildings – often illegally – to photograph themselves or the view.

Another key difference is that urban explorers visit abandoned spaces, whereas rooftoppers are tasked with trying to enter a fully operational building. One need not be James Bond or one of Charlie’s Angels to get past security unnoticed, though.

Making it to the top of a building can be as easy as sneaking past the front desk of a hotel and taking a lift to the roof on the weekend, or blending into the crowd at an office building during the week, says photographer April Wae, whose Instagram handle is @Aprilwae.

The real challenge is scaling the dizzying heights of some of Hong Kong’s tallest buildings, which involves climbing walls, leaping across gaps onto ladders and balancing precariously on ledges.

Wae started rooftopping three years ago when she moved to Hong Kong as a way to make friends and improve her photography, but she admits there’s another reason why she does it.

“I do it more now so people think, ‘This girl is so cool’, and it’s nice to boost your followers,” she says.

As rooftopping grows in popularity, more and more thrill-seekers are prepared to risk injury, arrest or even death as they bid to outdo each other and push themselves to the limit.

Earlier this year, a Russian videographer, known as Oleg Cricket to his followers, skateboarded atop a skyscraper on Hong Kong Island while lying on his stomach. He even performed somersaults and tiptoed along the roof’s edge.

The dangers, however, are very real. In Russia, the death of a 17-year-old schoolboy who fell nine floors from

This spread from left: A rooftopper takes in the view as the sun sets; A man teeters on the edge; Enjoying a sit down after making it to the roof



Photo: April Wae



Photo: April Wae

a rooftop as he tried to take a selfie for his Instagram page made headlines last year. In 2012, a 23-year-old man died after falling down a chimney while exploring the rooftop of a 42-storey hotel in Chicago, USA.

However, even with these dangers, the sense of competition among rooftoppers remains strong in Hong Kong as people try to gain more and more Instagram “likes”.

“There are lots of groups on Instagram and some definitely try to outdo each other. The locals see what the expats have done and try to beat it and vice versa,” says Wae.

As the competition heats up among rooftoppers, it could potentially open the way for brands to tap into a market which includes hundreds of thousands of young people by simply asking a rooftopper to share a photo with their product.

If this were to happen, though, rooftoppers would have to choose their brand wisely. Advertising a premium tequila as you dangle perilously off the side of a building might not be the most responsible product placement. The idea of brands using rooftoppers to their advantage, or rooftoppers earning money from what they do, is not something everyone agrees would work.

“I don’t think you can make money from rooftopping,” says Wae.

As more and more people strive for internet fame, the inevitable downside of this is the media attention the rooftoppers gain, which in turn alerts authorities to their activities and makes it harder for them to scale buildings.

Even though the penalties handed down by the police are minimal – police released without charge a group of five locals and foreigners who were caught

climbing to the top of Tsing Ma Bridge earlier this year – it is the added security installed in the buildings that will hinder rooftoppers.

“Some people have done videos taunting the police, asking them to ‘come and catch me’. When people do videos and photos like that, the media coverage makes it hard for us as the security at buildings improves,” says Wae.

Although Wae now spends more time snapping photos at street level rather than far above it, she admits to still getting a thrill when she reaches the pinnacle of a building.

“You can see Hong Kong from a different angle and you feel an amazing sense of accomplishment by making it to the roof,” she says. “A good example of this is the Grand Hyatt Hotel, as that is a really hard roof to get to.”

The thrill of climbing to the top of some of Hong Kong’s tallest buildings, though, is not just a hobby for those who want to take photos or enjoy the view. Some rooftoppers have used their internet stardom to make political statements.



Photo: Manuel Kniepe

Photo: Manuel Kniepe

“I was in Mong Kok on this super-crowded street and 10 minutes later I was on a roof. Once you get onto the roof you’re free”



Text: Andrew Scott



Photo: April Wae

This spread from left: Looking down on to the street below; A view of Hong Kong that a lot of people never see; A rooftopper dangles precariously from up high

Airin T, for example, took to the roof of a building while wearing a Guy Fawkes mask and dangling a colonial flag above Umbrella Movement protesters last year. The image went viral and showed that young people in Hong Kong were willing to defy the authorities and celebrate disobedience – essentially the heart of why rooftopping is so popular.

This case was an exception, though. The ability to escape the hustle and bustle and experience a sense of freedom in a city that’s home to 7 million people is still the main appeal of rooftopping.

“I was in Mong Kok recently on this super-crowded street and 10 minutes later I was on a roof,” Kniepe says. “Once you get onto the roof you are free.” ■