

HOW TO BE A BETTER PILOT

CFI Tim King continues his series aimed at the beginner paraglider pilot

NO 12: LAUNCHING WITH SKIS - PART 1

PHOTO: ANDY BUSSINGER



One of the great things about the paraglider is its sheer portability. Many more pilots these days are sneaking their gliders on the plane to take part in the family holiday. A skiing holiday is great for this - after sharing part of the day skiing with the family, an end-of-the-day waft or top-to-bottom down to the chalet in time for tea is the perfect ending to a great day.

In many Alpine areas it is possible to foot-launch from snow. Sometimes access can be difficult without skis - it may be too much of a slog, or they simply won't let you onto the lift. It is of course much better to fly without the weight and bulk of skis and boots, but for a short flight the benefits of launching on skis far outweigh the hassles of foot-launching from most Alpine launches in the season.

In the mountains at this time of year you can expect anything from gentle smooth-as-silk top-to-bottoms to rip-roaring off-the-clock climbs. December and January give shorter days and normally produce calm flying. The sun is lower in the sky, but fantastic mellow thermalling can sometimes be had in January when the lapse rate is high and the sun is out.

February is usually the beginning of better thermalling days, with the potential for generally stronger and longer days. The pistes tend to be very busy throughout February because of European half-terms - what better way to avoid the crowded slopes than by soaring high above the tree line on the sunny rock faces, or just gliding home, avoiding the mayhem of returning skiers.

As the end of the season blends into spring the flying can be epic, but often for the highly-experienced pilot only if afternoon flying is on the agenda. A slightly less exciting flight can still be had in the morning but there is often only a small window between the air on launch being katabatic to switching on and being very punchy. Of course the degree of thermic activity area is dictated by where you are. Late afternoons and early evenings can be fantastic and not overly active.

Etiquette

Some etiquette needs to be observed whilst flying at a ski resort. You are not normally allowed to land on pistes, and whilst may be tempting to buzz the

mortal skiers below it is frowned upon and slightly reckless. Not to mention the hazards of the looming tree line or the odd lift cable!

Nearly every resort has local commercial tandem operators. Some launches are for their use only and some are public. Tandem pilots usually like having other pilots in the air because it helps promote their flights, but the professionals will get unsettled if visiting pilots mess up their launches - it puts off potential customers and delays their operation. But most will be friendly and offer basic advice on the local aerology and rules.

Practicalities

Snow condition can dictate whether to foot or ski launch, and some take-off areas will only be suitable for skis. A launch covered with fresh powder could become extremely difficult to walk on - you'll be up to your knees or breaking through a wind-blown crust. A very icy launch could be hazardous without skis too.

When it's very thermic I choose to fly without skis if I can. Some lifts to launch will only be possible with skis on - usually those that don't allow you to go down (so you don't get stuck up the mountain if you don't fly). If the air is good and the area is top landable it may be possible to leave your skis on take-off or with the lifties by their hut.

'Big foot' type skis are not really long enough to make a decent ski launch. Better to use them to go up the lift, then put them in your harness for a foot-launched flight. You will need to ditch your ski poles before you go up to launch, or take collapsible ones if you need them to ski to an off-piste back-country flight, or to ski back down if conditions aren't flyable.

A ski launch will certainly give you a great buzz. From the moment your glider is above you, the acceleration you can gain whilst flying at full trim speed down a snowy face is really cool. Convert speed into lift and take the exit out of the world below, leaving the crowded pistes and noisy lifts behind...

In Part 2 next month: Set-up, attitude, techniques and dangers.

Tim King is CFI of Sky Paragliding (www.skyparagliding.co.uk). An earlier version of this series of articles appeared in Skywings between October 2003 and June 2005. The present series has been substantially revised and updated.

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