

Philippe Petit

World Trade Center Walk

Philippe Petit (French pronunciation: [filip pəti]; born 13 August 1949) is a French high-wire artist who gained fame for his high-wire walk between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, New York, on 7 August 1974.



Planning

Petit's most famous work was his performance which he executed at the World Trade Center (Twin Towers) in Manhattan. He was first inspired to attempt what he called his "coup" on the Twin Towers while he sat in his dentist's office in Paris in 1968. In a magazine, he came upon an article about the yet-to-be constructed buildings, along with an illustration of the model. At this time, Petit began collecting articles on the Towers whenever he was able to.

The "artistic crime of the century" took six years of planning, during which Petit learned everything he could about the buildings, taking into account such problems as the swaying of the towers because of wind, and how to rig the steel cable across the 200 ft (61 m) gap between the towers (at a height of 1,368 ft (417 m)). He traveled to New York on several occasions to make first-hand observations. Since the towers were still under construction, Petit and New York-based photographer Jim Moore went up in a helicopter to make aerial photographs of the trade center. His friend Francis Brunn, the German juggler, provided financial support for the attempt and its planning.

Petit snuck into the towers several times, hiding on the roof and other areas in the unfinished towers, in order to get a sense of what type of security measures were in place. Using his own observations and Moore's photographs, Petit was able to make a scale model of the towers to help him design the rigging he needed to prepare for the wirewalk. He made fake identification cards for himself and his collaborators (claiming that they were contractors who were installing an



electrified fence on the roof) to gain access to the towers. Prior to this, to make it easier to get into the buildings, Petit carefully observed the clothes worn by construction workers and the kinds of tools they carried. He also took note of the clothing of office workers so that he could blend in with them when he tried to enter the buildings. He observed what time the workers arrived and left, so he could determine when he would have roof access.

As the target date of his "coup" approached, he claimed to be a journalist with a French architecture magazine so that he could gain permission to interview the workers on the roof. The Port Authority allowed Petit to conduct the interviews, which he used as a pretext to make more observations.

On the night of Tuesday, 6 August 1974, Petit and his crew were able to ride in a freight elevator to the 104th floor with their equipment, and to store this equipment just nineteen steps from the roof. In order to pass the cable across the void, Petit and his crew had settled on using a bow and arrow. They first shot across a fishing line, and then passed larger and larger ropes across the space between the towers until they were able to pass the 450-pound steel cable across. Two cavalettis (guy lines) anchored to other points on the roof were used to stabilize the cable and keep the swaying of the wire to a minimum

Walking

On Wednesday, 7 August 1974, shortly after 7:15 a.m., Petit stepped off the South Tower and onto his steel cable. He walked the wire for 45 minutes, making eight crossings between the towers, a quarter of a mile above the sidewalks of Manhattan. In addition to walking, he sat on the wire, gave knee salutes and, while lying on the wire, spoke with a gull circling above his head.

As soon as Petit was observed by witnesses on the ground, the Port Authority Police Department dispatched officers to take him into custody. One of the officers, Sgt. Charles Daniels, later reported his experience:

I observed the tightrope 'dancer'—because you couldn't call him a 'walker'—approximately halfway between the two towers. And upon seeing us he started to smile and laugh and he started going into a dancing routine on the high wire....And when he got to the building we asked him to get off the high wire but instead he turned around and ran back out into the middle....He was bouncing up and down. His feet were actually leaving the wire and then he would resettle back on the wire again....Unbelievable really....Everybody was spellbound in the watching of it.

Petit was warned by his friend on the South Tower that a police helicopter would come to pick him off the wire unless he got off. Rain had begun to fall, and Petit decided he had taken enough risks, so he decided to give himself up to the police waiting for him on the South Tower. He was arrested once he stepped off the wire. Provoked by his taunting behavior while on the wire, police handcuffed him behind his back and roughly pushed him down a flight of stairs. This he later described as the most dangerous part of the stunt.

His high-wire performance made headlines around the world. When asked why he did the stunt, Petit would say, "When I see three oranges, I juggle; when I see two towers, I walk."

Aftermath

The extensive news coverage and public appreciation of Petit's high-wire walk resulted in all formal charges relating to his walk being dropped in exchange for what was supposed to be a free show of juggling for a few children in Central Park. Instead, he transformed it into another high-wire walk, in the Park above Belvedere Lake (which has now become Turtle Pond). Petit was also presented with a lifetime pass to the Twin Towers' Observation Deck by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

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