



# Classic Cross Country Routes

## 09: ZILLERTAL, AUSTRIA

Kelly Farina explores the beauty and the boldness of Austria's 'racing valley'



#### THE ALPS - 200,000,000 YEARS B.C.

The temperature is unbearably hot. Not even a single polar cap or glacier exists, even in the loftiest of mountain ranges. Sea levels are at their highest ever in the 500-million-year history of the Earth, and much of the planet is covered by shallow seas.

At this time, the Cretaceous period, sulphur-spewing volcanic eruptions are daily occurrences. Helped by a massive upheaval of rock and shifting fault lines as continent-size tectonic plates collide, Africa is making her way north and nothing will stand in her way.

Land rises as if from nowhere. Massive areas of rock that were beneath the sea are no longer submerged; this limestone rock will go on to form what we will know as the Dolomites and Karwendel ranges. As Earth's crust buckles and cracks, molten rock is pushed upwards, cools and forms the main Alpine divide, the backbone of the Alps.

The air is unbreathable to humans due to its high CO<sup>2</sup> and sulphur levels. The shallow seas are bursting with life: ferns and giant trees flourish; Mother Earth is doing her best to prepare the planet for life as we will know it, scrubbing the CO<sup>2</sup> and other greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. Hiding it deep beneath the surface, she hopes that it will never see the light of day - if only she was aware of the human word that some of us will call 'progress'.

#### FAST-FORWARD TO 10,000 YEARS B.C.

Countless ice ages have passed and the kilometre-thick ice sheets have started to recede. Only the highest peaks stick out like islands in a frozen wasteland.

Gravity drags the ice-rivers downhill, gouging

deep, alpine valleys out with its unstoppable force. Moraines and rivers of melt water flow out of the shrinking glacial giants. As the planet warms again, the retreating ice leaves behind it intricate, wide valley systems ready for human life, soon to become the playground for many.

#### FAST-FORWARD AGAIN, THIS TIME TO PRESENT DAY.

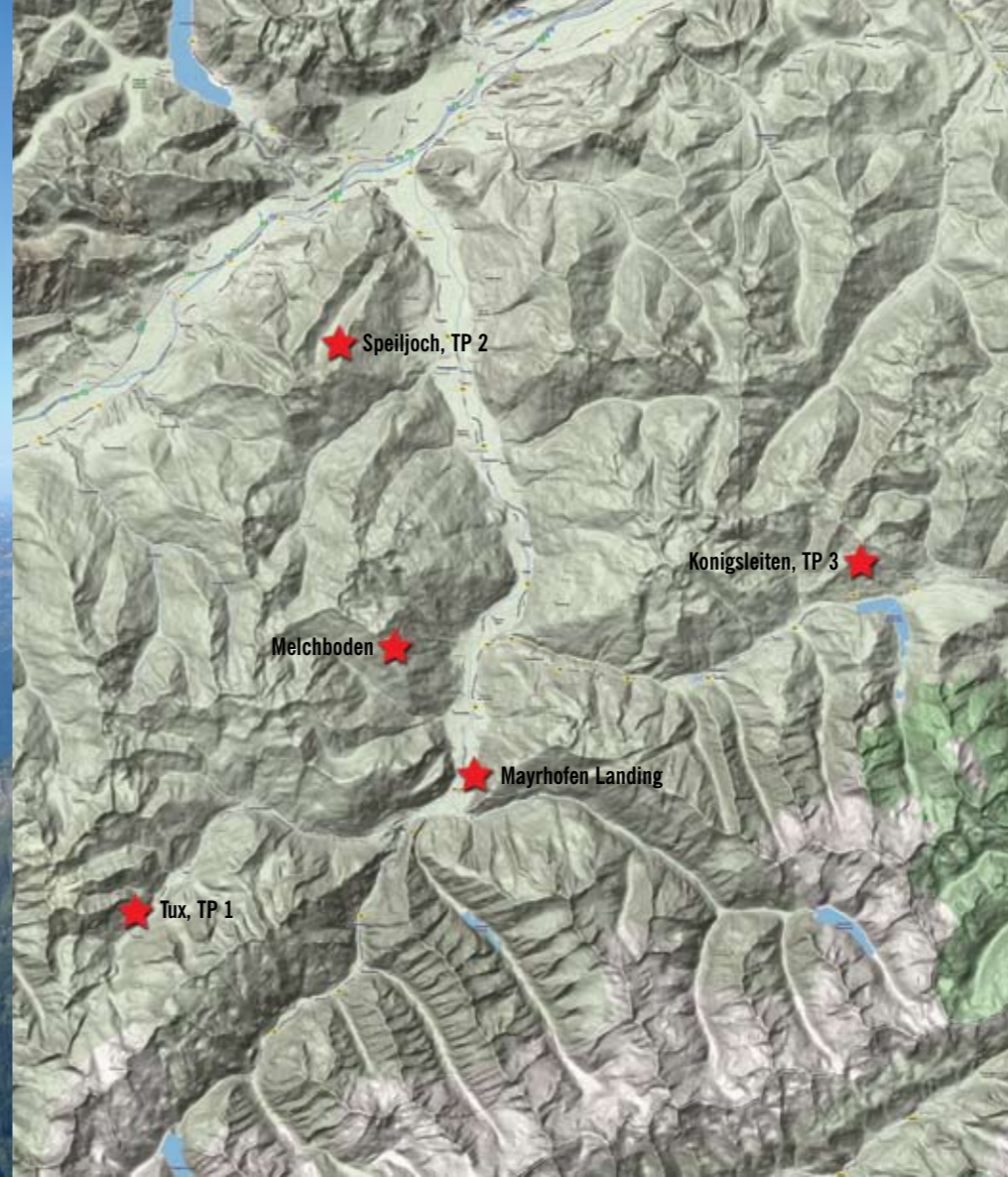
It's mid-summer's day, June 21, 2008, the longest day of the year and I'm sat on my balcony watching the tandems fly in evening formation over the town of Mayrhofen. While they wander the reddening sky, my mind reflects on my many years flying here, wondering how best to put into words the 'Classic Route' of my long-time home and free flying Mecca, the Zillertal valley in Austria.

The Zillertal valley is a cross country pilot's nirvana: running 30 km from north to south it provides steep east- and west-faces perfect for thermal soaring - even as I write these words, ex-world champion Stephan Stiegler is attempting a 300-km FAI triangle from the Hintertux glacier. [Ed - He landed after 240 km]

As glider performance and pilot skill level has increased, our world seems to be shrinking. Even the 50-km valley tour is now achieved from mid-February. This once three-hour-plus odyssey is now torn up in a little over an hour!

On any good XC day, just sight-seeing the main valley is fun, but criminal when there is another classic Alpine gem on offer. A simple, yet still interesting for pilots used to the big stuff, classic 90-km FAI triangle around the 'Tux' and Zillertal valleys. Beyond any doubt it's one of the European Alps' finest routes.

When I first started distance flying it would have



been a very respectable FAI triangle in the pre-OLC Austrian XC League. Popular amongst the local XC cracks for only requiring one long valley crossing, it follows the flow of the day with very few airspace restrictions.

The flight begins from Melchboden, 1,400 m above Mayrhofen, one of the most reliable XC exit points in the Alps. From here the first turnpoint is in the glacial-ended Tux valley, 20 km away to the southwest. To get there it's a choice between the uninhabited 2,700 m massif that stands in the way, with its huge bowls and own valley system, or the populated, low-level, but longer route around the valleys. The more direct line will take you over a scarred granite moraine with a prehistoric feel. I've sometimes wondered what it would be like to stand amidst this green-tinted boulder field, 400 m above the tree line, on a strong day and feel the sheer power of the energy that the bare rock escarpment produces.

Once high here it's a straightforward blast along the southeast-facing valley walls towards an ever-growing landscape - the impressive granite 'main ridge' of the Alps stands before all those who enter the Tux valley, rising up to 3,500 m just a few kilometres ahead. On the other side of this ridge lies Italy.

Terrain in the Tux valley rises up 1,000 metres, including the valley floor. It's high and bare. Scree and rock meld with grey, blue ice and snow and elsewhere the familiar forests of the lower-lying Zillertal valley are replaced with barren, high-level grass. The higher terrain causes a noticeable rise in cloudbase and heights of over 4,000 m are not uncommon on the main ridge by mid-afternoon.

The panorama is some of the most impressive in the Alps and forms part of Austria's National Park; a surreal place where pilots can find themselves at 3,000 m plus and still have a rock face towering next to them. It's close to Himalayan flying, but without the hypoxia or having to leave the security Europe affords.

With the first turnpoint under your belt it's time to leave this special place, as the sun won't stop moving just because you are slowing down and taking in the view. Instead, retrace your footsteps back north to take-off in the Zillertal valley. If you're lucky, you may even find that a long street of clouds form to help you on your way. The moment you leave the Tux valley you feel a huge difference. The landscape changes, the mountains shrink away again, and the large, intimidating, sheer rock faces and eroded grass-covered cliffs give way to forest covered side valleys and high pastures. You're out of the big stuff!

Once high over launch again, look north and you can see the route to the next turnpoint at the Speiljoch cable-car station at the mouth of the Zillertal valley. The terrain here in Zillertal is classically Alpine; experienced Alpine cross country pilots can comfortably read the lay of the land and find safe, soarable faces. But beware! Nasty leesides lie in wait, hidden from the inexperienced eye.

As you make your way north, look to the right and marvel at the Pinzgau valley stretching out to the east, known to local pilots as 'the highway'. In the past, most of the longest cross country flights were made in this direction to take advantage of the unbroken, south-facing ridge that stretches almost 300 km towards the flatlands of Austria. In 2004,

Thomas Walder launched on a low training site, Perler, to adjust his new harness. Ten hours later he landed after dark, 254 km further into the foothills of the Austrian Alps.

Climbing over the turnpoint Achensee Lake comes into view to the north. Famous for its long history as a DHV testing site, the place now has a very active acro scene. Look left into the huge east-to-west running valley system and the city of Innsbruck, where Nova is based, stares back at you, trapped beneath huge mountains that scream 'come fly me!'

On any good day, from mid-afternoon onwards, the valley flow is predictable and predominantly from the north. Knowledgeable pilots can use this flow for an easy ride back to their goal in Mayrhofen. You may fancy the same yourself, but wait - not so fast! There is still one more turnpoint to grab on this Classic Route before you can pick up your T-shirt over a cold beer in Mayrhofen.

A ride across the infamous Gerlos Pass is required to Konigsleiten. A bustling winter playground, but a summer ghost town, Konigsleiten illustrates exactly what happens when you sell an entire village for holiday homes. To get there you first have to jump the wide, flowing river of the Zillertal valley itself. The place you choose to jump, and the moment you do so, depends on many factors, not least the time of day. The west-facing slopes on the other side hold several keys that you can use to reach your final destination - let clouds and altitude lead you. Cross straight away and you can soar back south along the west-face past the Weisenalm launch to the Gerlos Pass. If it's too early to be on the west-faces, cross later on to the south-

facing corner of the junction of the two valleys, where a howling thermal is usually waiting for you to spin up inside it. Or, if conditions are tricky or less obvious, jump to the Haizenberg launch on the spine that sticks out from the Gerlos Pass into the Zillertal valley. Facing straight into the valley wind the Haizenberg is one of the most soarable places in the area; if thermals are sparse wait here until a ride comes along that can take you high enough and on over the Gerlos Pass or into the convergence.

Where the Zillertal valley meets the Pinzgau lies one of the few local convergence areas, the valley winds collide and create a solitary cumulus cloud over the middle of the lake. Yet again, the relief rises to meet you and suddenly what seemed like an orbital altitude in the Zillertal valley now leaves you feeling like one mistake and you'll be on the deck. Just beyond the lake lies Konigsleiten, so dive on in and snap up the last point on your FAI triangle before you prepare yourself for the ride back home.

There's just one climb needed before an easy glide back to the flatter, wider, main Zillertal valley. Once you drop in you'll be travelling downwind at close to 60 km/h with only one more choice to make: do you land, happy with a job well done, crack open a cold beer and kick back, or refuse to be torn away from the beauty of the mountains around you? If you choose the latter, and soar up on the Ahorn 'hill of eternal lift', you'll find yourself in good company, as no doubt the locals will be out soaring until sunset.

Now fast-forward another 10,000 years. Who knows where'll we be? Or even if we will be! The world will have changed; the mountains, the atmosphere, the flora and fauna will be

unrecognisable! Will we still be paragliding in the Zillertal valley? I doubt it, but I'm sure someone will still be there having fun. [XC](#)

#### ROUTE FACTS

DISTANCE: 90 km  
SEASON: April - October  
TERRAIN: Alpine Mountains  
DIFFICULTY: easy - medium - hard  
FLYING TIME: 3 - 5 hours

#### THE AUTHOR



Kelly Farina has lived and flown in the Zillertal valley since 1996. Having first come for the snow, Kelly stayed on for the big skies the area has to offer. Kelly has been running Austrian Arena for six years now and offers a comprehensive guiding service to help visiting pilots get the most out of the area. He competed for the British Team in the European Championships. For more info on flying in Zillertal visit [www.austrianarena.com](http://www.austrianarena.com)