



Photo with camera pole over Avila PHOTO: STEVE HAM

How to secure a scoop

During the last year's XC World Series at Piedrahita Steve Ham took a Spanish journalist aloft to explain what paragliding comps are all about... and bagged a new tandem record!

Outside of the specialist magazines, paragliding competition reports are rare and usually disappointing. Their journalists often have little idea of how paragliders fly and compete. After explaining to them how we fly cross country (rather than just timing the person who stays up longest), you then need to pass on some basic concepts of meteorology and aerodynamics. The increasingly bored journalist often has to leave for their next assignment before the conditions even become flyable. The resulting article is usually a mixture of errors and invention, accompanied by the newspaper's stock photo of a free-fall parachute or a 1980s glider embarking on a top-to-bottom.

In 2008 the province of Avila hosted three important international events: the British Open, the German

Nationals, and a leg of the XC World Series. This was a great opportunity to showcase the region's fantastic gliding potential, and for me a good opportunity to generate some enthusiasm in the press and to gain financial commitment from the local government to improve facilities. The tourist board also agreed to produce a poster for the events. The Spanish magazine *Parapente Vuelo Libre* had the perfect photo: Bruce Goldsmith racing over the city of Avila, an image encapsulating the feel of competition flying and instantly recognisable as the provincial Capital. However, they considered the magazine's services and image were too expensive and the local authority asked if perhaps their stock image would be OK (a 1980's training glider top-to-bottoming!). Luckily, Mark Hayman offered a super image from the 2007 Nationals of a glider high over Avila.

The British Open at Pedro Bernardo was a great success for the attending pilots and a welcome economic injection for the town. Local pilots benefited from a

much-improved access track to take-off. Task routes differed dramatically from previous Spanish competitions, opening up the fantastic potential of flying in the southern plains. There was an informative article in the *Diario de Avila* with an excellent shot of Pedro Bernardo from the air. At the time of the Pedro Bernardo event the Piedrahita town council were busy improving their launch site, possibly piqued into action by the rival venue.

The Piedrahita leg of the XC Open World Series in September was to be the star event of the year. It attracts many pilots of a wide range of abilities, from pilots flying fun class on DHV 1-2s to some of the world's best racers in the Open class. The XC Open differs from most race events in that pilots who fly the furthest win - an easy concept to explain to non-fliers. However this is complicated by the addition of three GPS computer-optimised waypoints which maximise overall distance if the course line is not straight.

I was the Meet Director for the event and would not normally be flying. However my plan was to fly tandem with a journalist on one of the good days after the event was up and running smoothly. I contacted the Diario de Avila, inviting one of their journalists for a tandem XC competition flight. Monday, three days into the event and showing excellent conditions, was the chosen day and Maria was to be my passenger.

Each XC Open pilot must be part of a retrieve team. My usual drivers, Teclas and Ester, were looking after a group of ten German, Russian, Romanian and British pilots. Normally, when flying XC with groups, I tend to shepherd them away from difficult landing and retrieve areas and I am in constant contact with the drivers as they follow along to ensure a fast retrieve. However, within a competition environment pilots tend to go wherever they think they can maximise distance, irrespective of terrain and retrieve problems. This can lead to some very late nights on the road.

The forecast was for light south-westerly winds, high base and the classic convergence along the northern plains. It was to be a big day with 200km potential and a likelihood of pilots spread over a huge area. For a normal race task I would have set a goal to Arcones - 150km along the straight N-110 highway - to ensure an easy retrieve. However with open distance pilots would follow the snaking convergence line wherever it took them, most likely further north of the fast route to the huge expanse of flat farmlands and scattered minor roads.

Maria arrived early for her competition day and was soon involved in the optimistic German, English and Spanish banter as we rode to launch. By around 12.30 conditions already looked superb with the clearly-defined cloud street of the convergence stretching to the north-eastern horizon. I had to fulfil my Meet Director roles and could not get into the air until quite late. Then, kitted out with two radios and my mobile phone on a lanyard to keep some semblance of control of the event, Maria and I finally took to the air.

My hope was to get involved in some typical competition activity: large gaggles and racing along near cloudbase with gliders strung out ahead and behind. The essential camera-pole photograph we needed was of us over the provincial capital of Avila clearly showing the city's iconic walls, and hopefully with a gaggle below us. This photo opportunity was 60km away.

We soon approached cloudbase amongst the tail end of the competitors. With the crisp visibility typical of early September we had an awesome view of the mountain chain and the vast flatlands to the north. The shadows cast by the cumulus indicated an easy stepping-stone route to the pass 20km away. Maria was behaving well, collaborating in the turns and not seeming too freaked out by the 4 to 5m/s climbs. We were soon at the pass, having overtaken a few small gaggles, but with streams of pilots ahead flowing over the pass to connect with the line of cloud leading us north-eastward.

The pass can be a little tricky if you get low, with potentially problematic landings for a tandem, so I was taking things slow at this time and circling a lot. We had been in the air for about 30 minutes when the inevitable happened: Maria started to feel sick. What a disappointment! Such potential and I would have to go and land. However, as we were now near 3,000m it was going to take a long time to get down. I encouraged Maria to get it out of her system, and

after a couple of wet and dry heaves to one side she felt well enough to continue.

I had confidence enough to fly past many circling pilots towards a classic climb area some 8km beyond the pass, already marked by some 20 or so pilots climbing out at various levels. We reached the climb at around 300m agl and rapidly climbed with a gaggle up to the beginning of the Valle de Ambles skyway. The convergence in the Ambles valley is one of the most potent parts of the system. Often the lift is too strong to fly directly below the clouds so you must fly at the edge of the street to avoid being sucked in. Typically the next 30 - 40km to Avila can be flown without needing to turn in climbs.

We were soon gliding towards Avila near cloudbase. However most pilots were gliding off well to the left of our track as the convergence line began to swing more northwards, away from the easy retrieve of the N-110, and more importantly for us, away from our important photo destination over the city. Within 25km of Avila we were almost alone, watching the stream of pilots now far to our north following the cloud street. I was sorely tempted to follow these epic conditions and perhaps improve on my ten-year-old Spanish tandem record. However we continued on the mission to Avila, now out of the convergence and being more conservative in taking climbs to stay high now that the objective was so close.

On the outskirts of the city there was abundant lift, enough to climb high and to cross right over the city centre, and with plenty of time to shoot off a variety of camera-pole photos of the monuments below. Maria had been sick in the first climb after the pass, but since then had been fine and was now enthusing about the view of the familiar cityscape below. The convergence line was now some 25km north of us but with plenty of cumulus leading to it. I sold Maria on the idea of a Spanish tandem record scoop for her newspaper, and after a long glide in sink over the eastern part of the city, we were soon beamed back to cloudbase in a rough thermal with peaks of 7m/s. Although now vomiting again, and shivering with the cold, she gamely agreed to continue with the new objective. The official Spanish record stood at 117km, made in 1998 by my wife Puri and I.

From this point we had to stay below a 3,000m airspace restriction. Since the cloudbase was close to 4,000m and the climbs strong, it was necessary to leave climbs at 2,700m to avoid accidental climbs above the airspace limit. The conditions led us well to the north of the N-110 over the flat yellow and brown tablelands, broken here and there by green blocks of forestry and scored by dry creeks, infrequent roads and sparsely dotted with villages. We spent most of the time gliding, with only the occasional top up to keep the sickness caused by circling to a minimum. We altered our course when lower to follow some the better roads, and when higher to keep to the edges of the deeper clouds.

As the afternoon wore on we occasionally spotted other pilots and I regularly spoke to Teclas to find out the position of our team's pilots and to give him a rough indication of our progress. Distance would only be scored until 7.30pm, and all pilots were required to text or phone in before 8pm to confirm that they were safe. Throughout the day my phone had been regularly beeping with the text messages of landed pilots. I needed to be on the ground by 7pm for the hour it would take me to check all 105 messages, in case we needed to call out a search for unreported pilots.

By around 6.45pm I had passed the 117km record distance, so now we just needed to add a few kilometres and find a decent-sized village to land at. Just before 7pm we landed at 126km in Pinarejos (140km with the three waypoints). I spent the next hour trawling through the SMS messages and by 8pm we had established that everyone was safe. Some were still flying beyond the land-by time for their personal bests, as the weakening conditions would continue until nearly 9pm.

Our immediate problem now was to get back home with the rest of our team who were spread out over various parts of Segovia and Avila. Teclas arrived for us at around 8.30pm with a Swiss pilot belonging to another retrieve team. Many of our group were already with Ester who at that time was searching for Alex the Russian in some remote village 40km north of Avila. Joerg was some 80km by road further from us. Phoning the Swiss retrieve in that area, we traded taking their Swiss for our German pilot. We just needed to collect Paul and Tobias who were in different villages some 20km back.

Tobias had been waiting at the house of an elderly Spanish farmer called Elias. Tobias could speak no Spanish, but Elias had told Teclas over Tobias' radio that his wife had prepared supper for Tobias and insisted that we all stay to eat. As the five of us sat down to scoff this country feast I felt a little guilty that Paul was waiting some 15km away, but soothed my guilt with various helpings of pork, and that Paul, being vegetarian, wouldn't have enjoyed it anyway! 20 minutes after bidding goodbye to our wonderful hosts we collected a hungry Paul, sitting in the dark at the side of the road. At midnight we dropped Maria at her home in Avila, arriving back to Piedrahita a little before 1am. Joerg and the Swiss guy didn't arrive until 4am.

The best distance was made by Chrigel Maurer with 220km, and who would also be the overall winner of the eight-day event. A number of other pilots flew to around 200km after the 7.30pm landing time. There were some personal bests amongst the few British competitors. In the DHV1-2 Class, tandem pilots Adrian and Sue Leppard made 79km, whilst Dave Regan managed to improve his PB from 20km to 100km.



Steve and Maria's route. Note the detour for the Avila picture.

Maria's very well informed article for the newspaper can be found (in Spanish) at <http://www.flypiedrahita.com/inicio/images/DiarioDeAvilaSep08.pdf>.

Steve Ham has been living in Piedrahita and promoting its flying potential since 1991. Detailed information on most aspects of flying in Central Spain can be found on his website www.flypiedrahita.com, including a booking calendar for XC holidays in 2009. From Saturday June 27th - Saturday July 4th Piedrahita will host the British Paragliding Nationals for the tenth time.