

We were up the hill by about 1130 having an official dither. Steve reckoned it was going to be a good day but for a brief spell it seemed as if the light westerly might get too strong. Taking off at 1230 we began working the easterly leesides of the spines which were producing bitty cores of different strengths. It was a matter of getting stuck in, keeping at it and staying sharp. To my shame, one of my attempts at joining Graham in a thermal resulted in us both losing it. Some of the cores were really powerful enabling Steve and I to get some height over the ridge and with some of the others about level with the top we made our way towards the corral. With our extra height Steve thought we might be able to connect with some convergence and I dutifully followed him over the back towards the clouds I assumed he was talking about. The alleged convergence soon fell apart and we fled back to the edge where I hung around trying to regain some of the lost height as Steve made his way across to the centre of the valley near the quarry spine.

Several people were still at ridge height as I set off to try and join Steve. I had noticed that he had not lost much height in his glide to the valley and remembered just in time to follow the ridge line of the corral spur. This kept me in almost continuous light lift which enhanced my glide and led me into a small thermal right on the 'nose' of the spine, just what I needed to easily join Steve near the quarry ridge. Cloud was forming towards the head of the pass and we worked bits and pieces while Steve tried to help the others lower down. Unfortunately only Steve and I were able to slip over the pass to the waiting cloud street which stretched away to Avila and beyond. As we climbed under the end of the street Steve calmly co-ordinated Jerry's pick up of the others who had landed while my brain was fully occupied staying in the thermal.

For the next hour or so it was more or less continuous speed bar under the cloud street with the occasional climb for me to catch Steve up. Although my new Whisper was like a rocket ship after my old Omega 3, Steve's micro-lined Boomerang and streamlined pod harness had a definite edge. To keep up with Steve I would take one or two more 360's of climb after he led off to get some extra height. The idea was that this would put me about level with him at the start of the next climb and it worked quite well apart from once when I ended up in cloud. This was not a big problem as the inversion prevented the cloud from becoming too big and by staying cool and keeping on the compass heading I soon came out just above and behind Steve. The worst problem was my UV protective visor icing up!

Approaching Avila the street started to break up and the sky looked better to the north. We took a glide across the reservoir (not shown on Steve's flying maps!) on the Rio Adaja without my customary extra height. Getting a bit low in some sink I booted on the speedbar and made for the rising ground on the east shore where I found some gentle lift and was able to sneak about until I found a nice steady climb. Steve was still much higher and a little behind me so I concentrated on the thermal until I neared cloudbase when I looked for Steve who I guessed would be waiting for me. He was gone! I searched the nearby sky for a while before thinking to look downwards where, to my amazement, I found Steve almost on the ground a little way in front of me scratching for dear life. How he managed to get from above and behind me to below and in front of me without connecting with the perfectly good thermal I was marking eludes me still!

A little unnerved by this I looked around and took stock. By British standards the area is almost a desert and staying reasonably close to civilisation seemed a good idea. If Steve was going to bomb out I would not go north but would continue as far as I could along the main road towards Segovia despite the sky looking poorer in that direction.

Making my way to the next cloud I looked back from time to time but, after spotting him in a climb, I was eventually unable to see Steve any more. I continued onwards but after another cloud or so and I was again faced with the problem of the best looking sky lying across relatively bleak landscape to the north. Eventually spotting a village in that direction I decided to glide for a nearby cloud so that if I bombed out I could land near the village. Unfortunately these sort of dithering compromises seldom pay off and I was soon on the ground next to the village of Monterubio.

I had flown 92km in about four hours and Steve inevitably flew on to nearly 200 km, just short of his personal best (he should have come to my thermal by the reservoir!). If I had gone back for him he would probably have coaxed me quite a lot further but apart from that my reluctance to cross the relatively unpopulated areas was probably wise. When I landed the ground was definitely 'Scorchio' and a big walk out could have been quite hazardous with my skin problem. I have never flown with a GPS but this could be the trigger for me to buy one in order to keep tabs on nearest villages at all stages of a flight. Nevertheless it had been an exceptional day. Anyone who had been able to reach the cloud street would probably have made Avila. The hard part was getting over the pass and I had plenty of help there!

The next day looked rather unstable and we made an early launch from which I had a fifteen minute sleigh ride to the bottom, although two people did soar. Later we tried again and after sinking quite a long way down the hillside I managed to get a climb off the end of one of the spurs and made towards the rather dark cloudbase. I noted that Steve had wisely broken off his climb fairly early so I headed towards the northern edge of the cloud. This was a big cloud and it took sometime to reach clear air climbing all the way feeling a bit concerned about being sucked in. I was grateful to reach the edge without incident. I was thinking that the relatively clear skies to the north were preferable to the heavy clouds over the hills when Steve announced that we should try and fly as far as we could along the Salamanca road and back again.

As I was already on my way with loads of height this suited me fine and I easily crossed the Corneja valley via a couple of clouds to the hills on the other side. The area looked overdeveloped with holes appearing in the cloud shadow and although there were areas of light lift there was nothing I could climb on. I could have glided on but was fairly sure that I would have ended up on the ground so I turned back towards the Corneja valley which was still in sun. Steve and two others passed overhead going the other way, but my aim was to either get height or get back. I got a nice climb over the middle of the valley and watched as Neil desperately scratched around before bombing out below me. The two who had passed me called that they had landed which did not particularly surprise me in those conditions, and shortly after so did Steve which did.

The overdevelopment which had put the three down cleared quite quickly and the sky to the north looked quite inviting. I had plenty of height so I gave it another go skirting along the western edges of the clouds which were over sunlit ground. At about Horcajo a very tempting street led off to the north-east but again I was nervous about flying over unknown territory particularly as my radio had no external microphone system and I would not be able to let people know where I was going. I did not fancy going further towards Salamanca although, in retrospect, perhaps I should have tried. Instead I flew back to the Corneja valley again. There was still plenty of daylight left and the sky looked good so I had another go towards Salamanca on the grounds that things might have become better in that direction. I flew northwards again to Horcajo to find conditions were similar to the first time and began to realise that some of the radio calls were directed specifically at me and not the other Nigel in the group. Having seen me fly back towards Piedrahita the others had assumed I had landed somewhere in the north of the Corneja valley. They were getting very worried so I tried

answering by keying the PTT of my radio in my breast pocket to acknowledge their calls. After further confusion I shouted at the radio that I was still airborne and would try to get back to Piedrahita which they apparently heard OK despite the difficult conditions.

The sky had become a little messy but after an intermediate cloud I made a glide towards Santa Maria del Berrocal at the north edge of the Corneja valley where I got a climb for a final glide to the official Piedrahita landing field near the football pitch. There was a fairly big cloud over Pena Negra. I did not intend to get right underneath it but as I flew towards Piedrahita I could not help noticing that I was not going down much. More or less over the landing field I tried a few 360's but my rate of descent was still insignificant. At this stage I began to realise just how powerful this cloud was and boldly decided to run away towards the clear sky to the north-east. This was the first time I have had to run away from a cloud and, apart from basic fear, the thing that struck me most was how far I had to fly on full speed bar and big ears before I started to descend at a useful rate. A call from Steve informed me that it was now raining in Piedrahita and that I should expect a gust front. Just what I needed to cheer me up! By Mesegar, about 5km away, I had just started to come down a bit but I decided to take no chances and continued another 6km to Bonilla before landing. As things were a bit unpredictable I chose the biggest field I could find next to one with some sheep who, in the circumstances, I felt could not possibly object. However I had not taken account of their dog which was actually bigger than the sheep it was protecting from marauding paraglider pilots (and bigger than me for that matter!). Thankfully it must have been well fed and limited its tactics to barking and running up and down allowing me to escape to the safety of Jerry's van before the rain came. I had been airborne about three and a half hours and flown nearly 100km including all the to-ing, fro-ing and flee-ing.

A while later back at the ranch I was in the shower with thunder rumbling and lights flickering trying unsuccessfully to remember exactly what the cloud over the Pena Negra had looked like. There had been an anvil a long way off to the north-east as I fled Piedrahita but to the best of my knowledge the Pena Negra cloud had just looked a bit big and black. It just shows how careful you have to be!

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