

TIPS AND TALES FROM BIR IN INDIA

The last leg of this years Paragliding World Cup will be held in Bir, India from the 24th to the 31st of October 2015. To find out more about flying in Bir, I turned the clocks back many, many years and got in touch with the very colourful Eddie Colfox; our paths first crossed in the ladies toilets on the campsite in Abergavenny in 1995!

Written by Ruth Jessop

I also emailed Debu Choudary who had swapped his meet director's hat for one with 'DADDY' written on it for a few days, but none too nappy brained, he was very helpful. As for all the great pics, who better to ask for help than John Silvester, Jim Mallinson, Colin Hawke, Antoine Lauren, Fred Gustafsson, Dave Hanning, Dave Lewis, Mike Blubb and Dean Crosby. To see more of their wonderful photos have a look at Himalayan Sky Safaris' photo gallery: <http://www.himalayanskysafaris.com/>

Thus scratching his legendary ginger beard and thinking about Bir, Eddie told me:

"22 years ago I was instructing and doing tandems with Wrinkley Dick's Flying Circus near Pune in Maharashtra. Bir, with it's track up to the launch of Billing was legendary even then, there was a small scene with people like Debu Choudary, Bruce Mills, Andy Harland and Gilles Monnier amongst the few regulars.

It seemed the flying was a very hippy scene, about 20 people came over for the season, people didn't go over the back and flights beyond the Big Face were rare. John Silvester and Bob Drury had flown by Bir in the first Himalayan Vol Biv landing at the funicular railway station above Joginder Nagar, 10 kms east of Billing. I never really did the place justice until I returned there in 2004 with Jim Mallinson, the year before the first Bir Pre PWC. After 10 consecutive autumns there I am still discovering new ground and routes to fly. Personally I prefer vol biv in the Bir region to anywhere else including the Alps. This is primarily due to the great autumn conditions and the generally more benign valley winds and the fact that India iswell India!



Eddie Colfox flying near Bir



The take-off at Billing

Bir's launch of Billing is such a fantastic place to fly. It's the first significant face of the Himalayas, the Dauladhar range. As such the air, once it is warmed, is all going up anabatically. But as it is a range without many gaps, it doesn't have the worry of valley winds. It does over the back on the way to Manali but not the front range. Consequently there is not usually a significant leeside (excepting 1 or 2 places nearer Dahramsala)."

For those who have never flown in Bir before, Eddie advises:

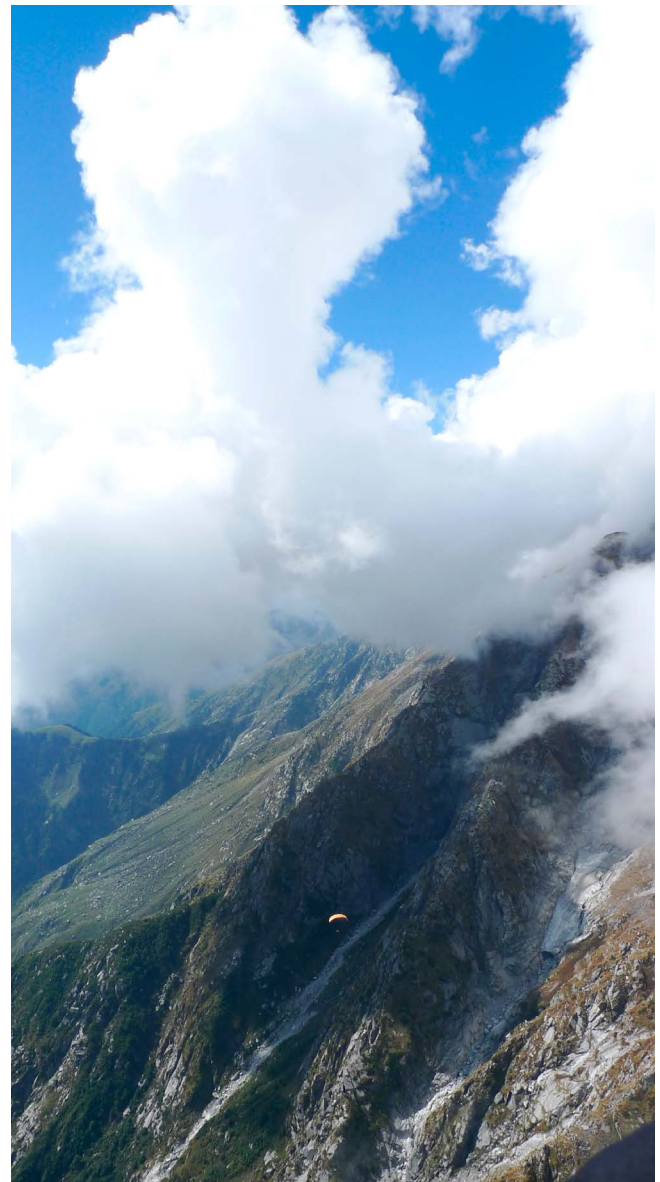
"Please bring a conventional magnetic compass or better still treat the clouds with the caution they deserve. Bir does have the dangers of large clouds, in the front range usually they are surprisingly benign in terms of suckiness but they are often below mountaintop height and can form multiple layers and form around you, so please treat them with caution. Many pilots have come to grief with clouds there over the years. Unusually cloud base descends during the course of the day as the moist air from the Punjab is sucked towards the mountains. Base usually remains high over the back which can be difficult to get to if you launch late and you often arrive above cloud base on the return flight.

Fortunately the region has plenty of trees. They catch many pilots every year as they race along close to them.

A tree rescue can be hugely epic as, even on the front ridge, you might be hours from a road and the slopes and trees are tall/steep enough that you're hugely high up. And that's without the bears and leopards... A ball of dental floss can be a useful lightweight aid to haul up a rescue rope. Anyway it's really not necessary to surf the trees that close, possibly excepting late in the day on your return from your adventures.



A group of spectators at launch



Clouds often form below mountaintop height and with multiple layers – beware!



You are often flying with the parakeets as well as vultures, lammergeyers and, beware, sometimes if you are close to the trees, Jungle chicken (a sort of pheasant) and flying squirrels will launch themselves at you as they soar downslope.

Please bring a spot or Delorme tracking system. Despite what it says on their website, Spots have worked there in the past and Delorme do too. The signal may be intermittent but it still gives an invaluable hand if you do go down in the trees or worse. If you are walking out don't forget to turn it on so people know that and do not waste time looking in your last known position."

N.B. All pilots in the Paragliding World Cup competition in October 2015 will be provided with Flymaster live trackers. <http://www.flymaster-avionics.com/flymaster/livesd>

"Beware with satellite phones, you'll need a licence, however if you don't have one and use it, the army will come out in force thinking you're a terrorist so it might be the fastest retrieve/rescue possible although it may involve a police cell. "

Eddie was in Bir for the 2013 Pre PWC and recalls the different strategies taken by the pilots particularly on the last day. "In the last task many competitors got the upper hand on the start gate by getting a climb deep over the back and going into orbit. They were able to get the start gate approximately 1000m higher than the pilots who climbed in the region of launch or the start gate. They were then able to glide from the start gate to TP1 with no need to top up for extra altitude. It is common for bases to be 1000 -1500m higher within 5km from launch, however it may be a risky strategy as sometimes it's hard to get the climb and going down there is a 3 hour walk or 3 hour bus ride back. The bus only comes once a day and that's at 0745hrs..."

I asked Debu Choudary (meet director for the 2015 Paragliding World Cup) about flying in Bir and what sort of tasks pilots can expect in the competition this year. "For those that have flown in Bir before, you know its a pretty easy and consistent place to fly, with every spur working in textbook style, the only problem with racing here is its kind of one big long ridge, so most tasks are cats cradle kind of tasks, however we found that by putting waypoints out in the flats with a big radius can spice things up a bit as you



Eddy flying with a vulture.

'A great place to go exploring and top landing, unless you get it wrong and then it's remote wildness.'

John Silvester

The ridge at Bir.



need to calculate the right height to get back to the main range and get up. Also there are a few smaller ridges out front which work, so for sure during the PWC we will be setting turn points out on these ridges and that will make the pilots work these ridges to get back on to the main ridge, also we have a few turn points which are fairly high up, and conditions permitting I would like to use these points and make pilots climb to a higher elevation to tag these turn points. Hopefully we will have higher bases than the pre PWC and can then set tasks that are a bit longer, hoping to get at least one or two 100km + tasks, but for sure we will be setting radiuses big, so as to give people more options and make it more interesting.

During the pre PWC 2013, after a couple of days, some of the pilots figured out a special start strategy, which was to hop over the valley behind the main range and get to the big mountains and then get really high to take the start, we had pilots up at 5000 metres, and taking the start a 1000 metres above the rest of the field, this was very exciting for the pilots and for the spectators, however unfortunately for the PWC we have decided that we will not be allowing pilots to go over the back ridge as if there is a crash there, it is very hard to get to and the conditions and valley winds are much stronger there."

So if you feel inspired, don't forget that registration for the 2015 Paragliding World Cup in Bir closes on the 24th of July 2015. <http://www.pwca.org/>

As for places to stay and things to do Eddie told me: "There are plenty of places to stay in the Bir region. The obvious ones are in the Tibetan Colony. For the 'smarter' ones you need to book up front and I know the Colonel's resort is already booked. But there is now a new smart Colonel in town...(drum beat)... on the upper road at Bir Colony now, I think he has about 20 rooms, most of which are en suite.

There are also Nam Langs, Hotel Soraya, Gurpreet's hotel near the landing field, Poldines by the Garden Cafe, Sian's Place and many other Buddhist owned guest houses/hotels within the Colony. The prices can vary from \$8 - \$50 per/night and a meal from \$2 - \$20. They have been building a hotel on launch for the last few years. Maybe it's ready now. It would be a tremendous place to wake up.



The town of Bir



Terracing near Bir

People tend to hang out at the numerous cafes on the main street with names like Vimla's, the Cave. There's always reasonable food at very cheap prices. Otherwise there is, the Garden cafe, Sorayas, some roof gardens and various other things like Austrian Martin's pizzas and even a coffee shop.

I have missed the obvious... Sunset landing is always beautiful however funnily enough it is best at Sunset. There is a cafe there and youngsters will be wandering around selling bajis and it is a gathering point of so many cultures with Indian people cutting and stacking hay by hand, Buddhist monks and Tibetans watching the landings as well as 50 + pilots from so many nations...Then there is Billing, the launch. Chatuji's now Babajis is a great place to be for basic snacks and millions of cups of chai, a short walk from the forest and fantastic views down the Dauladhar as well as the entertainment of launch.

It is also now possible to hire bicycles and motorbikes in Bir. These are great for exploring the local area as you are close enough to see it all but fast enough to move on. There is also the wonderful track that takes you on from the launch at Billing and over to Raj Gunda and the Barot Valley. This is an area where few western tourists go and some of the villages are still inaccessible by car. It's also the bomb out if you don't make it up over the back. However you're unlikely to find the time to bike as it's usually flyable every day from Oct 10th -Nov 15th."

For those keen to fly in Bir but not in a World Cup, there are companies like Himalayan Sky Safaris (HSS) whom Eddie works for, to help you enjoy the area. As Debu said, logistically for retrieve and rescue, competitions in Bir set tasks that go along the south side of the range with some turn-points out in the valley. However companies like Himalayan Sky Safaris (www.himalayanskysafaris.com) do tours of the larger area including flights to Mandi, Manali and Chamba.

They specialise in low guide to client ratio trips to give you more support. Camping out is a big part of it, complemented by the aid of local people which not only makes this possible but actually very comfortable. Names like Hobbiton, Majestic View and 360 camp, were originally given and camped by HSS.





Epic mountain flying.

Eddie explains:

"We try to camp near shepherds as this usually means a good source of water, some shared resources and even local knowledge about where your cell phone might work. However HSS have widened our overnight stays to include temples, wild bivvies and hotel city stays. For example regular points on our itinerary include flights to Dahramsala with an overnight stay in McCleod Ganj, a launch from Magic View with a flight to Bir to 360 onto Parasur or Mandi and back. Towards the end of the 10 day tour, if the client is keen and the guide thinks it possible then 1:1 guidance is offered to Manali, Chamba, Parbati or anywhere deemed doable!!

Guidance is not strictly necessary for such tours but please remember this is the Himalayas. There are bears, leopards, wolves and the various lethal traps that men leave

to catch such animals. Much of the terrain is over 4000m high and help is many hours away even if people know where you are. There is also weather that can catch you out. John Silvester and I have bivvied to wake covered in snow with no certainty when it will clear and chosen to follow paw prints down the mountainside. Local conditions can also be very specific with strong winds in particular areas. Again we can tell you that being pinned in a strong wind at 5500m unable to penetrate away from the range is not a situation to repeat or blunder into. Although we do want pilots who have some practical experience of thermalling, you do not need to be a Skygod to come on an HSS tour. Due to our intimate guide to client ratios, pilots are able to improve their flying and experience quickly. In the past we have had <30 hour pilots who by the end of the week with us have done 90km out and return flights".



The icing on the cake.

Five things Eddie recommends you DO NOT forget to bring with you:

- 1) *Insurance to include medivac*
- 2) *A phone that takes a local sim*
- 3) *Some mosquito treatment if you arrive in early October. They're gone by the end of the month, but they're quite bad around sunset, not as bad as Scottish midges in May though.*
- 4) *Your camera, India is not only incredible, it's beautiful too*
- 5) *Most importantly a sense of adventure and a belief that most people genuinely are trying to help.*

Last but not least, whether you are going to Bir to fly on your own, with a company like Himalayan Sky Safaris or in the World cup, it's important to remember that India is proud of its bureaucracy, (which they inherited from the British). This means that pilots need local licences so you need to bring your national licence, insurance (including helivac), passport photos as well as visas to fly there. It's actually easier to sort out than you might expect and if you're in a comp or on a guided tour it is often

sorted out for you.

So all you need to do now is choose when to go to Bir.

As autumn turns to winter the weather becomes more and more stable with lower bases and temperatures, however it remains flyable through much of the winter but gets very cold and stable.

The spring can be good but is less regular/consistent than the autumn. The best period at this time of year is March, April, May. Truly epic days are possible with bases of over 4000m on the front ridge.

Summer, obviously, isn't a good idea as it is plagued by the monsoon.

The monsoon ends in early October making the weather inconsistent and prone to overdevelopment but by the middle of October it's consistent and excellent! So the best, most reliable period is between about mid October and late November.

Got your bags packed yet? 🧳



A temple in Bir.