

# Big Wednesday

Kelly Farina tries for the 200km club



Shortly after crossing the Gerlos pass on the way out, looking east towards Zell-am-See, and Statzerhaus about 70km in the distance

PHOTO: KELLY FARINA



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PHOTO: DAN WREJCIOTYM

commitments during the best time of year. I can't recall the number of times I've said, at pre-flight briefings, "Over 200km is possible for the top pilots today," and then settle on a 80 - 90km route for the group. Flying over 200km, when not just blasting down track on a windy day, requires launching early, pushing on, never getting stuck and a fast average speed over eight hours. That's a little too fast for sometimes rusty hobby pilots.

So I watched as, one by one, my club mates joined the 200 club, yet it seemed to elude me. On each attempt, towards the end of each day it overdeveloped. On one day when I was in high orbit, cirrus moved in and shut down the street which led 40k all the way home. Bummer!

Flying XC in the northern Alps is not just soaring along south-facing ridges, where the only decisions are when to climb to cross a small gap. On our side of the Alps it's a little more of a complicated chess game. Understanding and using valley flows is crucial to staying up and out of trouble down low.

Last year I booked a week off in the middle of May, bang in the middle of the best time for XC in the Alps. Great for flying big distances around the main area of the Alps, but the day's length could be against me for the task I'd set myself. My goal was to close a 206km flat triangle around the Zillertal, Tuxertal and Pinzgau valleys.

Being midweek, there were only two local XC pilots out, myself and local legend Bene Kater. We decided to start from our main launch of Hohenstrasse (2,000m) a little before 10:30. The sky

was mainly blue, with just a few wispy cu forming over the highest peaks to the south.

Our first turnpoint was 20km to the south-west in the big mountains of the Tuxertal valley system. After getting high over launch it was a straightforward push over the high ground behind Penken, our house mountain. Climbs were weak due to the time and we helped each other push on as best we could. I was able to relax when my XC Trainer informed me that there was little or no wind up to 3,200m.

That's important when flying into the Tux valley where the peaks themselves are over 3,000m. The high mountains can create some pretty impressive lee turbulence, especially when close to the terrain, if the wind is just 5 -10km/h too strong.

As the peaks grew higher the thermal strength, size and general quality improved. It was great to fly with another experienced pilot and we took it in turns to mark and hunt for better cores, almost using telepathy. Although we took slightly different lines to the first turnpoint the views were the same. We were only a few km from the Italian border, just over the Brenner pass. With an improving sky it didn't take long before we were out of the big mountains and back over launch. It was now just before noon.

I shook my head in disbelief when I saw that the way to the next waypoint, Statzerhaus, over 90km to the east, was still almost blue. I nearly quit after losing a climb at the inversion just to the north of launch. I thought, "Oh well, I've had an epic flight so far." Bene read my mind and shouted that we

Way back in February 2001 Skywings published an article about a long (around 140km) out-and-return flight I made between Mayrhofen and Zell-am-See. Ten years ago it took me around seven hours. I've since raced this route at an Austrian league meet in a little under five hours - it's amazing the difference modern glider performance and 120 thermal markers make! The original flight, together with a few other 100km ones, saw me finish 10th in the Austrian XC league in 2000. How times change! These days, if each flight entered is not well over 200km you're just an also-ran.

For years it's been rare that I've had time off on the really huge days, mainly due to guiding

needed more height to make the long crossing to Kreuzjoch, 12km to the east. He then marked the solid 4m/s climb we needed to cross the next bridge. I would have kicked myself forever if I'd missed out on the next seven hours flying.

After a few more climbs I lost Bene when he failed to connect with a broken core low down on the Gerlos pass, the guardian to the Pinzgau valley, aptly named the Spatziergang or walkway by locals. Normally, after this point pilots are rewarded with easy fast-paced glides to Zell-am-See. However today was no walkway... it was a motorway! The light inversion broke and my Axis Mercury and I enjoyed high, fast and long 20km+ glides. Many of the glides were close to 30:1!

Bene chose the low line and cracked on behind me. We reconnected at Zell-am-See, and by now the sky was littered with paragliders, hang gliders and sailplanes. It was great to see Bene again as there was an important route choice after crossing the lake. Both would have worked, but I followed Bene on the direct route even though this would potentially bring us in the partial lee of the valley wind, now evident on the lake's surface. Bene stopped for a rough lee-sider that looked a bit too tasty for me, and I pushed more into the protected full lee. My choice worked better (read safer) and we were both soon at base looking towards the turnpoint.

At Statzerhaus Bene pushed even further to the east to stretch the distance, but the climb under the big cu wasn't there. I now had my first real safety dilemma: stay on the south side of the saddle and risk sliding down into an area with no landings, or run out with my tail between my legs on the shadier, windier north side. My choice was clear - go the north side. With just 50m over the saddle I found something that gave a little breathing space. I don't mind saying I was a little nervous, but it turned into something decent and at last I was away from the terrain.

For the second time we crossed the lake together, this time with over 90km to goal on the GPS. It was just before 4pm. We made a lot of speed on the crossing back to Zell-am-See top station as clouds and gliders marked the way. It was looking very possible.

I watched Bene push on with the bit truly between his teeth, loving the low risky line as I climbed for more safety. We reached the Pass Thurn just after 1700, now only 45km out from Mayrhofen.

This is where our good fortune came to an end, partly due to me being exhausted and dehydrated. For some reason Bene chose the west-facing side of the pass. At this time of day the valley wind in the venturi would strip the west side of any useful thermals. Normally here I would always chose to cross to the regular, consistent west sides of the Pinzgau system.

But with brain disengaged I followed Bene in to find it as scrappy as one would expect from the aerology and topography below. But we managed to climb out and drift/glide to where the next obvious climbs should be. But it was rough and unnecessary, and a waste of valuable time. This mistake would cost us the day.

In the next two hours we only covered 15km amongst the valley wind and shady slopes below, never climbing out beyond 2,300m. After two attempts to get over the Gerlos pass the day died. Had we been able to cross this obstacle, home would have been an easy and straight 20km glide away.



PHOTO: KELLY FARINA

Approaching Zell-am-See. Statzerhaus lies at the highest point at the end of valley to the left of picture. Over 100km still to go...

Instead we landed together in Krimml, home of the largest waterfall in Europe. The Gerlos pass has ended many flights by better pilots than myself. It was now 1915; together we had covered 186km and spent over eight hours and 45 minutes in the air. Our average speed, up until the end, was very respectable.

So I'm still yet to join the 200 club, but there is always this coming season. What did I learn? That

my bladder is made of pretty stern stuff. To trust my gut instinct and not be afraid to go off on my own line. And that staying hydrated and having a pee tube is the future for long-haul flights.

*This year Kelly will be running an advanced XC course alongside the usual intermediate courses around Zillertal and Bassano. The goal will be to complete the 140km out-and-return to Zell-am-See. Details are at [www.austrianarena.com](http://www.austrianarena.com).*

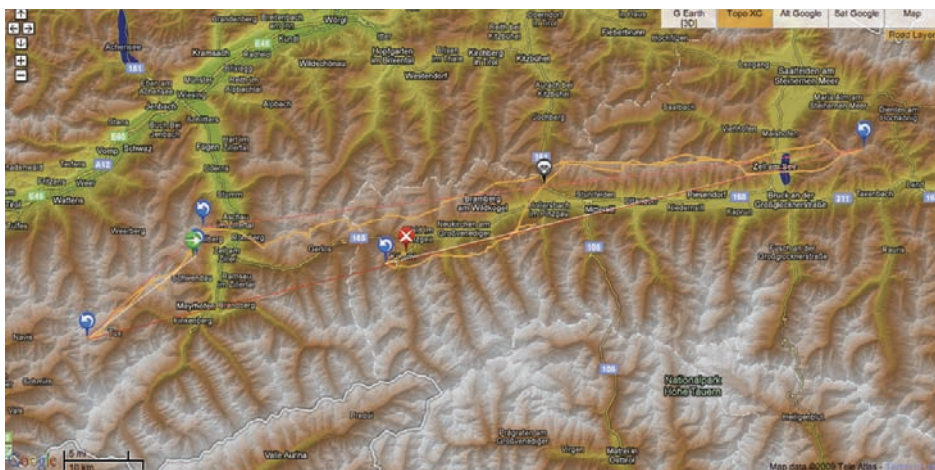


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