

PUSHING HARD IN THE ALPS

A POSTCARD FROM THE ALPS

By Gavin McClurg
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Since my paragliding obsession began in 2006 the Alps just get better and better and better. I go over every chance I get. Four times last year. Three the year before. The same the year before that. I've lost count. It's always a supreme chase. There's green grass and trees everywhere for a reason and being at the right place at the right time can be a very tough game. Luckily I've got a trick up my sleeve- his name is Bruce. That he's an Aussie is particularly amusing. He handily destroyed the Chocolate Club on X-Contest last season (for 100K+ flights and is murdering it again this year), racking up over 500 hours in the air before a pretty scary crash in the Sass Fee Valley near Zermatt that he walked away from, but not totally unscathed. He's got the addiction probably worse than I do but he's also got a mind for detail which I definitely don't. I'm not aware of anyone who follows the weather more closely so when I head to Europe I just go where he says to go and it simply works out.

My summer is stacked with paragliding plans which I'm trying to orient around training for next year's Red Bull X-Alps. I want to spend as much time as possible on the X-Alps route between Salzburg and Monaco pushing deep lines and hopping over cols and summits that demand some pretty attentive flying. Typically Bruce and I attempt FAI and Flat Triangles on proven routes that can easily be found on the X-Contest database and I'm an admitted kilometer chaser, but my mission this spring was to fly creative lines that would connect valley systems that pilots like Chrigel have mastered. And as Bruce will be one of my supporters next year, we also wanted to fly a lot of areas we are not yet familiar with. We foreigners are handicapped big time with the lack of local knowledge. For the Euros the Alps is their back yard and while I believe firmly that flying the Intermountain West is a lot more committing and a great training ground, the Alps reign supreme in its complexity.



The Tour Begins up high in Fanas



Getting into the groove in Bellazona on the Niviuk Peak 3

Each valley has its own unique characteristics and challenges, and they are all potentially affected by things happening north south east and west of where you might be and cannot see and feel.

I had three weeks before a planned film-ing/flying expedition to Iran this May to have another go at spring in the Alps. I got an email from Bruce on April 30th that said, "it's time for us to get to Fanas". I was on a plane the next day (flying standby on United makes travel across the pond about as hard a choice as going to the grocery store).

Job one was to retrieve the Niviuk Mobile in Annecy then drive around Geneva and Zurich to meet Bruce in the tiny alpine town of Fanas above Chur, a place I'd always wanted to fly. Huge triangles are done out of Fanas and our first good day looked like a pretty decent shot at something sizable. 30 km into the flight, just after the first turnpoint a Swiss Pilot in front of me suddenly started doing some pretty wild looking acro in a place I thought was pretty questionable for hucking. Turns out he wasn't doing acro but was in an uncontrolled cascade. His reserve came out just as things started to look pretty desperate and he landed softly on a very steep snow slope and was able to walk down. Just another day in the Alps! I crossed Davos and headed for Chur, battling a wretched headwind and soon found myself in a very steep, tight canyon watching gliders in front of me carry on. Push on into a potential terrain trap or land safely? I landed safely, feeling the gliders in front of me had very little chance to carry on much farther. I went 50km that day, some of them battled for nearly 200. Not a very Chrigel start to Europe, time to dig a little deeper McClurg!

The next day was considerably questionable with a lot more wind and chance of overdevelopment so I launched with Bruce and instead of going for the typical first turnpoint, which most of the other pilots in the air seemed to be attempting with little success I said adios to Bruce and pitched it over the back toward Feldkirk and quickly found myself in a stunning albeit icy arena grabbing some terrifically dynamic climbs. In no time I was running hard for Lichtenstein with very little idea where I was but ecstatic with the decision to just lob into the unknown. In due course a blanket of cirrus shut everything down so I did what is remarkably easy just



Going Deep



about everywhere in the Alps- land at the train station and head home.

From Fanas Bruce saw a window in Bellazona on the border of Italy, at the north end of Lago Maggiore. This is the Italian region of Switzerland where you can thankfully leave the crappy (and incredibly expensive) Swiss "food" behind. Our first flight was a doozy, and maybe the most important flight I've yet had in the Alps that allowed me to tie this complex place together. Our plan was to fly along the north end of Lago Maggiore to Domodossola, where we'd cross the border into Italy, then north to grab a turnpoint near Mt Basodino, then head home to complete the triangle. On the way to Domodossola you could easily make out the Matterhorn and the Finsteraarhorn. We were literally one valley away from the Rhone, a valley I've flown up and down more than any other in Europe. All those times looking south, wondering what would happen if I just went...that way. Now I knew!

After a low save north of Domodossola a strong south valley wind didn't allow us to hit the planned turn-point so I headed



»altitude 2010 m »ground 1331 m »AGL 679 m »vario +1.9 m/s »speed 22 km/h »time 10:39:38 UTC »GPS N 46° 12.809' / E 8° 42.155'



north until I couldn't go any deeper then crossed a col and just kind of followed my nose. Bruce was behind me somewhere but we were out of radio contact, then I nearly lost my phone and battery on my flight deck and lost my maps for a full glide which didn't seem to matter as the maps weren't helping much anyway so I just carried on, col hopping. The terrain was magnificent and it all felt incredibly deep, but no doubt if you got in trouble you could wedge down into a valley and find a bus or train stop so I just kept pushing on north until I got to a huge valley that seemed to lead back to launch. In the end I flew a magnificently inefficient 165km FAI but anytime you spend 8 hours in the air it's a terrific day. Turned out the biggest flight in Europe that day (posted) which testifies to Bruce's remarkable weather skills.

We got 3 more flights out of Bellazona, but all of them were considerably more work with plenty of sketchy thrown in. The most memorable was a huck downwind to the ski town of St. Moritz on an amazingly unstable day where only tiny bits of sun were hitting the ground but was somehow enough to keep us in the air. I landed at the end of the lake in town a few feet short of controlled air space, about 100 feet from the train station, after throwing big wingovers above a crowd of people standing firmly into a strong breeze that I was happy to get out of. Only in Europe!

Wicked wicked day. First time flying Bellazona, expecting a bit more wind but it was just nice all day. Pulled my phone apart in the air and damn near lost the whole thing, so lost my maps for awhile and had very little idea where to go, but it's Europe- it all makes sense. Beautiful day of flying!
http://www.xcontest.org/world/en/flights/detail:gavin_mcclurg/8.5.2014/09:24

These flights were all enormously rewarding. Day after day Bruce and I were getting some of the best flights posted in Europe, confirming the routing ability of my partner for the X-Alps and increasing my Europe knowledge immensely.

Even though we were trying to avoid the Wallis opting for new sites, the weather brought us back to Fiesch as it always does and I got to have just my second go over the infamous Furka pass with a great crew of pilots including Hucksters Sebastian Benz and Dominique Dusec, two Swiss air Gods who consistently rack up impressive flights in this area. At the end of the day I'd flown a hard-fought 192km. Hard only because of what my flying partner at home calls "school boy errors". The first wasn't so much an error but just lack of patience. I got to the Furka well ahead of the group I was flying with and thought we'd go with our original call of a big flat triangle back to Martigny then possibly around to Interlaken. So I tagged the glacier at the Furka, flew back 10km only to hear that Bruce and Co were heading over. So I turned around and got stuck in the pass for 40 minutes of scratching before finally losing patience, knowing everyone was pulling away and just slid through the col a few feet off the deck hoping the backside would give me some room to work. Which of course it didn't so the scratch fest continued for a very stressful bout before I finally grabbed a decent climb and carried on toward Andermatt.

Then I blew my condom catheter off and peed all over my gear and instruments and eventually somehow even my face. Then I decided to try to turn around and head back over the Furka as some pilots seemed to be doing but when I tried to pee again hanging out of my harness I managed to pee once again all over my face and I thought "ok fuck this, I'm just going to go downwind and land!". But I hate landing so I just put up with being wet and carried on. eventually landing near Zurich. Radical (albeit wet) flying!



Keen on big Air!



Flying into St Moritz



Heading over to the Pinzgau

From the Wallis we headed east again to Austria to try our luck at Greifenburg, one of the most famous flying sites in the Alps, and certainly THE most for Hangies. The line possibilities from Greifenburg are nearly endless and I made up my mind to try to be creative. We got three solid flights from Emberger Alm, the main launch, racking up a 152 free flight where I tried to do a huge FAI across into the Pinzgau in a strong south Foehn and couldn't get back; an 88 km flight to the stunning Gloscockner on a remarkably questionable day; and a beautiful if hard-fought 164 FAI where I tried to dismiss the standard routes and just fly hard terrain.

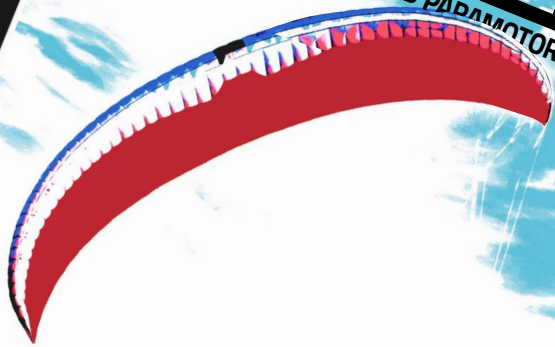
As always, my time in Europe came to an end too early. But it was a successful run. 12 flights in 21 days. 69 hours in the air. Nearly 1300 KM. A solid warm-up to the season, and an astounding improvement on last year's 5 flights in the month of May. ■

Landing at the Train Station!



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