

I had a great time in Piedrahita with Puri and Steve in May and somehow managed to fix another trip in August. This time things did not go quite so well. I had the runs towards the end of the first week and missed two of the best days. Early in the second week I was still rather weak but by carefully marshalling my energy I did manage to fly to Avila with Steve and experience blue convergence along the Adaja valley.

It was the last day and to my eye the weather did not look particularly promising with early cloud development and a forecast of storms. Although my kit was prepared for a long flight, mentally I was expecting a 'float around and fly down' before everything overcooked and went bang. We arrived at the usual Pena Negra take off to find the southerly wind coming over the back so we continued to a site at Puerto de Chia overlooking the village of San Martin on the southern side of the Sierra de Villafranca. Steve's brief was to get high and go over the back UK cross country style which would bring us into the Corneja valley from where we would make our way northwards along the Piedrahita/Salamanca road.

The Chia take off is quite entertaining and involves removing a section of fence, taking a good run through the gap and elegantly leaping over rocks, bushes and entangled paragliders. Thankfully I did not become one of the latter and was soon flying along the hillside picking up bits of thermal here and there. Steve was scratching about over the middle of the valley but Bill Sampson seemed to be slowly climbing below me nearby. I put myself over the top and was rewarded with a good climb, initially vertical and later drifting gently to the north. Approaching cloudbase I called to Steve that I was about to set off and started a glide towards the corral spine on the north side of the sierra which I could now see clearly. I did not feel particularly high over the plateau behind take off and found myself drifting to the right to give myself more ground clearance by keeping over the the valley leading down to Villafranca.

After a nice top up thermal I was soon looking ahead from above Villafranca. I had a choice of a small and declining cloud over the hill south of Bonilla on Steve's suggested route or a good looking one off track over Casas del Puerto where you would normally try and get height before crossing the pass en route to Avila. I went for Casas del Puerto and was soon at cloudbase heading west for Bonilla. A worryingly large bank of cloud was forming over the hills to the north of the Corneja valley and I contacted Steve who was now on his way with some of the others. He assured me that the cloud was a local convergence and safe so I pushed over Bonilla, which has a truly enormous church for such a small village, towards Becedillas on the north side of the valley. The others with Steve had begun to drop out and I spotted him somewhere between Mesegar and Malpartida heading approximately my way. The convergence cloud I had been concerned about now seemed overdeveloped and began to dissipate into a sort of layer, so as I pushed under it I made sure that I worked all the bits and pieces of lift I could to stay as high as possible.

As the others had now dropped out Steve moved under the remains of the convergence with me and we began to make our way westwards. Steve was now concerned about the cloud development further towards Salamanca and for the time being we pursued the alternate plan of flying around the perimeter of the Corneja valley and back to Piedrahita. We got lower and lower until we reached El Miron where some vultures guided us into a good climb. Near cloudbase Steve decided that things were now quieter in the Salamanca direction and we set off to the north.

My memory of the next bit is not so clear. Let's just say that (a) I was a bit low and (b) the area along the Piedrahita/Salamanca road between Horcajo and Anaya de Alba is a 'ganadera' where bulls are bred for the ring to have 'casta' or 'fighting spirit'. Large areas of pollarded oak give shade for the bulls and inevitably it was over the middle of

one of these, some distance from the main road, that the cloud looked best. Scrutinising the fields along the main road very carefully I decided that there were safe fields which had been fenced off and cropped for hay. I flew towards the cloud with my brain continuously clocking the position of the safe fields, the position of the cloud, my height and the suspicious absence of black dots in the areas between the trees. Now I am not paranoid (I tell myself that every morning) and I did not actually see any bulls, but I know that they were there, hiding under the trees, sharpening their horns and stamping their feet in anticipation. Steve was soon climbing under the best looking bit of the cloud but rather than going all or nothing for the thermal I used small bits of lift on the way to maintain enough height to remain in safe gliding distance of the cropped fields and tried to think calm thoughts.

As I hit the thermal a profound feeling of relief swept over me and as the tension fell off I realised I was feeling a bit tired. In recent times I had drunk only water whilst flying but I had begun to suspect that my limit for cross country flying was about four hours. On this day I had decided to experiment and had made up two litres of full strength Isostar. Now, instead of the usual sip, I took a good long swig from my drinking tube. The effect was quite remarkable and by the time we reached the top of the thermal my 'casta' was duly restored and I was ready for the next bit.

The wind was now more westerly and we were clear of the ganadera looking across a blue hole at a sort of street over the river Tormes near Alba. We had been maintaining height and creeping northwards towards Alba but I was now starting to sink out and wondering what Steve had in mind. I told him of my concern and received an instruction to set off for the cloud. As usual I was lower than Steve who hit a thermal over the middle of the river valley whilst I encountered only bits and pieces. However, when I turned south to go back under where Steve was climbing he told me to keep heading north. I was very low by this time but soon realised why Steve had said to do this. Moving north put me on the opposite side of the hill to the river where rocky outcrops on rising ground broke away from open fields in full sun. This is as good as it gets for a save and I was soon climbing away admiring the view of Alba. Like most of the climbs that day it was still fairly hard work but as we neared cloudbase we could see Salamanca about fifteen kilometres away.

Steve suggested that instead of gliding to Salamanca and landing we should try and get back to Piedrahita with a promise that this time we would get high before we reached the ganadera. The westerly wind was quite strong and his plan was to move into wind southwest along the Tormes river and then run downwind across to the Salamanca/Piedrahita road. Steve pushed quickly along but I took my time and made sure that I left the upwind edge of the cloud at base. For once my ploy worked and it took a great effort to suppress a feeling of smugness derived from seeing Steve nearly bomb out in the valley. Let's face it, I was not doing so well myself, I just had more height to start with. We scratched along slowly beginning to get better climbs and eventually Steve climbed past me. Well, it was nice while it lasted.

I was not going to get to cloudbase on this climb but the air seemed quite buoyant and I found I could make my way upwind without losing much height. From where we were over the river somewhere around Ejeme or Galisancho a sort of finger of cloud pointed towards the village of Anaya de Alba on the main road which had a small cloud over it. In the otherwise blue sky it would have to do and leaving Steve still climbing behind me I made my way along the finger maintaining as best as I could before gliding for the cloud at Anaya. It seemed a long, quiet glide and I was quite low again but as I neared the village I began to hit bits and pieces of lift and was soon joined by Steve in the promised climb before the ganadera. The strengthening westerly wind was taking me too far from the main road and I had to abandon the climb well before cloudbase whilst Steve, as usual, somehow continued to gain height. I made for

Horcajo where I had landed the previous day taking what bits of thermal I could on the way. Steve suggested that I glide for a landing on the south side of the village as he attempted to get a climb off a hill to the west. The cheek of it! I was not down yet! The village was on a hillside facing the full evening sun as well as the westerly wind and as I crossed it I began to get some nice bleeps from my vario. The climb was smooth but with considerable drift and I had to keep moving upwind to stay in. Fortunately there were villages close downwind making a bomb out at that stage no problem so I kept working what I could.

When the climb finished I set off again. Arriving over Arevalillo I struggled with the little lift I could find but decided that rather than squeeze out the last kilometre or so I would land by the road junction for an easy retrieve with Steve landing a few kilometres further towards Piedrahita.

At over five and a half hours this was the longest time I have spent away from the hill and one of my most enjoyable, if hardest, flights. Flying with Steve is great fun and a real education. I know I would not have got so far that day without his help. The difficulty was knowing when to just follow him and when to take my own initiative. It is no use just flying into the ground gliding after someone who has started with a lot more height nor in sinking out in a thermal which is giving no climb, even though the person you are flying with is still be climbing above you. Over a distance of eighty two kilometres only three of the climbs had been 'easy' thermals and the rest were hard work and 'bitty', especially those over the Tormes valley. I am sure the Isostar was the only thing that got me through. I will just have to use the stuff all the time and deal with the way it blackens my drinking system and the strange things it makes grow inside.

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