

Good things come to those who train...

By John Porter discovers that concentrating on the cornerstones of paragliding pays dividends

I'm just a regular club pilot with around 75 hours. Like most pilots I also have to juggle work, family and the inclement UK weather to get any chance of flying at weekends. Luckily for me, being self employed means that weekdays are sometimes an option; either that or I make time to go on organised trips abroad.

I started flying in 2001 and it seemed that the big flights that appear in the flying press would always elude me. It always seemed that everything coming together for a long XC flight in the Alps, one of my favourite areas to fly, was about as likely as winning the lottery.

There was always something in the way of what could/should have been a big day out. Either it was too stable, too unstable or too windy. Or simply that, though I hate to admit it, I bombed early due to being rusty and unable to use small thermals. Inexperience got the better of me again and again. It becomes intensely frustrating to see the more experienced pilots - and the guide - pull away from you time and time again.

I'd been on a few XC courses in the past, but always felt like I was struggling to keep up with the modest average speeds of the group. I would either end up on the deck after the first or second climb, or get left further and further behind. I soon learnt that trying to chase from below and behind quickly put me on the ground.

Epic XC stories in magazines whet pilots' appetites, but they all make it sound easier than it is in reality. And like most pilots I gauged my success in numbers, i.e. distance or duration. This was before I realised, with the help of Kelly from Austrian Arena, that the cornerstone of XC flying was being able to

thermal correctly. Just as important was doing more and more ground handling. As my instructor used to say, "A minute on the ground is worth an hour in the air." Never a truer word spoken.

With my ground handling a little more polished and my thermalling technique improved, I began to launch without thinking, or concentrating on what was happening over my shoulder. I even managed a couple of extremely modest XCs (OK, one-thermal wonders!) from my local hills. I felt it was slowly coming together. Amazingly, when I concentrated less on the outcome and more on the moment, I was not only less frustrated but the fruits of my labours were starting to pay off.

In September 2008 I signed up for a week in the Dolomites, again with Austrian Arena. Having recently changed to an Airwave Sport 4 I was keen to test it out there. The aim was to fly around the main formations and attempt to get over the Marmolada, queen of the Dolomites. The week proved a little stable with high pressure and light winds. But what a fantastic place: a hotel at 5,000ft and a cable car to take-off at 8,000ft.

Though a little intimidated by the surroundings and crowded launch, I got into the air with minimum fuss and kept up with our group on most days. I went home happy, though a little envious that two thirds of the group were

The Bassano ridge from the flatlands

The Bassano ridge from the flatlands

moving on for an XC course at Bassano del Grappa the following week.

Fast forward to September 2009. We'd had a good summer in the UK and I was feeling current and confident, a rare feeling. Kelly suggested I should join the group at Bassano in the autumn and said I'd love the area. I booked along with longtime flying buddy Marc Kaferstein, who only has time to fly on foreign trips due to work commitments.

The group's experienced ranged from our modest 30 - 60 hours right through to Dr Robert (a regular with Kelly) with a whopping 1,400 hours. Everyone had had a great week previously and I wondered if I would be left behind again, but quickly shook that out my head and stayed positive.

The next day, although very thermic, was a touch too windy to push along the ridge safely. Instead we used our time to get used to the new site, tweak our

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gear and of course train our techniques under the supervision of our guide. Kelly never intruded or rushed us but gave very helpful pointers about pressure and the timing of the outside-brake rule.

Kelly spent time climbing opposite each of us, watching like a hawk and demonstrating the optimum line, bank and radius for the climb. A debrief after some flatland flying was the finishing touch to an enjoyable flight. I understood the theory, but to have it shown next to me in real time was the best after-school training I've received. My worries about Kelly and Dr. Rob getting away from me were unfounded. Finally I was holding my own.

Bassano is at the foot of the very first mountains on the south side of the Alps. It benefits from a micro climate that I'm sure Kelly or Luigi, an experienced local pilot and our retrieve driver for the week, could explain far more lucidly than myself. The gen-

eral gist is that it doesn't often blow out because of the protection given by surrounding terrain. The climate is definitely more Mediterranean than Alpine, and occasionally Bassano is the only flyable place in the whole of Europe.

The main landing field is huge and has a new hotel conveniently placed there with an almost impossible-to-miss LZ. Bomb-out options are endless and I was never worried... until Kelly mentioned that further along the main ridge was the Valley of Doom! However, I could see why you need a retrieve driver there; the public transport once out in the flatlands was a mystery, even to Luigi.

Monte Grappa, the main peak, has a very special place in Italian history. During World War I a group of young conscripts held back the might of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Had the place been allowed to fall Italy would soon have been over-run.

At the highest point, around 1,900 metres, lies a huge mausoleum dedicated to those who lost their lives to protect Italy. We would get to see this up close as it was a regular turnpoint for XC routes.

Kelly and Luigi, eyes skyward, quietly conversed and nodded in agreement: today was the day. The nerves started again, but even I could see that the strong upper winds were gone. Clouds formed and stayed steady, a little higher than the last days, just below 2,000m. The visibility was unusually good, with Venice clearly visible along with the Slovenian mountain range.

During the safety briefing we discussed the usual stuff: anyone who found it too strong on the ridge should push out into the flatlands. "It's not a war of nerves," as Kelly put it. He also explained a logical way of avoiding the potentially strong cloud suck which we could experience, the very useful and under-discussed 45-degree rule.



We entered the turnpoints into our Aircotec XC Trainers. The route around all turnpoints made up a 60km flat triangle. The less experienced of the group scratched our collective heads; we must have looked a little out of our depth. Dr. Robert put us at ease. He'd flown XC with Kelly countless times and knew the route was easily possible with the length of day. "Just relax and concentrate on the first climb, boys - you can do it!" were Kelly's final words.

With that we were off. The plan was just to get high and push eastwards into the slight (10km/h) headwind to the first turnpoint, around 10km away. It was on the other side of the Valley of Doom. The brief was to invest time in gaining height this side of the valley and only cross at cloudbase.

occasionally fluttering in the passing breeze. I thought briefly about this sombre place and the horrific events that had happened here but couldn't dwell as the radio crackled into life.

Before long we were again over the busy Bepe launch with the next turnpoint clearly visible - the aeralis on the other side of the Valsugana. Here I struggled, taking a sinky line on the 5km crossing. I watched the others take a weak climb on the other side, but 30 seconds behind is a long time and I joined the tail end of the thermal too late. "Watch out for the cable down there, John." There was no way I could miss it but I thanked Kelly for his concern.

I struggled for the time it took the other guys to take the next turnpoint and get back to base,

shake my hand, and I still couldn't believe that I'd spent the last three hours in the air and closed a 38km flat triangle, my personal best. Time for a beer. Towards the end of my second beer I could make out, in the distance, Kelly's glider coming in, although alone this time. Rob had gone down in the flatlands by Asolo castle, 10km out, adding another five hours to his logbook in one flight. And I had added another ten and a half hours to add to my logbook in a week, and my best foreign trip by far!

I'd like to say a big thank you to Luigi for his patience and help on launch, and being a wealth of local knowledge. And of course to Kelly for his relaxed style of guiding. It wasn't just follow-the-leader but an in-depth course designed to



John Porter out over the flatlands

Unbelievably, I was keeping up with the group. There were many obvious (even to me) thermal markers en route. Progress was fast with the 5 - 6m/s climbs. "This is what it's all about," I smiled to myself. Before long we were climbing at the edge of the Valley of Doom. Kelly had paid particular attention to this point as there were no landing options in the flat, forest-infested gorge. With clouds calling to us after the short crossing we worked together, and whilst Rob and Kelly were separately searching for a climb I found it! Not only was I keeping up but I was pulling my weight. It felt fantastic. As soon as they saw me circling they targeted me and together we whooped to each other on our way back to cloudbase.

After crossing the Valley of Doom again, heading westwards, the next turnpoint was the mausoleum. Again at base, it was easy to reach. The red, white and green flags hung limply, only

around 20 minutes. It was a little too small, close in and rough for my liking. Although I wanted to continue I knew things were against me so I recrossed the valley low down. That sinking feeling was happening again as I watched the two others scream up and disappear at 5m/s in the light leeside above me. "Well done John, great effort mate. Let me know when you're down and safe," came Kelly's message over the radio.

Still 3 or 4km from the LZ, I thought I was going to bomb out in the huge Valsugana which has dozens of landing options. Instead I headed back to the huge sun-facing hillside and got big climbs back to ridge height, passed the launch site and made it back to the main LZ with hundreds of metres to spare.

The others in the group were coming down from their second flight. Marc was first to

promote independent piloting, with our safety his number one priority. I'm definitely going back.

Kelly Farina of Austrian Arena runs XC and thermal courses in the Bassano area in spring and autumn. Check out austrianarena.com if you don't believe me!



The hotel and landing field