

A perfect wall... or not at all!

Paul Wade finds that flying skills take a huge jump as part of a shared experience

THE TITLE IS JUST ONE OF THE MANY LESSONS FROM MY FOURTH PARAGLIDING HOLIDAY, which has made me a better pilot and expanded the list of folk I can call when going XC. At Algodonales in February we all had some great thermalling action, completed our first XCs and achieved much more than we expected to.



PHOTO: CHRISTINE WILSON

Caught by a dust devil on take-off, Andy was nearly pulled off the launch

In fact it was so good I wanted to offer my hearty support for these fly-learn holidays and encourage others to benefit from the camaraderie, accelerated learning and sheer joy of spending a time with like-minded folk, pushing your flying skills in a guided and secure (as possible) environment.

A doctor or two, a mechanic, aeroplane sprayer, aeroplane engineer, lorry driver, train driver, retired teacher and an IT guy are a rather unlikely mix, but we all had paragliders and we all wanted to fly. A quick flight on the first day, despite a long trip from Bristol, set the scene nicely: we were going to try to maximise the opportunities to fly.

The next day the weather turned sour and widespread ground handling broke out, but not without a solid flight-theory session that had our brains hurting, and then a ground-handling competition. When flying returned with a gentle top-to-bottom it was not looking promising, but our local guides and CFI seemed to know instinctively where the

best options would be and we later had amazing flights at Montellan.

I had a four-hour flight, landing just after sunset in last remaining light - it was singularly the most satisfying achievement of my flying career up to that point in time (I exceeded this by thermalling to over 1200m on the fifth day, going over the mountain to land in Algodonales village!). On that third day the active flying theory session was time well spent and we all clocked up at least two hours in the air.

On the fourth day the Pope resigned. We went back to higher ground and found some thermals (I don't think they are connected, but we had our own Sky God with us). Once again we were in the right place, and when other groups dashed to a different take-off we simply waited for a while. It wasn't long before the whole group was thermalling up to 2k+ and even to cloudbase.

Our group was often in the air longest, catching the best thermals and clearly

practicing active flying. We maximised every day, more than once watching the sun go down while reluctantly heading for a landing. Some of us hadn't thermalled at all before this holiday, and we heard one comment of "It's really really high up here!" in a bit of a whimper over the radio from a tough lorry driver. It demonstrates just how far we all came in a few days. Pete "Look at me - I'm top of the stack!" proved that even the Daddy of the group was having a great time.

In some lighter moments we discovered odd details: a third of us were on Bolero 4s, perhaps not typical of the whole paragliding community (none particularly liked the colour options), and paraglider pilots don't fish. Ricky fell in the ditch because he was so happy with his landing (Yeah... right!). And some mistakes result in beer for all, (nice one Andy). Reading the windsock the wrong way round will result in a hot landing, although talking it through at a daily debrief will help ensure it will never happen again.

Algodonales

Algo is a picturesque village nestling against the Sierra de Lijar mountains, close to the Sierra de Grazalema natural park. It hosted the hang gliding world championships in 2001 and has become a mecca for paraglider and hang glider pilots from all over the world. Flying is possible in all wind directions at the following sites:

Algo West:	906m (height difference 431m)
Algo East/South:	1025m (height difference 635m)
Algo North:	875m (height difference 400m)

El Bosque:	720m (height difference 465m)
Montellan:	500m (height difference 175m)
Ronda la Vieja:	903m (height difference 175m)
Teba:	590m (height difference 165m)

There is some sensitivity to landing outside of the official landing areas and crops must be avoided at all cost due to the tough economic climate. Pilots landing on crops are advised to bunch up and get to a track or road as quickly as possible, and to consider a donation if challenged to preserve good faith for other flyers and good relations with the landowners.

PHOTO: PAUL WADE

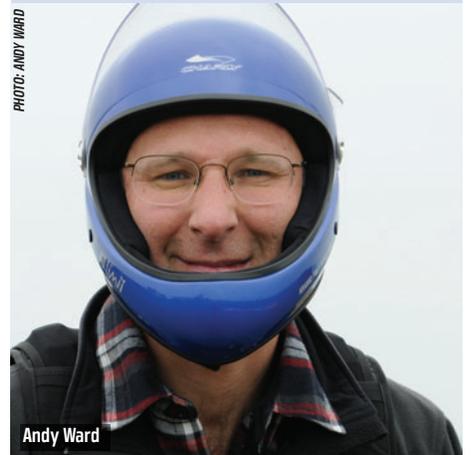


Thermalling above the Sierra de Lijar

Another view...

Andy Ward writes, of the same trip: "I set off from the UK having just lost my red ribbon, and having only flirted unsuccessfully with thermalling in the UK. When I returned home I had more than ten hours experience flying in conditions varying from strong days with easy-but-turbulent thermalling, to light days where concentration and self-belief were key to staying aloft."

PHOTO: ANDY WARD



Andy Ward

"The security and support offered by a large group meant that the odd tuck or two as we honed our active flying skills seemed much less terrifying than when the same happened flying alone at Maiden Castle last year, grounding me for the rest of a flyable day whilst my nerve returned. Having others to watch and learn from, and having a radio so that our guide and instructor could help us nail those first elusive thermals, made all the difference."

"Near-perfect weather meant that we had the airtime to develop the skills to thermal effectively on our own by the time we returned to the UK. I'd certainly echo Paul's comments that a holiday abroad is a great way to progress, as well as being a great way to make new friends, have fun... and reduce the locals to tears of laughter whilst trying to speak the lingo."

PHOTO: PAUL WADE



The team (L - R): Rod Kedward, George Nott-Bower, Andy Ward, Peter Tansley, Charlie Gottlieb, Roy Menage (Coach), Andrew Pearse (Flying Frenzy CFI), Beatrice (Zero Gravity instructor), Colin Moore and Nigel Castle

The French pilot who rushed over and simply said "Too fast!" was admittedly very observant, although I had worked that out for myself during the 25-metre slide. "Bolsita para el perro?" in my limited Spanish didn't get the desired doggie-bag of leftover pizza for the next day's flying snack, but it did send the waitress into mild hysterics.

However, back on topic, I feel the shared learning experience is very well suited to paragliding. It is a hazardous pastime and there are many lessons which we all want to learn as quickly and safely as possible. In my humble opinion, here's why shared learning works...

- Feeding off the energy of others
- Benefiting from the experiences of others (good and bad) – daily flying debriefs are essential
- Introducing a competitive element to the learning and discussion

- Good interaction and stronger communication by shared learning.

It would be fair to say that we went on holiday to do some flying, but we returned as more experienced and much better pilots, and with some good friends to chat/help/cajole/caution on the hill or call when we've gone XC.

My advice: Go on a flying holiday. I am positive that you will not regret it. Make sure you have good instructors who are enthusiastic and thorough and have good local knowledge. Fly safely and always practice active flying.

Big thanks to my new flying buddies Andy, Charlie, Colin, George, Nigel, Peter, Ricky and Rod, and of course a big thankyou to Roy Menage and Andrew Pearse of Flying Frenzy, also our local hosts Hosa and Beatrice from Zero Gravity.

PHOTO: PAUL WADE



Final flight on the last day of the holiday, ridge soaring from the west take-off before flying over the mountain to land in Algo - Andy passes to my right and below