

PARAGLIDING IN THE WILDERNESS

Rob Holmes

MY WIFE KATH GOES BACK TO SOUTH AFRICA TO VISIT FAMILY IN CAPE TOWN EVER FEW YEARS – I HAVE ALWAYS DECLINED TO JOIN HER BECAUSE OF THE EXPENSE AND BECAUSE I DO NOT HAVE ANY FAMILY LEFT THERE. HOWEVER, THIS TIME IT WAS DIFFERENT – I HAD STARTED PARAGLIDING SINCE HER LAST VISIT AND NOW I NEVER MISS THE CHANCE OF A TRIP ANYWHERE BECAUSE TO ME, FLYING AT NEW SITES IS JUST SOMETHING ELSE.

Before we left, I ordered a copy of Greg Hammerton's Fresh Air Site Guide that has everything you would need to know about paragliding or hang gliding in South Africa. It covers just about every site across the country; every site is given a skill rating with details of how to get there, site risks, launch directions, best wind conditions and so on.

Since taking up paragliding I had often dreamed of flying off mountain sites around Cape Town where I was brought up – flying in some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. Having spent many years there I remembered that gale force south-easterlies that blow right through summer. After about 35 years absence – weatherwise, nothing had changed much.

Family matters kept us in Cape Town for the first week while I fretted and watched the weather forecast predicting gale force

south-easterlies day after day. Soon after arriving, I contacted a few of the flying schools who do tourist tours around the Western Cape. Luckily one group, Barry Pederson's 'Birdman' School, was heading up country to Porterville with a bunch of PG tourists.

Porterville has a reputation as one of South Africa's best inland thermalling sites. I arranged to meet the group on the Sunday morning at the top of Dasklip Pass near Porterville. An hour-and-a-half drive at the speed limit of 120km/h took me up the freeway to Picketburg to the north, then a right turn and a 20-minute drive across the plain toward the range that towers over Porterville. Following instructions in the guide book, I made my way along dirt roads and eventually up a little winding road that switches backwards and forwards as it climbs higher and higher to the launch at about 1500ft

above the plain. Just near the summit of the pass there is a metal hang glider ramp below the road – the paragliders take a short hike up above the road to where sardine nets have been spread out over the low bushland to make enough room for a several pilots to organise their gear.

Barry explained how Porterville is a 'one-launch' flying site: As the sun moves east to west over the range, the west facing slopes begin to give off thermals around mid-day and these can take you for long distances along the north-south direction of the escarpment. The one-launch business being due to the fact that as the plain below begins to warm, it draws in the seabreeze from the south – the engine driving Cape Town's south-easter – which make launches more and more difficult as the day wears on.

On the night before heading up to Porterville, I was introduced to an experienced hangie who warned that it was not safe to hug the escarpment when launching off Dasklip. Unfortunately, I took his advice too seriously and flew out away from the range and out of the thermals. All I got out of my trip to Porterville was a 15-minute flight! Others in Barry's tour group got in two and three hour flights along the range. For the serious cross-country aficionados, good heights and big distances are possible. By the time the Birdman recovery bus had got me back up to the launch, conditions were now too blustery for a safe launch. As an intermediate, I don't take many chances – so that was it for the day. However, it was well worth seeing the site and even worth the sled ride to the bottom. I will know what to do next time I am there!

Porterville itself is a pretty little agricultural town with B&B accommodations available for pilots spending the weekend out there. If you go with Barry, he has access to a cabin over the other side of the pass



Dasklip Pass

– Hammerton says there is also camping over the top of the pass as well.

Week two saw Kath and I heading up the south-east coast to Wilderness – this being the name of a small coastal town and also the general name applied to the stretch of coastline between the town of Wilderness and Knysna.

At this point I have to say that the roads in South Africa (at least where I travelled) are much better than anything I have seen in Australia. While travelling at 120km/h we were occasionally overtaken by cars that made it look as if we were standing still. The exchange rate reduces holiday expenses to a ridiculous level where food and accommodation are extremely cheap for the Aussie traveller. We had really cheap luxury accommodation in B&Bs wherever we went – but there are much cheaper options for the die-hard PG pilot. Even better, excellent wines and beers are nothing short of dirt cheap.

Having got that out of the way, along the Wilderness coastline are multiple flying sites on coastal cliffs and sand dunes; inland hills just a few kilometres from the coast have excellent thermic conditions.

On our first night we stopped at Dana Bay, just outside of Mossel Bay, which was good luck because the accommodation in Dana was good and the scenery is great. I insisted on going into Dana because Hammerton lists a launch for this little coastal settlement hanging onto a very steep slope overlooking the ocean.

Unfortunately, all possible launch sites seem to be been built over by urban development in this little patch of paradise. We had a great fish dinner in Mossel Bay that night and next day we moved on to the town of Wilderness which has scenery to take your breath away. Map-of-Africa is the local launch – it is a huge grassy slope at about 400ft amsl overlooking the town.

The downside about Wilderness is the four-lane freeway, built in the days before majority government, cutting right through the centre of this most incredibly beautiful little town and coastal scenery. I found it a bit nervy at times to ridge soar only a few hundred feet over a freeway with semi-trailers, coaches and cars speeding back and forth over four lanes. Any need for a reserve in the event of a collision and you would end up splattered on the bitumen.

While we booked into our B&B and explored the town, I kept an eye on the launch overlooking the town, looking out for any signs of paragliders being laid out. By 11am I could see some activity and the first paraglider in the air – Kath and I then



Cape Hangklip False Bay



Dana Bay

headed straight up to the launch. The road up to launch makes its way through the most incredibly lush vegetation typical of this part of the world and a sign of the mild climate and buckets of rain this place must get – a huge change from the dry sclerophyll vegetation dominating southern Australia which I am now used to.

The launch was packed by the time we got there, mostly with German tourists – either pilots on holiday or students getting their flying tickets for next to nothing. It seems that South Africa is the premier destination for German paraglider pilots whose Euro currency exceeds the Australian/SA exchange rate of 7:1 by a factor of two!



Map-of-Africa launch



Town of Wilderness

A measure of South Africa's popularity in Germany is that Hammerton has even published his book in German.

I launched into a gentle five-knot breeze with a German yelling something behind me as I galloped down the slope trying vainly to get lift. I found out later that it was, "Kravatte!" (*Cravat*) – something I soon discovered for myself. Being a bit nervous on a new launch only makes things worse. As I steadied my wing overhead, I did not look up to check – it felt good, so I just took off at a run. Every time I lifted off I was pulled to my right and then found myself down and running again. Soon I ran out of runway with a drop and bushes ahead. Then a bit of lift gave me the chance to look up: a small cravat on the right!

Scheitserhausen! Bushes coming up – good job I opted for flying boots today

– cleared the bushes while tugging at the outer As – freeway underneath, then houses – might make it to the beach – still leaning to the left and tugging on the outer As! At that point the right hand side popped open and I was borne up into the lift and surrounded by up to 16 Germans paragliders – on quite a small length of ridge.

After an hour of continuous head turning to find out where the next glider was coming from, I opted to drop out on the beach just a short walk from our B&B. Not being a competition pilot – I have never shared the air in such close quarters with

so many other pilots before – and a lot of them either restricted or students!

A relaxing lunch followed while we watching the swirling mass of gliders over Map-of-Africa. After lunch Kath took me back up to launch, this time for a more dignified take-off and another hour of head swivelling and again dropping in on the beach for afternoon tea at the B&B. As it so happened, the wind direction was SE which provides for a rather small length of ridge over the launch. If we had had more south in the breeze, this would have added a kilometre or so of flyable ridge to the east, overlooking the town and beach. Anyway, I was not complaining about a gentle seabreeze for hour after hour, all day, everyday.

Next on to Sedgefield about 70km further east along the coast. Just before Sedgefield there is Swartvlei beach with a launch at 1000m (according to Hammerton) on Gericke's, overlooking the ocean. Gericke's is a private property where a site fee is payable at a restaurant next to the gate. This is an amazing launch site at huge height with near-vertical cliffs dropping to the ocean below. Once again, incredible ocean scenery and once again, huge numbers of German pilots, but lots of ridge space. No more than about five or six knots on launch, with rock-steady lift up the cliff faces.

I spent about three hours repeating the process of getting enormous height a long way out over the ocean, circling down to a few hundred feet and cutting back over the beach carpark and then scratching along the cliff face to gain height again. Because of the height, space and steady breeze this is a great place for freestyle aficionados to hone their skills over the ocean. On landing I was surprised to find that the breeze was



Wilderness – as seen from our lunch table



Traffic at Map-of-Africa

only a few knots at beach level. Every day that week was the same: a gentle seabreeze coming in at about 11am which died off and turned easterly towards sunset. I like to think that it is always like that.

Sedgeview is a huge grassy launch on a hill overlooking the town of Sedgefield where we stayed with friends. Easy top-landing for novice pilots, so no retrievals are needed. Again, hours and hours of ridge soaring with good thermic activity to huge heights. A couple of hangies were flying off the ridge and disappeared to enormous height – coming back for a top-landing at sunset.

For the week we were on the Wilderness coasts, the SE seabreezes determined which sites were flyable. For southerlies or south-westerlies there were plenty of other choices which make this place a flying paradise. I would have loved to have had another week to go to Port Elizabeth, exploring all the sites along the way.

An ideal paragliding holiday at this time of year would be to fly into George (inland of Wilderness) and return to Johannesburg for the home flight via Port Elizabeth.

As for Cape Town, I really wanted to fly there, but I believe the best time would be around spring and autumn. There were a few days in Cape Town when people were flying the Table Mountain 'wind shadow'. The Cape Town west coast is shadowed from the south-easter by mountain ranges; within the wind shadow there is good thermal lift off the slopes, but you need to know where steady air and turbulence meet – you can see the line out to sea where the glassy water in the wind shadow meets a line of whitecaps where the south-easter plunges to sea level. This can be risky flying and should be done under the supervision of an advanced pilot who knows the local conditions. There are a number of flying schools around Cape Town who offer this service.

Tipping Advice

You tip everywhere you go, especially in restaurants where the staff do not get wages – they only get tips and are paid on a percentage of orders taken. On this basis, the service in restaurants in South Africa is the best I have ever seen. Therefore, if you don't want to look like a Scrooge, tip at 10% of the bill. Petrol station attendants only take cash (no debit cards at petrol stations) and are poorly paid. They do a good driveway service; so always give these guys the loose change that they bring back. You will be pestered for tips at every parking lot or spot – just a few Rand makes these guys happy and provides insurance that your car will



View from Gerrikes launch



Wilderness

not get broken into or vandalised (it's protection money!). As for the beggars at traffic lights – do what you think is best.

The questions I got after returning were mostly about personal security. There are a lot of bad stories about South Africa. You just have to show a little common sense and not place yourself in risky situations. At no time did Kath or I ever find ourselves in an

uncomfortable situation. When in South Africa, I was asked about some of the violence in WA – one death per month on average caused by people getting hit in the head due to silly booze-fuelled confrontations or just plain mindless agro against innocents. In fact, just how dangerous is Perth if you want to go out late at night?

