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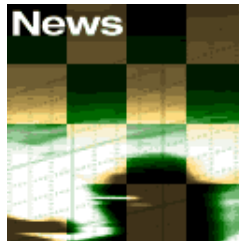
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Fly like an eagle - in a sleeping bag?

Don't know your thermals from your reserve deployments? Ed Ewing spends a week at the British Paragliding Open to find out

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Wednesday July 20, 2005

Dave Snowden is explaining why he's given up competing in paragliding competitions. "Too risky," he half jokes, sipping beer, as he fast-forwards through his latest home movie of flying in the Karakorum mountains.



A busy sky at the British Paragliding Open, Piedrahita, Spain. Photograph: Ed Ewing.

Snowden, in his mid-40s, is just back from Pakistan where he spent three months paragliding within "touching distance" of the 8,000m peaks surrounding K2. Usually the preserve of serious high-altitude mountaineers, Snowden, with a select band of others, is at the forefront of the latest trend in paragliding: high-altitude, lightweight gliding among the world's biggest mountain ranges.

Attached to a glider made of six kilos of cloth and a bundle of Kevlar lining, sitting in a swing-cum-armchair harness, these dedicated pilots are slowly exploring the Himalayas by catching thermals, climbing to 7,000m and doing a 'grand tour' of 100km or more in a day around the world's most dangerous mountains.

So what's he doing here, at the British Paragliding Open in the dusty town of Piedrahita, central Spain? "This? It's just for fun," he smirks and pulls another tab from his pack.

Earlier that day, three of us were sitting round a table, sipping ice-cold drinks and feeling sorry for ourselves after landing early. John Stevenson, a retired entrepreneur and best friend of 'Touching the Void's Joe Simpson by day, British competition paraglider pilot by weekend, was finessing a rolled cigarette.

The radio crackled, it was tuned to the competition's safety channel: "Calvo, copy pilot 122. Reserve deployment. I repeat, there has been a reserve deployment."

Concerned, Stevenson leaned forward. The drama

unfolded. Pilot 122, by the sound of the voice a young South African woman, calmly relayed what she could see. Another pilot had got into trouble and, unable to keep his main wing flying, had thrown his reserve parachute. Pilot 122, still flying, was the closest one to him and watched as he drifted - pretty rapidly - to earth.

She relayed GPS co-ordinates - all pilots have at least one GPS when competing - to the one-name-only Calvo, the meet director, and waited, flying in circles above, to see where the pilot lands.

"The pilot has landed on a roof. He is not moving. I repeat, not moving."

Because of the British weather, two out of the three annual British Paragliding Ppens are held outside the UK. The destinations vary: in May it was the Alps; this July 9-16 it was in Piedrahita, Spain; in August it will be Bishop's Castle, England. The overall winner of all three is the British champion - the title is valued more highly than any prize and all competitors are amateurs. Sponsorship is minimal.

Famous for its hot, dry weather, Piedrahita offers UK paraglider pilots conditions unlike any at home. With take-off at the top of a 2,000m pass in the Gredos mountains, heights of 4,000m-plus are attained and distances of over 100km are flown by weekend pilots. Here, everyone can be an eagle.

All gliders - hang-gliders (rigid, triangle-shaped), paragliders (floppy, like a square parachute, common in ski-resorts) and sailplanes (rigid, white, plane-like) - use the same trick to stay in the air: they catch thermals.

These parcels of warm air caused by the sun heating the land, break off from the land and head skywards, often at great speed, until they stabilise at their equilibrium height and form clouds. Like eagles, glider pilots catch thermals, ride them to cloudbase and then glide off to find another. Thus distance is achieved. The game is knowing where these invisible thermals will be and learning how to use them.

Pilots spend years learning about meteorology and how the wind interacts with the landscape. Wind is like water - there are eddies, currents, updraughts and downdraughts. There is no such thing as an 'air-pocket', but just as thermals can carry a glider skywards at up to 10m a second, air can tumble downwards like a waterfall. Get the wrong piece of sky and you're toast.

Relief as the radio buzzes again. "Pilot is moving, repeat, pilot is moving." We relax - he'll have to endure a bit of fun in the bar later on, plus a tricky conversation about roof tiles with a Spanish farmer, but nothing more serious.

Paragliding was born in the 80s when climbers in the Alps started to use freefall parachute canopies to run off high, steep mountains and glide back to the valley. It caught on and pretty soon pilots started trying to stay up. First soaring them in stiff winds on steep slopes (imagine opening your jacket on a windy cliff, stepping off and going up) and then,

as designs improved, they started to imitate their hang-glider cousins and use thermals to get to cloudbase ("like hanging on to a horse as it gallops to the clouds," according to Nicky Moss, one of Britain's top female competition pilots).

Now, there are dozens of manufacturers worldwide, tens of thousands of pilots - 5,000 in too-windy UK, 40,000 in the Alpine countries - and tens of thousands who have had a one-off tandem flight at a ski resort.

Training to basic level under the auspices of the British Hang and Paragliding Association takes a week of fine weather, and after that it depends on the pilot. Some are happy to float around on a local hill on Sunday afternoons; others, like Moss, make it their life.

"Bird thermaling out the front," notes Moss, displaying the pre-eminent characteristic of the successful pilot observation, on the drive up to launch on the first day of the Open.

She and her boyfriend, Mark Graham, have been on the competition circuit full-time since September 2004. It shows. They look a bit like half-starved scarecrows, sunburnt and ragged from too many hours spent waiting on blown-out hillsides.

"I've flown the Himalayan Open in India, the Europeans in Greece, spent six weeks in Australia competing, flew the World Championships in Brazil, the Polish Open in Italy, the British Open in Austria, the Spanish Championships in Spain and now the British Open," says Moss. They still have the Iberia Cup in Portugal, and Europeans in Slovenia before October.

Taking place over a week, paragliding competitions are completely weather-dependent. It's a bit like sailing in that each day, 150 pilots will gather on the launch to be told their task for the day.

Normally, pilots will have to plot a course around the sky, ticking off turnpoints - either imaginary points held only in the GPS, or real-world features, like a church, or garage on the roadside. Eventually, after flying for up to five hours, and travelling over 100km round a course of six or so turnpoints, the pilots race for goal.

By this time the field is well spread out. The unlucky bottom third have already landed, the tenacious middle group might be hanging on somewhere, scrabbling in a weak thermal, the full-time comp-heads will be pushing their gliders to the maximum, eking out the speed, assessing the dangers of the sky and gunning for goal.

Sometimes mere seconds separate the top two or three pilots. A 'blow-out' - when the canopy loses pressure, collapsing into what's technically known as a 'bag of washing' before restabilising as a glider - caused by rough air can knock precious seconds off the top competitors, sending them crashing into fourth or fifth place. Or simply crashing.

It can be dangerous. There were nine reserve deployments

in last week's Piedrahita leg of the British Open - out of a field of 121, that's not very good odds. Recreational pilots in the UK will go a whole career without even thinking about their reserve parachute. Fortunately, the worst injury this time was a broken ankle and rib, but sometimes there are deaths.

South coast paragliding instructor Russell Ogden, 32, won the competition in Piedrahita, beating 121 other hopefuls. He was a deserving winner. On the second of four tasks another competitor 'piled-in' close by.

Ogden didn't hesitate to fly down, land, administer first aid and help co-ordinate the rescue. In doing so he sacrificed anything but average points for the day. Like everyone else in Piedrahita that week it seems, the competition for Ogden was second to having fun, and staying safe.

*For more information, visit the [British Hang and Paragliding Association](#) and the [British Paragliding Competition](#) websites

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