



Frank Goodman and friends on Piedrahita's Peña Negra launch

Flying in Spain: Piedrahita

Report by Frank Goodman

If a group of pilots were to sit down and make a list of features for their ideal paragliding site, it would be surprising if their varying degrees of experience and competence did not influence their choice. But I'm sure that reliable weather conditions would appear high on everyone's list. As a middle-of-the-road pilot who gets away from Derbyshire sites when conditions are good to excellent - i.e. not not that often - it's nice to supplement home flying with trips abroad for the good thermals that allow sustained cross-country flights.

Getting long in the tooth and having a growing inclination to indolence adds a special bias to my own choice of site, such as vehicle access to take-off, a reasonable road network for retrieves, plus a smattering of villages with a bar open to serve a cooling drink while waiting for a lift. I find plenty of younger people aren't too keen on flogging uphill in hot weather either.

However, many people I talk to on the Derbyshire hills think of Piedrahita as beyond their capabilities. When I mention that I've flown there in August there's always a sharp intake of breath and a question about horrendous turbulence. Of course it is hot in Spain in the summer and you can expect more thermals, but the overall picture I carry in my mind is that Piedrahita is benevolent. Let me

describe a typical flying day to show you what I mean. And I do mean typical - I flew there on 12 days out of 14 this year!

The take-off at Peña Negra is at the top of a 6,100ft pass. It's about 15km from Piedrahita, 30 minutes by car. 4WD is not required. There's a superb view of the long ridge with Piedrahita itself some 3,000ft below surrounded by large, flat fields. Arrive about mid-day, get a snack from the small café at the edge of the take-off area and wait. The thermals will be coming up the hill in gradually increasing increments - the wind-sock puffs out at five knots but slowly stretches more and more as the thermic wind intensifies. By two o'clock it could well be blown out, so choose your time and launch when you think it is right for you.

There is usually a westerly component in the wind and you'll therefore set off along the ridge or push out into the valley towards the north east looking for thermals. If you're unlucky - it does happen - you can land close to the village and try again. More likely you will spiral up to 8, 10, 12,000ft and watch the well-known land-marks of the zig-zag road and the corral drift past below you. If you lose it, the main road is only a short glide away. After ten km or so you reach The Pass. There's a gap in the ridge here and the valley narrows as the main road climbs over the high (ish) ground. To float easily over both the gap and the pass you need some height to start with. You will be amazed how quickly the sink drops you into the football pitch at Villafranca, which usually has a few unfortunate pilots sitting in the bar! This is a much better option than flying into the pass too low as the wind can funnel through and give you a very hard time (come on, nowhere's perfect!).



Once you're over the pass the valley becomes even wider and flatter, with bigger fields and the town of Avila beckoning another 30km away. After that you'll probably find you'll meet headwinds that will bring all but the best fliers to the ground, but you never know. Thermals can be strong but some are very benign, even on a blazing hot day. Once I drifted down to less than a hundred feet when my curses were silenced by the sound of a bleep from the vario. The air was bleeding up off a small knoll in the middle of a field in a continuous stream and I circled away in it, never climbing at more than 1-up until I was at ten grand and the knoll was an indistinct speck to windward. On some days there are convergence clouds over the ridge and then you can porpoise along under them without thinking about thermals at all.

By six in the evening the wind at take-off is slackening. Pilots are gathering again to enjoy evening flights and to swap stories of triumph or

humiliation of the day's events. Now is the time to float around in the 'magic air' above the village, to try out those manoeuvres that you like to practice high up in smooth air, or to just amble around and watch the sun go down.

There are of course other take-offs for other wind directions, and other towns to aim for, but the general feeling is of big distances to fly and easy landings - even in the mountains, and only a few places that you need to keep away from.

Piedrahita is a small town rather than a village and the eating and drinking is good even though there is little tourism except for free fliers. The development of paragliding in this area is mainly due to the well-known British pilot Steve Ham and his wife Puri, who is a first rate pilot too. Together they offer a complete paragliding service which includes bed and breakfast accommodation, transport to take-off and retrieves. Steve has become involved in white-water

kayaking too, so if you go out early, during the spring run-off, you can paddle good Grade 3 water if the flying weather decides to take a day off.

Steve knows the area intimately and will give you all the help you need. It's easy to forget what a privilege it is to fly with him. What other sport could give you personal guidance from one of the world's top pilots (Steve is an erstwhile European Champion and still holds the British distance record). Piedrahita isn't just a place where you get a smattering of local knowledge from the resident guru; you get first rate advice about your flying from a world-ranking pilot as well.

I first went to Piedrahita with some trepidation but discovered an area good for a wide range of piloting abilities. And there's lots of friendly help too if you want it.

Piedrahita Flight Centre is at: (+34) 920 360550.