



gerloss pass

How to cross the

Kelly Farina opens the door to the Pinzgau valley



ALL PHOTOS: KELLY FARINA

By now most UK pilots will be familiar with the Zillertal valley in Tirol, Austria. My company, the Austrian Arena, has been offering guidance and support to visiting paraglider pilots for the last three seasons. During the spring and summer months our valley offers the experienced and novice pilot a whole heap of rewards. Last year I explained the 50km out-and-return tour around the valley (Skywings, June and July 2003), which many pilots have now attempted on good days in the Alps.

However, on an epic day in spring or summer, just flying to the mouth of the Zillertal valley and back is not using the day's full potential as just a few good high climbs will get a skilled pilot round quickly. The following article is not aimed at novices but at the experienced, thinking pilot who wants to make it over the first obstacle to the neighbouring Pinzgau valley, the Gerlos Pass (1,600m).

Once over it the way is open for massive distances. Schladming, 150km to the east and the 140km out-and-return to Zell am See become very possible with the right routes and planning. Thomas Walder, our local matador, flew 260km on May 18th this year flying a similar route.

This is a step-by-step route over this tricky pass with limited landing possibilities. Firstly it requires the right conditions. The best wind directions for this flight are a light westerly or north- or south-westerly at altitude with a relatively dry airmass and high-ish cloudbase (although on the day pictured here there were no clouds and I never climbed out above 2,800m).

The stronger and more northerly the wind the more you could find conditions more active than most non-alpine pilots would like. So consulting a local is never a bad idea; even just a stronger-than-expected valley flow can produce a lot of sink and turbulence on some mountains. Please remember to avoid flying these sort of distances alone - it's not a good idea. It's always safer and easier to fly with a guided group or some friends.

Our normal launch for this flight would be Melchboden at 2,040m. You could also use Penken but the way is longer to get across the valley. On a good day you should be aiming to launch at around 11.30am if you want to make a good distance. I mentioned in the last article about in-flight toilet problems and avoiding caffeine, salt and sugar, so I won't go into that again.

Once above Melchboden the first decision is when and where to cross to Kreuzjoch, directly to the east. This is a crucial stage, probably the most crucial. If you're 3,200m+ at Melchboden then crossing the valley directly is not a problem. However if you are below 3,000m then heading north towards the Oeflerjoch is a good idea, as the crossing is 2km shorter if attempted here (Photo 1 on next page). This may lose you a little time but save you valuable altitude. Obvious heat sources on the south-facing ridge below will deliver good climbs.

I'd suggest you'll need at least 2,800m here if you're going to attempt the 10km crossing to



Photo 1: Heading north towards Oefflerjoch

Kreuzjoch. So get as high as you can, relax and tuck in for the glide. The next stage is vital to making it over the pass. If there is a cloud ask yourself a few questions; how far in is it? And how much drift to the south does it have? From these two observations you can tell heaps about how deep to search for lift and how much lee-side action, if any, to expect.

The further in towards Gerlos you go you should find things get less turbulent. Below on this south-facing ridge there are some power cables. I would strongly recommend that if you have not found any lift by the time you reach the height of these you should turn around and head back to the Zillertal. Below there are very limited landing options, so a good decision here is critical to keeping safe (Photo 2). You may also find yourself gliding back to safety in a headwind.

As you can see from Photo 2 there are many potential heat sources below. Pushing slightly further east you'll find that the ridge goes into a massive south-east facing bowl. This is always a good place to search, especially if it's early. Once you've managed to climb up to at least 2,700 - 2,800m on Kreuzjoch you can glide onwards towards Isskogel.

Just below lies Gerlos town. There is a good bomb-out option on the south side of town. By now in the immediate distance you'll be able to locate the dammed lake, Durlossboden, just before the pass (Photo 3). Huge faces in the sun on the south side of this mountain should deliver strong climbs as by now the sun should have heated up the valley below.



Photo 2: 10km crossing towards Kreuzjoch

The next stage is very important as landing options will all but disappear until you are safely on the other side of the pass. Once you're high on the Isskogel, glide directly to the south-facing forests and fields to the north of the lake. This normally works but if you get too low here it's not advisable to push any further; much better to land in Gerlos. The crux here is to be patient and get as high as possible over the now-quiet ski area of Konigsleiten, the mountain in Photo 4 with the ski run coming down it.

To the east you'll see the large flat fields of the Pinzgau valley and countless landing options (Photo 5). With about 2,800m over the lake you should have plenty of height to glide in safety to Wald even if you find no more lift. For me this is very important so I can relax and enjoy the views while flying over the forests below. Just to the

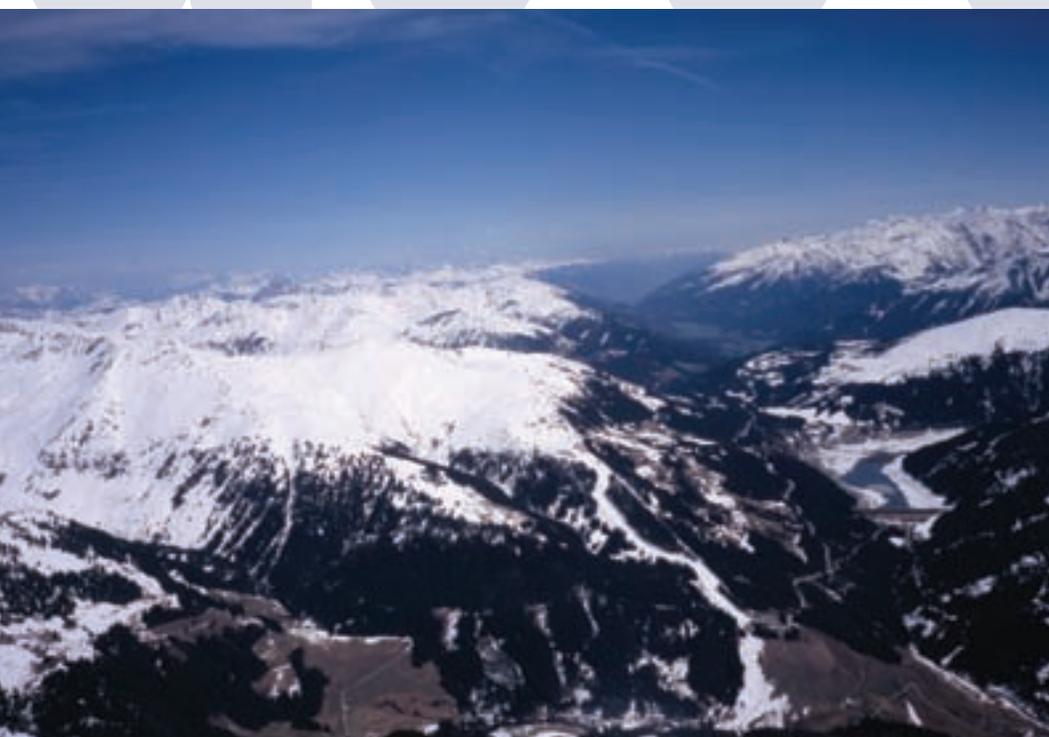


Photo 4: Gliding towards Konigsleiten ski area (Durlossboden lake to the right)

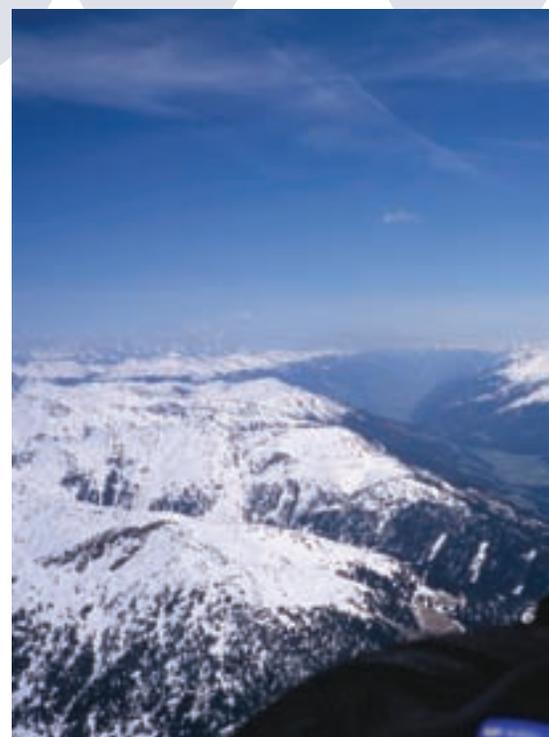


Photo 5: Above Konigsleiten with Pinzgau to the east



south-east is the 400m vertical drop of the Krimmler waterfall, the largest in Europe. During warm spring days the glacier meltwater cascading over this drop is at its most powerful.

Knowing that you are within gliding distance of friendlier terrain, it's time to think about gliding to the Gernkogel. There is one ridge before this mountain (see Photo 5), but in the past I've found it to be unreliable and rough due to a northerly that blows down the valleys on both sides of this narrow peak. However this is not always the case so give it a try; maybe on your day it will work. If you don't find anything, gliding to Gernkogel could cost a lot of altitude. Don't panic, as on a good day this mountain works low down really well, if a little rough due to the northerly blowing out the bottom. Again glide further onto the south face for the best climbs. Active piloting here is essential.



Photo 3: Gliding to Isskogel, 2,260m

Once at a good height above Gernkogel (Photo 6) it's possible to just cross directly to the next ridge, Rohrberg. It could be around 13.30 by now and the day's activity should really be getting going. On a good day in these mountains I'd expect climbs of anything between 2 and 8m/s, especially on the Wildkogel (pronounced Vildkogel). This is the mountain visible in Photo 6 around 8km in the distance.

Due to the Bayern wind (a northerly valley wind from the flats of Germany) at this time of day the climbs are always the strongest on this stretch of the Alps. It's important for pilots to have their gliders fully in hand and suitable for their skill level. This will leave you comfortable and relaxed enough to concentrate on the task.

You are now in the Pinzgau. Should conditions be good the amount of kilometres you eat is up to you. If you want to fly just a long one-way trip I suggest crossing to the west-facing mountains on the south side of the Pinzgau no later than 15.30; by then pilots should be at least over Kaprun. Then the way to Schladming is open... but this will feature as another pictorial article in the future.

Good luck, and if you want to attempt a flight like this anywhere I would always consult the local pilots. If you'd like to know more about alpine flying in Austria you can join our weekly courses based in Mayrhofen. Joining one of our informal clinics is a good way to safely push a little harder for that elusive 100km. Check out www.austrianarena.com for more details.



Photo 6: Above Gernkogel. Rohrberg and Wildkogel are in the distance