

LIKE FLYING

PARAGLIDING IS ABOUT AS CLOSE AS YOU'RE GOING TO GET UNLESS YOU SPROUT WINGS. BY ALICE ROSS

There are many ways to chase an adrenaline rush. For some people, crossing a Barcelona road at rush hour is life-threatening enough. Other braver souls climb cliffs or go spelunking. Barcelona resident Nicky Moss gets her kicks from soaring at three kilometres above sea level, supported by "a thin piece of plastic and lots of string."

Moss is the UK's top female paraglider, and competes on the British team. Having taken to the skies for the first time in Scotland in 1999, the former quantity surveyor became "bitten by the paragliding bug" and quit her job to become semi-professional in September 2004, three years after moving to Barcelona.

For those unfamiliar with paragliding, Moss explained: "Basically, you have a very large rucksack filled with a parachute, and a harness which is something like a cross between an armchair and a baby's car seat, and lots of bits of string that hold it all together. Then you spread it out on top of a hill, clip yourself into the harness and run off. Whereas a parachute's designed to descend, a paraglide is designed to fly, so if you start running, the canopy comes up as the air pockets inflate, and you start to fly away. It's one of the most fantastic sensations you can imagine."

Like an eagle, the paraglider then uses thermals to maintain heights of up to 4,000 metres above sea level—"3,000 metres is perfectly normal gliding"—at up to 100 kilometres an hour. "If there's no thermals and no breeze then you can be down in less than five minutes. But in perfect conditions I've flown for more than six hours and travelled hundreds of kilometres by riding a thermal up to a cloud, then gliding and finding another thermal and taking that up to another cloud."

Nicky is enthusiastic about the opportunities Catalunya offers for practising: "Things are much easier here than in Scotland in some ways. The weather conditions are generally perfect, and the Pyrenees have fantastic gliding—incredible scenery and intense flying conditions. It's perfect."

She admits that integrating with the local paragliding community wasn't all plain sailing (or gliding): "Getting involved was a little interesting at first, because I don't speak Catalan, and the fact that I was a girl was a bit of a novelty—I only know of three girls who compete in Spain. But now they regard me as Catalan by adoption, and even ask me to compete against the British teams."

Since taking up paragliding full-time, Moss hasn't spent much time in Catalunya: "I've worked out that I've spent 37 days at home this year. I've competed all over Europe, in South Africa,

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the Himalayas, Australia, and the World Championships in Brazil. I spend my winters practising in Australia—although you can fly all year round down in Andalusia, here in Catalunya it's a bit restricted in Winter because of the weather."

Competitive gliding is tough. On an average course, just 20 percent of the competitors who start finish the race. "It's not particularly physical, it's a mental sport. You have to deal with fear and with being in uncomfortable places, and you have to keep your concentration no matter what."

While the sport is rewarding in many ways, it has no professional status and prizes can be unorthodox: "I won the Himalayan Open female class in Tibet last year and came in 20th overall, beating about 180 guys, which is my best result so far. They gave me a hand-made carpet, a hand-painted *thanka* [a Buddhist prayer wheel painting] and a *pashmina* [a shawl]. I had to beg them to let me on the plane!"

The lack of professional status can make it



▲ Nicky Moss takes to the air.

difficult for competitors on the international circuit: "Virtually everyone who flies supports themselves, unless they can get sponsorship from glide manufacturers. I've been living on money I'd saved when I was working in the UK, but that's almost gone now and I need to find sponsorship from somewhere."

For the moment, though, Moss is content. "I'm heading off to Australia to practise with the British team over the winter, and my place on the team is guaranteed for next year. It's a fantastic life, because it's such an amazing sport. How many people can say they can fly like a bird?" ■