

# FLYING ELSEWHERE

The BGA Safety Team outlines some considerations before flying from another site in the UK and overseas

As the days shorten, leaves fall, and *Strictly Come Dancing* returns for its 22nd series, many UK glider pilots dream of flying elsewhere. This could be an expedition to a ridge or wave site within the British Isles, a spring expedition to the Alps or Pyrenees, or exchanging the British winter for the thermals of Australia or South Africa. For a few this will be a regular migration to familiar sites, but for many it is a rare chance for some exotic and exciting flying.

Flying elsewhere may be part of a club expedition, a solo indulgence, a celebratory treat as part of a family holiday, or even an extension to a business trip. It will almost certainly involve a location, frame of mind, procedures, objectives and challenges that differ from those at the pilot's home club – and usually that will have been part of the motivation. Unfortunately, these differences, and the stresses that go with them, introduce hazards, described here, that have caught out numerous pilots over the years.

While we probably hear of just a fraction of overseas gliding accidents, a fifteenth of all fatalities recorded in our accident database involved UK pilots flying abroad; and it was striking when preparing this article how many of the BGA Safety Team had lost a friend or witnessed a fatal accident flying overseas. Too many pilots, some with thousands of hours, have lost their lives flying



unfamiliar aircraft in difficult or unfamiliar conditions.

## AIRCRAFT

On a UK expedition you may have taken your own glider; otherwise, unless you're one of the many pilots to trailer your glider to Spain or the south of France, it's likely you'll be flying an unfamiliar aircraft, with different handling, cockpit layout and instruments. With a new glider back home, you'd probably take a few gentle flights to gain familiarity; on holiday, costs and time pressures may encourage shortcuts to more ambitious flying.

## AIRFIELD OPERATIONS

You may be used to a club where flying is supervised by an attentive instructor, and ground crew check before flight that your glider is correctly rigged and your canopy and brakes are locked. Operations elsewhere may leave these responsibilities to you as a

licensed pilot.

Unlike most UK gliding sites, overseas gliding fields may be shared with powered aircraft and even airliners. The launch method may not be one that you're used to, and ground and launch operations could also be quite different. Lack of familiarity can lead to delays which, together with the novelty itself, can cause stress and distraction.

Mountain sites can be small, with cramped circuits and narrow landing areas that get busy when conditions change.

Operations overseas commonly make routine use of radio, and this will often be in the local language. The vocabulary may be modest, but it still needs to be learned.

## SOARING ENVIRONMENT

Hitting ridges and flying into mountains feature prominently amongst reports of accidents abroad. Ridge and mountain flying requires techniques [1] that cannot safely be self-taught, as well as specific knowledge of the local geography, including escape routes and minimum heights in particular areas. Ground clearance can be difficult to judge if the only reference is nearby vegetation, and even harder when flying over bare rock or snow; and maintaining attitude is harder when the scenery interrupts the horizon.

Flat regions offer their own challenges, especially if thermal strength is the attraction. Soaring altitudes in Australia and South Africa may be much higher than at home, and cross-country distances correspondingly greater. With larger fields or featureless terrain, distances can be harder to judge.

Outlanding options can be extremely limited and far between. Ridge sites are often surrounded by tiny fields, and in mountainous regions the few vaguely level areas are often cultivated with vines and other fruit. In other regions, the ground may be rough or strewn with boulders. Often the only feasible options are a few fields and airfields that pilots must study beforehand. Attempts to glide beyond unlandable ground have caused a number of accidents. Settlements can be far apart, so



Lasham expedition, Sisteron 2024

help can take a long time to come.

## CLIMATE AND WEATHER

Over much of the UK, the climate is mild and moderate; conditions in popular soaring destinations tend to be more extreme. Ridge and mountain sites may have stronger winds, rotor, turbulence, squalls, thunderstorms and downdraughts, as well as orographic features that appear and vanish with no notice. Strong thermals in flatlands may reach great heights and be powerful enough for pilots to lose control. Handling and navigation can be challenging, and routes need to be planned with possible sink, cloud and squalls in mind.

Rotor and turbulence can make the launch and the return to the airfield difficult, stressful and tiring. Strong winds may change suddenly in strength and direction. Heavy rain is a hazard in the air, and wind and hail can damage gliders on the ground.

## REGULATIONS AND AIRSPACE

Airspace types and allocations can be quite different abroad, with restrictions where you might not expect them, including around nature reserves and in military exercise areas, and starting only a modest height above ground in mountainous areas. Compliance is expected, and ignorance of the law is no excuse. Radio contact with air traffic units may be more routinely required, and can be tiring if you're not used to it, especially in a different language.

## PHYSIOLOGY

Expedition climates and flying conditions can test the human body. Clear summer skies bring the risks of sunburn, sunstroke and dehydration [2]; at altitude, however, it can be extremely cold, and hypoxia is a further threat. Long flights can be tiring, and travel to your holiday can cause fatigue and jet-lag.

## PSYCHOLOGY

Flying from a different site can provide many sources of distraction. Dealing with a different aircraft, environment, climate and language can interrupt our usual routines; and different operational procedures may not provide customary cues. Domestic arrangements concerning travel and family activities may be a worry. Excitement, nervousness, and simply being on holiday can affect the way we think.

There can also be pressure to fly when there is limited time available, and a desire to get good value or satisfy ambitions beyond what is prudent. Overconfident pilots may succumb to temptation, others might be

persuaded to try more than they think wise or find comfortable.

## BEFORE YOU GO

There's lots that you can prepare in advance of your expedition. Study the flight manual for the glider you'll be flying, and learn how to use the instruments fitted. Read the airfield operations manual and any other advice about local conditions. Buy aeronautical charts and sort out radio frequencies, including those for air traffic units and airfields where you might have to land, especially where field landings might not be an option. If taking your own glider, upload airspace and turning point files and the radio frequencies. Prepare your glider, including batteries, canopy and airframe covers and stake-out gear. Overhaul your trailer and check local and en-route traffic regulations.

Learn any radio phraseology you'll need in the local language. Study the regulations and air law for the country you'll be visiting, and check that your licences, medical and insurance are all valid and appropriate.

Make sure you have suitable clothing for the likely flying conditions, including sunhat, sunglasses and sunblock, and for survival while awaiting a retrieve after landing out. Consider buying a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) – noting that airlines may restrict the type or size of batteries they contain.


Do your best to be fully current at your home site and get advice from anyone with experience of the flying that you'll be doing. Read about the area, conditions and soaring techniques beforehand, and think about the hazards you're likely to meet, including those described above. Prepare mentally for the costs involved, which will be substantial.

## ON EXPEDITION

Give yourself time to settle in and allow for snags and delays. A couple of days' local sight-seeing can work wonders. Only fly when you're fit to do so [3]. Be careful when rigging, and check connections thoroughly.

Enjoy treating everything as a learning experience. Pay for professional local instruction or join a club-led expedition with experienced coaches who can provide supervision and a stepped approach to risk exposure as you gain experience.

Fly conservatively, keep a critical eye on the weather, and monitor the terrain beneath to ensure you always have landing options.

Finally, enjoy yourself – that's why you're there! – and send us a postcard. 

**Tim Freearge and the BGA safety team**

■ The BGA's Managing Flying Risk [1] contains advice about ridge and mountain flying with links to many useful articles. The SSSA's briefing notes [2] describe how to deal with many of the hazards in hot climates.

[1] BGA, Managing Flying Risk – hill, ridge & mountain soaring

<https://tinyurl.com/flyright2438>

[2] SSSA, Briefing notes for pilots gliding in South Africa during the summer season (2018)

<https://tinyurl.com/flyright2439>

[3] BGA, I'M SAFE checklist

<https://tinyurl.com/flyright2440>

## PREVIOUS 'FLY RIGHT' ARTICLES

- The perils of distraction (Apr/May 19)
- Keeping safe in thermals (June/July 19)
- Why it is good to think ahead (Aug/Sept 19)
- The effects of wind gradient (Oct/Nov 19)
- A fun but safe introduction (Dec 19/Jan 20)
- Stop the drop (Feb/Mar 20)
- Avoiding upset (Apr/May 20)
- Backroom boys (June/July 20)
- Cockpit muddle (Aug/Sept 20)
- Safe rotation (Oct/Nov 20)
- Cockpit remedies (Dec 20/Jan 21)
- COVID currency (Feb/Mar 21)
- Eroded margins (Apr/May 21)
- A good lookout (June/July 21)
- Trouble with turbos (Aug/Sept 21)
- 'Hopefully' is not an option (Oct/Nov 21)
- Act when the launch fails (Dec 21/Jan 22)
- Time to solve a knotty problem (Feb/Mar 22)
- RTFM: Read the flight manual (Apr/May 22)
- Startling events (June/July 22)
- Collision risks (Aug/Sept 22)
- Winter hazards (Oct/Nov 22)
- Swiss cheese (Dec 22/Jan 23)
- An expensive mistake (Feb/Mar 23)
- What's changed? (Apr/May 23)
- Aerotow eventualities (June/July 23)
- Problems with probabilities (Aug/Sept 23)
- Winch nuances (Oct/Nov 23)
- Heart troubles (Dec 23/Jan 24)
- Inadvisable turn (Feb/March 24)
- Partial failures (Apr/May 24)
- Safe separation (June/July 24)
- Command and control (Aug/Sept 24)