

10 Days, 34 Hours, 500 Km - Nigel Page

Staying with Steve Ham and Puri Almansa at Piedrahita is always fun. I probably fly there too much but I have a problem with UV and the service Steve and Puri provide enables me to fly without fear of having to spend long periods hitching or waiting in the sun.

Flypiedrahita's week runs from Sunday to Sunday but the late flight time to Madrid from Liverpool prompted me to travel on Saturday and stay overnight in Avila instead of using Steve and Puri's pick up service from Madrid airport. It's a little confusing getting from Madrid airport to the railway station on the tube but I enjoy the spectacular and relaxing train journey over the mountains to Avila.

Day 1 - 3 hrs 9 mins

Under a clear blue sky which was to remain so for most of the holiday I arrived in Piedrahita on the Sunday morning bus from Avila, left my stuff at the house and hitched up to the Peña Negra take off. Steve was doing the transfers from the airport so I would also have to hitch or walk back after landing. At slight risk of bombing out I took off a bit early to avoid having to make a windy take off on the first day. The flying was fairly straightforward but as I did not want to risk a landing away from the main road I stayed within gliding distance of Piedrahita and did some much needed thermalling practice. Eventually a particularly big thermal drifted me towards the southwest and I took a glide and an easy climb before landing in a very strong wind at El Barco. I decided to risk standing in the sun trying to hitch for 15 minutes and if that did not work I would hide in the shade, ring Steve and ask for a lift. Luckily I got a hitch in about ten minutes and arrived back at the house to find rest of the week's group were about to go up for an evening flight. I was a bit hot and tired so did not join them.

Day 2 - 1 hr

With everyone settled in Pedro the driver took us up the hill in the van. Not one of my better days! My radio played up. I didn't screw the top on my water bladder properly so it leaked out and I had to rush to the cafe at the take off and buy a bottle of water and sundry other things were going wrong with my kit. With a forecast of a NE wind and high thermal tops Steve had briefed us for a flight to Plasencia. This meant flying over the Tornevacas pass and along the "cherry tree" valley which has no landing for part of the way. The effect of the various problems I was having had stacked up in my mind and without radio I was just not comfortable so although I had plenty of height I decided to quit and landed just before El Barco. A short flight but nevertheless I enjoyed following the others in the van and helping Pedro to use the new "Live Tracking" system. Paul Russel has developed customised software for Flypiedrahita based on Livetrack24 with which each pilot carries a device which tracks him or her by GPS and sends the signal to a web site by GSM. Paul's software enables the location and height of each pilot in the group to be seen on a Google Earth web page which can be displayed in the retrieve vehicle and shows whether they are airborne or on foot. By making very efficient retrieves this system also enables Steve to be more flexible with his routes. Several of the group did personal bests including Gavin who went past Plasencia with Steve to over 110 km. Having seen the route from the ground I hope I might be able to find the bottle to give it a go next time it is viable.

Day 3 - 6 hrs 58 mins

The aim this day was to fly to the north west skirting around the Sierra de Béjar and Sierra de Tamames and then west, possibly to Ciudad Rodrigo and the border with Portugal. We

crossed the Corneja valley towards Puente Del Congosto on the river Tormes. I was fairly high at this point and had no difficulties but several of the others didn't make it to the next target of the town of Guijuelo. Those left plodded on and we were just northeast of Linares de Riofrio when it suddenly all seemed to get very hard. With just Steve, myself and Richard left flying we encountered a westerly headwind and I found myself getting very low over a lee slope in what was almost a shallow bowl. Not a good position to be in but it was producing some lift and I managed to scrape enough to drift back to a windward slope behind a village on the other side of the depression. This produced a slow but more confident thermal to get me back to a reasonable height. The headwind scuppered any prospect of further flight westward so we changed our plan to an attempt to fly back to Piedrahita and started to make our way back in the now lighter thermals. It was quite hard work and although Steve might have made it back alone I needed the support of both him and Richard to remain airborne. Several times I thought I was out of it but just managed to scrape into a thermal found by one of the others. Eventually back over the Corneja valley in the northwesterly wind, prompted by Steve, I was able to make some use of the small hills opposite the main Piedrahita ridge to make my way. Unfortunately Richard, who had flown very well indeed, didn't quite make it but still finished with a personal best and my gratitude for helping me make it back. It was quite late now and as I approached Piedrahita intending to land I started to go up without trying as restitution set in over the valley. I was quite tired but as staying up did not seem to require any effort I just pointed the thing at the village of Bonilla across the valley to the northeast and continued on. A few kilometers from Bonilla the lift dropped off so to avoid the risk of landing out I turned back for Piedrahita. Now very tired, lift was everywhere near Piedrahita and I could not get down without doing something drastic. I had heard of people blacking out whilst spiralling when tired so that was out and I just cruised about, waited for the lift to drop off, and tried to avoid liquid related thoughts. Eventually I landed at about 8.30 having flown about 114 km in almost 7 hours, my longest distance and duration.

#### Day 4 - 3 hrs 10 mins

With a forecast of some west wind we were to go for the classic run over the Villatoro pass to Avila. Getting over the pass is sometimes easy if you happen to blunder into a big thermal at the right moment. Otherwise it is more like some dimmed game of chess where the success of each move is determined by the throw of a badly weighted dice. The object is to arrive as high as possible over the ridge stretching back from the tiny "quarry spine" in front of the pass where the best thermals usually originate to get you over the pass. This day I had moved along the main ridge to the "corral spine" over which I tried to make a climb before crossing over Villafranca to the quarry spine. I got a bit of a climb, blew it and ended up lower than before, scratching around with Haakon, our Norwegian group member whilst two others who had arrived lower bombed at the foot of the spine. Eventually Haakon made off over Villafranca whilst I went more north towards a big ranch where I sometimes get a save. Haakon found a weak climb to which I diverted only to find the climb was drifting towards the "dead end valley" from which walk outs can be rather long. Sizing things up as I climbed I took a chance, left the thermal and headed for the quarry spine. Unfortunately as I approached the spine a strongish northwest headwind put me on the lee side and wrecked my glide angle. It was all a bit uncomfortable and the quarry was starting to look very big and close indeed. I was about to turn back and land at Villafranca when I was lucky enough to hit a strong thermal taking me high enough to cross the pass in a lifty glide. After that it was fairly straightforward to within a few kilometers of Avila where a strong northerly decided me to turn and fly back a bit to reduce the length of the retrieve. Steve had had a very windy landing a few kilometers beyond Muñogalindo and warned me on the radio to pick a big field with no obstructions. Two fairly profound dust devils popped off of my first choice so I dropped back to another field

and landed without incident with Haakon arriving shortly after. We were both quite glad to be on the ground.

#### Day 5 - 1 hr 13 mins

With a forecast of a fairly strong northwesterly wind up high we took off fairly early. As heating mixed the upper and lower air the strong wind "came down" and we landed with almost zero ground speed. Useful to have flown but a bit stressful.

#### Day 6 - 1 hr 58 mins

A moderate westerly wind but weaker thermals made going over the pass towards Avila somewhat more hazardous than it might have been, so from just before the pass we abandoned the attempt and tried to fly back to Piedrahita. I didn't make too good a job of it and landed only a short way back in a frustratingly familiar field but "other" Richard (there were two Richards in the group that week and they both flew very well!) got to a landing field on the edge of town.

#### And 1 hr 39 mins

Later in the afternoon the wind appeared to have dropped at take off and we had another attempt. A few of us got off in what turned out to be a relatively short lull and made for the pass. There was some cloud to give us clues which enabled me to find a lifty line across the pass although I should, perhaps, have taken the more obvious line under bigger clouds across the high ground. The weakening thermals and long glides got me to Muñugalindo, about 40 km.

#### Day 7 - 4 hrs 30 mins

After sorting out my UV protective gear I was a little late taking off. The rest of the group except for Bart, our representative from what he called "the States", had just taken a big thermal and drifted quite high over the plateau behind take off. In the following sink cycle I was very low on the "chalet spine" sinking like a brick and wondering if I was going to make the glide to the valley when Bart got a good thermal some distance ahead of me. I intercepted his thermal which turned out to be one of the best I can remember taking me solidly to about 2800 m with some bits at over 9 m/s. In light winds we flew to El Barco quite quickly and started to come back along the ridge. During this return leg I seemed to be having particular difficulty keeping up with Steve and I realised that sometime in the last few years I had got out of the habit of properly optimising my speed in glides. I gave myself a good talking to and concentrated on slowing in lift and speeding in sink after which things improved considerably. By taking the odd extra climb as well I ended up much higher than Steve by the time we got back to take off. We got a good climb off the "big spine" and continued down the ridge in the direction of the Villatoro pass but instead of crossing it we turned north, flew to Bonilla and back to Piedrahita. A westerly wind was developing and rather than use the main landing field which has rotor hazards Steve decided to land at the hang-glider field which, although a little way out of town, is much larger and more open. I decided to remain airborne for a while longer and continued cautiously, finding that as long as I could stay high the winds were fairly light. Concious of strong winds lower down I flew to the western end of the flat part of the Corneja valley. Flying further west was probably viable but would have increased the probability of a windy landing in hilly terrain. I landed back at the HG landing field having flown about 75 km which would just have to do.

#### Day 8 - 3 hrs 21 mins

Another Sunday and the airport run for Steve left myself and Haakon, both staying for two weeks, to fly independently. There was a local league competition running and after I took off I stayed in the local area for a while. This let the competition pass through allowing me to see what conditions were like as they moved off and also let the ground "cook" a while longer. The competition moved northwest along the ridge towards the Villatoro pass against the light northeast wind but I decided to go to El Barco again and see if I could fly back this time. Getting to El Barco was no real problem but coming back was a bit of a trial against the wind which seemed to be increasing. I made two attempts to cross the shallow pass between Piedrahita and El Barco at La Aldehuela but could not get high enough or far enough into wind. Eventually in the strong wind and lumpy conditions my nerve went and I flew back downwind to Santa Maria de los Caballeros for an easy landing and good hitching potential. A bunch of French pilots with a van were just picking up a pilot there and kindly took me back to Piedrahita. It had been a hard but interesting 39 km "back and forth" flight.

#### Day 9 - 1 hr 58 mins

Quite a lumpy flight to El Barco and on to the conical hill just beyond. I should have slipped over the edge to an easier landing further up the valley towards the Tornavcas pass but found myself making a very windy landing on a small plateau just above El Barco. All a bit too exciting.

#### And 25 mins

A short relaxing evening flight. No scary thermals or strong winds!

#### Day 10 - 5 hrs 1min

The heat low was now making things potentially stormy and with a westerly forecast Steve's brief was to make what distance we could before any big developments started. I was lucky to get a good climb just after take off and, unusually for me, managed to hang around without losing too much height whilst the others scrambled up. I moved on to the "big spine" to the east and when Steve joined me we set off quite quickly towards the "quarry spine" just before the pass. As I was right with Steve I thought I had better hang on behind him and just follow. I was in for a fairly wild ride! We found almost no lift on the way and over the spine we were well below the height I would have quit at had I been on my own. I just hung on in formation behind, and thankfully slightly above Steve, as rocks, power lines, trees and stuff passed rapidly underneath as we visited the potential thermal release spots. The last possible spot, a small field by the cemetery at Casas del Puerto, produced a low save. I've had low saves on my own but not with another pilot in the thermal and not drifting at the rate we were over trees and houses. For the most part in the early stages I was too scared to thermal properly and just followed Steve who calmly pulled away from me. Nevertheless I managed to climb out OK telling myself it really was safer than it felt.

Several of the group had got over the pass and although we could see big cumuli to the south the clouds over the Ambles valley remained OK. I flew on to Avila fairly easily and found myself at about 3600 m approaching the 3000 m limit airspace climbing without trying. I turned north as instructed and managed to get below 3000 m as I turned east again under the edge of the airspace. When I had been in this area before I had messed up after becoming nervous about flying over fairly extensive areas with no tarmac roads where my UV sensitivity could be a problem if I had to do a walk out. This time I felt a bit more relaxed and was more easily able to pick a fairly good route with potential thermal sources.

Pushing on I got a little low as I approached the gliding airfield of Fuentemilanos and had to glide to the south of it to avoid the possibility of landing in the middle of the runway. I began to realise that a northerly wind was setting in and my next climb drifted me even further to the south and rather off track. In bits and pieces of light thermal I staggered on to the village of Madrona where I had seen some sailplanes climbing and was joined by Steve. We found a light thermal in two separate cores spaced a little bit apart. I was getting tired and although we were both climbing at about the same rate I made the mistake of crossing to Steve's core and began to lose it. Pete who had been some way behind joined us a bit above me and climbed out with Steve with a fairly strong southerly drift over a scrubby tree covered hill. I was still over Madrona which was still producing fairly continuous light lift over a large area but did not seem likely to produce the strong core I felt I needed to make further progress in the northerly crosswind. After struggling for some time I landed there, a few kilometres short of Segovia but still a distance of 111 km with Steve and Pete a little further on. For the whole route there were big clouds with some anvils towards the south but it was OK on our track.

During the remaining four days of the holiday the weather deteriorated and we only had two short flights. In the first ten days I had flown 34 hours 37 minutes and over 500 km total distance. Steve's excellent briefings and coaching and the live tracking system undoubtedly helped but I am convinced that my ability to do so much this year was largely enabled by my switching from flying an EN C glider to flying the EN B Mentor 2 at the end of last year. As with many of the modern EN Bs the Mentor 2 is easy to launch, has a good performance and only needs a little active flying in fairly extreme air. My policy these days is that for maximum enjoyment I try and fly for as long a time as possible and see what distance I can make in that time. I may not make the speed and distance that might be achieved on a higher performance wing but I am definitely having much more fun.

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