



Map showing track line of the flight in blue

a perfect day

Miciele Farina takes advantage of the Austrian Alps

Click... whirr... the last turnpoint was safely in my camera. The images of the last seven hours were just a weary blur that played through my head. Exhausted yet ecstatic, I'd made it. My goal? 140km out-and-return... and it felt incredible!

One bright blue spring morning, 30 or so pilots from our club, the Golden Eagles, gathered at our most reliable XC site, the 2,000m Melchboden. With the sky already looking good plus a forecast of very light winds, the buzz on launch was electric. High wispy streets stretched off in all directions. It was obvious that today was going to be very special.

Our XC declaration forms were completed, signed and photographed. The mission was on! Mayrhofen to Zell am See and back. I'd flown to Zell am See and beyond in the past but never tried to return. I'd also heard that many pilots get decked at the 90km mark by a strong valley wind which blows over the Pass Thurn near Kitzbühel. This would be the crux of the flight, but I'd cross that bridge...

I decided to launch at around 11.30am. My Proton GT inflated easily in a good thermal, feeding the perfect cumulus forming 1,200m overhead. Seconds later I was in a smooth 2m/s climb with friends Martin, Joe and Andy. The core strengthened to take us to the shadowy chill of cloudbase. Tendrils engulfed the others around me, but after some incoherent shouting we set off on the long valley crossing to Kreuzjoch, 10km away.

My glide was enough to allow me easy connection with the next big climbs, all marked by beautiful cu's. From my vantage point at 3,300m the views

were mindblowing. To my right was the high glacial border with Italy, while in the distance to my left lay the flatlands of Germany. Below glared the white-capped peaks of the Zillertal Alps, dotted with ice-covered lakes.

As for the forecast, it was spot-on. A very light backwind helped me sail effortlessly over the Gerlos Pass, the psychological guardian of the next valley, Pinzgau.

The next 20km after Gerlos were classic, each climb stronger than the last with cloudbase rising to 3,500m. Every cloud had a mix of sailplanes, hang gliders and paragliders carouselling under it, and between thermals pilots were gliding to almost every point of the compass. The occasional thumbs-up from passing pilots made me laugh out loud. This really was the day of days, and not just for me.

The Pinzgau Valley is also known as 'The Highway', where you can fly 30 - 40km without the stress of turning too many times. But today was different: the next 40km were blue! Up until now we'd enjoyed solid gains and good fast glides. 'How can it be?' I wondered, looking along the 30 or so kilometres towards Zell am See. I'd skied out beneath a huge deep cu and cored thermals averaging 7 - 9m/s, yet in front was nothing, not even a wisp. So much for 'The Highway'!

I pumped out the ears and headed off across the Pass Thurn valley with Joe and Andy. Cruising at well over 3,000m it was easy to become detached from my surroundings... until we were hammered by sink on the crossing and arrived low on the other side. Suddenly my surroundings became very real indeed. Getting worked over by punchy thermals and valley winds, I thought this must be payback for the easy ride until now. Caught in

hideous sink and close enough to smell pine, we separated. There were no shouts or cheers now as there has been in the last screamer over Wildkogel; this was critical. The Pass Thurn wind threatened to deck us all at only 50km.

Now alone, I had room to work the rough stuff and gradually clawed back some of my lost height. The thermals were more weak and broken, and the rest of the 20km ridge ahead didn't appear to be any better. I wasted well over an hour here, only once or twice popping over the top to 2,200m. The short glides from one bowl to another, and being in so close was very mentally tiring. Not only was this kind of flying stressful, it was slow.

Still below the ridge as I neared the turnpoint, Zell an See cable-car station, I desperately needed some kind of miracle to have any chance of making it back. But, looking around, I thought that maybe my luck was on the up. I started to notice wisps forming over Pinzgau behind me, and more importantly above me. It was going up somewhere; it just needed finding. With the breaking inversion the wisps got denser and the climb became stronger. Soon I was high enough to see where I'd come from - far in the distance the Gerlos Pass, and behind it Zillertal and home.

The turnpoint photographed, I took a deep breath, concentrated my thoughts and glided off towards my nemesis, Pass Thurn. I was suddenly surprised to see Martin just above me. He had been slightly behind but had had better luck at Pinzgau. With the last 20km or so having decked many pilots it was good to fly with a familiar glider again. We stayed high under a classic street now defined over the ridge, ears in and bar on half. Below were the ridges and power cables I'd squeaked over earlier. Glancing down, it felt good not to have to gully-hop any more.



In the glacial side valleys. Behind the Gross Venediger is Italy; it is said you can see Venice on a clear day.



The last ridge on the glide home, the 2,700m Brandberger Kolm

We were doing 45km/h by GPS and climbing at an average 2m/s, but we had some catching up to do as it was now 15.40. Soon enough the dream was over and we were back at the blue hole of Pass Thurn again. Looking at the terrain ahead, however, the route to take was obvious. Perfect high clouds stretched ahead on the west-facing ridges on the other side of the main valley. If we could get there that would be our way home.

Making sure every metre was squeezed out of the last climb, I turned my back on Pass Thurn and tucked in for the long 10km glide. The crossing was fast but not without sink. My line for the closest spur with a good cloud worked and I relaxed a little. We climbed out together at a smooth constant 4m/s. Had we crossed the bridge? I asked myself.

Base had risen to 3,900m here and goal was just four thermals away, or five to be sure. The thermal we were in seemed to last forever, no real surprise as under us was a huge west-facing rocky peak with cliffs and scree stretching all the way to the valley floor. A total thermal machine! I could make out several gliders circling a few ridges ahead. It was looking very possible.

The way ahead was straightforward: get high and glide to the next ridge. There was just one problem, a huge cloud that had developed over Kreuzjoch and threatened to cut off the sun in front. As we glided to the next ridge the shadow forced us deeper into the uninhabited glacial valley systems.

The views were epic. Below lay the Krimmler waterfall, the largest in Europe, dwarfed by the stunning surroundings. Base peaked here at an incredible 4,100m. It felt as if I could reach out and touch the glacial crevasses only three or four km away under the main ridge of the Alps.

Here Martin and I split up. He went to the shadows, not wanting to risk the remoteness of walking out from where we were, but unfortunately landed soon after on the Gerlos Pass plateau, some 18km from goal.

With Martin and the gliders out in front gone I was completely alone, a very strange feeling. I was totally enjoying the isolation and buzzing from it: just rock and ice and snow. Trance-like, I gazed in awe at the position I found myself in - around 2,800m up and still climbing to the next massive, monolithic rock wall. It was insane. But this was why I'd learnt to fly.

On my last climb of the day a curious adult eagle joined me, helping me by marking out the core with ease in the weaker early-evening lift. The big 9m/sec climbs were gone, replaced by 2m/sec smooth and wide. This beautiful bird played with me to just below base and then it was gone, gliding south towards Italy.

With enough height and Mayrhofen clearly only a glide away I sat back and took in the views. And as I re-entered the Zillertal valley it dawned on me that we'd done it. It wasn't a dream - I'd made it!

An exhausting seven hours in the air and a straight-line distance of 140km - my personal best. After spiralling down to land at the Bruggerstube, the large local LZ, it was all handshakes and cold beers. I learned that it had been Joe and Andy out front, but surprisingly only six of the 25 had made it back. More pilots arrived by foot, thumb and rail, but no more by air. Completely finished, I retired early as the war stories continued long into the night.

Mickele Farina has lived and flown in Mayrhofen, Austria since 1995. He has around 700 hours and last year finished 10th in the Austrian XC League and 15th overall in the British Nationals. He is currently offering fly-guiding and accommodation in the area. Anyone wishing to fly in the Zillertal Alps should visit www.austrianarena.com.



Halfway along the Pinzgau and through the inversion.