



# High flyer

The wind in Spain is mostly on the plains, discovered **Zoe Dare Hall**, when she spoke to the international paraglider who moved to Barcelona in search of hot air.



main pic Just head for the edge and run  
1 Nicky Moss, kitted up and ready to fly

**NICKY** Moss has a different view of Spain from most people, mainly because she spends half her time sitting beneath a cloud and looking down.

Recently selected to represent Britain at the European paragliding championships, she lives in Barcelona and travels around Spain for training, competitions and pleasure. Ask her what she thinks of Granada, and she'll reply: "Like staring down at the surface of the moon. Once you get above the rocky peaks, you lose all perspective as everything is flat. You just see shadows and shades of pinky grey."

Or Jaén: "Like a child's drawing of olive trees – a patchwork quilt of dots as far as the eye can see. But it's hard to land as you have to find a spot between the trees."

That, as it turned out, proved problematic in the Spanish championships in nearby Pegalajar this year. "I considered landing in a cemetery but I thought that might be sacrilege in Spain, so I landed in an olive press yard when the factory was in full flow," she recalls. "All the workers came outside and clapped."

Nicky, 36, stumbled across paragliding rather by chance, when her job as a chartered quantity surveyor transferred her to Edinburgh five years ago. "It was right in the middle of the Edinburgh Festival so I couldn't find anywhere to stay and I didn't know anyone. I eventually found a hotel for a few weeks while I searched for a flat and decided then that I had to join a club as I couldn't spend every night reading on my own in a pub."

The club happened to be paragliding. "I'm naturally an outdoors person because I grew up on a farm. I used to ski and rock climb and I'd always seen paragliders and wondered what it was like," says Nicky. "You basically put on a parachute and run off a hill, then when the canopy fills with air, you start flying. On my first flight I was so excited and worried about not running enough that my legs kept rotating till I landed."

At the club Nicky met her boyfriend Mark, who taught her to fly, and they moved to Spain three years ago after Mark was offered a job in Barcelona.

"Until I moved here, I was forever chucking my glider on Easyjet – it's small enough to pack into a rucksack – and going to visit him," says Nicky. "Now we've been here a while we've got to know the gliding scene and during the summer I enter Catalan competitions."

The couple live just outside the city in La Floresta, surrounded by the greenery of >>



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the Collserola natural park, and Nicky paraglides four times a week. "I often fly on my own if there is no one else around midweek. Sometimes you meet someone in the air and have a chat, as you can get close enough. But it's a fantastic feeling flying on your own. You sit underneath a cloud with nothing beneath you, watching eagles flying past."

"It feels very secure when the glider is inflated. I don't feel like I'm hanging in the sky on a handkerchief, which is essentially what I am doing. People think it's an extreme sport, but really it's like sitting in a chair and waving your arms every now and again."

Given how weather-dependent the sport is, Spain is naturally a far better place to practise paragliding than Britain. "I've never flown in England," says Nicky. "My first real thermic flight was over the mountains near Alicante, which was incredible. When the conditions are good in Britain, flying is exceptional, but there's too much bad weather. Spain has a far better climate and it has mountains, semi-deserts and a huge land mass."

"There are far more paraglider pilots in Spain than in Britain as there are so many places to fly. In the UK you have to compete for space because there are far more airports in a much smaller area, but Spain has few restrictions on airspace so you can take off almost anywhere. And Spain has thermals that can whip your boots off."

Thermals – caused by the changes of temperature over land – are what paragliders go in search of to keep them buoyant; otherwise they land. A flight can last from 15 minutes to several hours.

"In Spain you're often flying up to 4,000 feet above sea level and at speeds of up to 80kph," says Nicky. "In competitions, you're judged on the distance you cover. The world record is 420 kilometres."

She flies regularly over Catalunya, near Girona and Ager, and a favourite spot is Berga in the Spanish Pyrénées. But Piedrahita near Avila, where English pilot Steve Ham set the Spanish record in July "is one of the best places to fly in the world, with big flat valleys and big hills to take off from".

Nicky also loves the mountain range around Castejón de Sos in Aragón and enthuses about flying over orange and lemon groves between Alicante and Murcia. As part of the British squad, along with two other women and 12 men, she spends her winters competing in Australia and Brazil. "Financing the travel is my biggest problem," she says, calculating that she spends about €20,000 a year going to and entering competitions. "This year I've travelled to Australia, Brazil, France, Switzerland and Spain to compete and I'm hoping to enter the European championships in Greece in October. I'm doing some web design to make money as my chartered surveyor qualifications don't count in Spain, but if I'm going to carry on I need to find some sponsorship."

"A paraglider is a 25 square-metre billboard. It's an amazing platform for advertising, but it's an esoteric sport which will never be mainstream, so you need sponsors that want to be associated with adventure sports."

Nicky has won two women's competitions this year – the Australian Open and the Catalan Championships. "You usually win trophies, t-shirts and entry to next year's competition, but the Spanish do it with far more style. At the Catalan Championships in Ager, they awarded me a big bag of food full of local produce including sausages, olive oil, jam and wine. It was far nicer than sticking a silver cup under your arm."

And although when a convoy of paragliders descend on a 'pueblo blanco' in Andalucía and the locals aren't quite sure what's happening, they love to get involved, says Nicky. "The whole village takes part. The town hall makes an event of it, everyone turns up to watch and they make a big paella."

Of course there is one downside to seeing Spain at cloud level. It can get rather cold up there. "In Ager last June, it was 40 degrees on land and I was wearing a balaclava, helmet and gloves," says Nicky. "Then at 4,000 metres up, I felt ice on my eyelashes. It was an exceptional day. I tried to rescue my scarf and more clothes from the back of the harness, but I was shaking too much with cold. When the views are so stunning, though, it's worth it."

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2 Paragliders fold up to fit in a rucksack  
3 Coming down to earth

