

I've got a wife and kids who are understanding enough to let me concentrate on paragliding for one week away each year, and in 2004 I decided to give Piedrahita a go. I've been to the Alps a couple of times and the weather hasn't been the best, and a non-thermic top to bottom just doesn't do it for me anymore. Plus there's all that valley wind stuff that doesn't apply in the south-east of England, which can be scary quite frankly. I wanted something I could apply to my UK flying, and Piedrahita sounded like it fitted the bill.

It has a mountain, which would mean I had a chance of catching a thermal before I hit the deck, and which can act as a nifty source of house thermals. It isn't crowded, so I was unlikely to find a bunch of other fliers grabbing a thermal at the same time like flies on... well, you know what I mean. It gets convergence, that magic stuff that you hear people flying for many miles on at terrific speed. It has big areas of flat ground just like the UK, and it's in Spain so the weather's always perfect. OK, the last bit's rubbish, the weather can be poor anywhere. My thought process was that I could apply the flying I learnt out there over here, as it was just like the UK but on a bigger scale, and with more reliable weather.

Did it work? Yes and no. The no is that last year the weather was appalling and I didn't fly once (this is the bit where Steve Ham cringes, but you have to tell it like it is). Let's face it though, you can fly to Brazil and be unlucky with the weather, and be a lot more out of pocket. The yes is that last year I returned and managed to beat both my altitude and distance personal bests, and had the most epic flying of my life. (I have to add at this point that the furthest I'd flown "XC" in the UK was the Brighton cliff run).

There were six fliers staying with Steve and Puri (www.flypiedrahita.com) for the week I was there, and none of us had known one another previously. Two of the chaps had flown there previously, and one of those was on his fourth visit, so weather permitting I knew it had to be a good place to fly. True to form, the enthusiastic West Country yokel guide had us up the mountain looking at the conditions the afternoon we arrived, and an hour later I'd just beaten my XC personal best, having flown 9km on more than one climb.

The second day was better. I did the same flight - to just past the Long Bar - twice more, but this time I got to, well got into cloudbase on the way. The next day wasn't so hot, consisting of a top-to-bottom before a cold front came through, but after the front had cleared base lifted nicely and flights over the Villatoro pass into the Avila valley were on offer.

In a westerly wind, a flight to the pass goes something like this: Take off and look for thermals on the first spine. Go up as much as possible and fly to the next spine for more thermals. Continue down the valley until you get to the Corral, and then get even more height so you can make it across to the next house thermal, which is the Quarry.

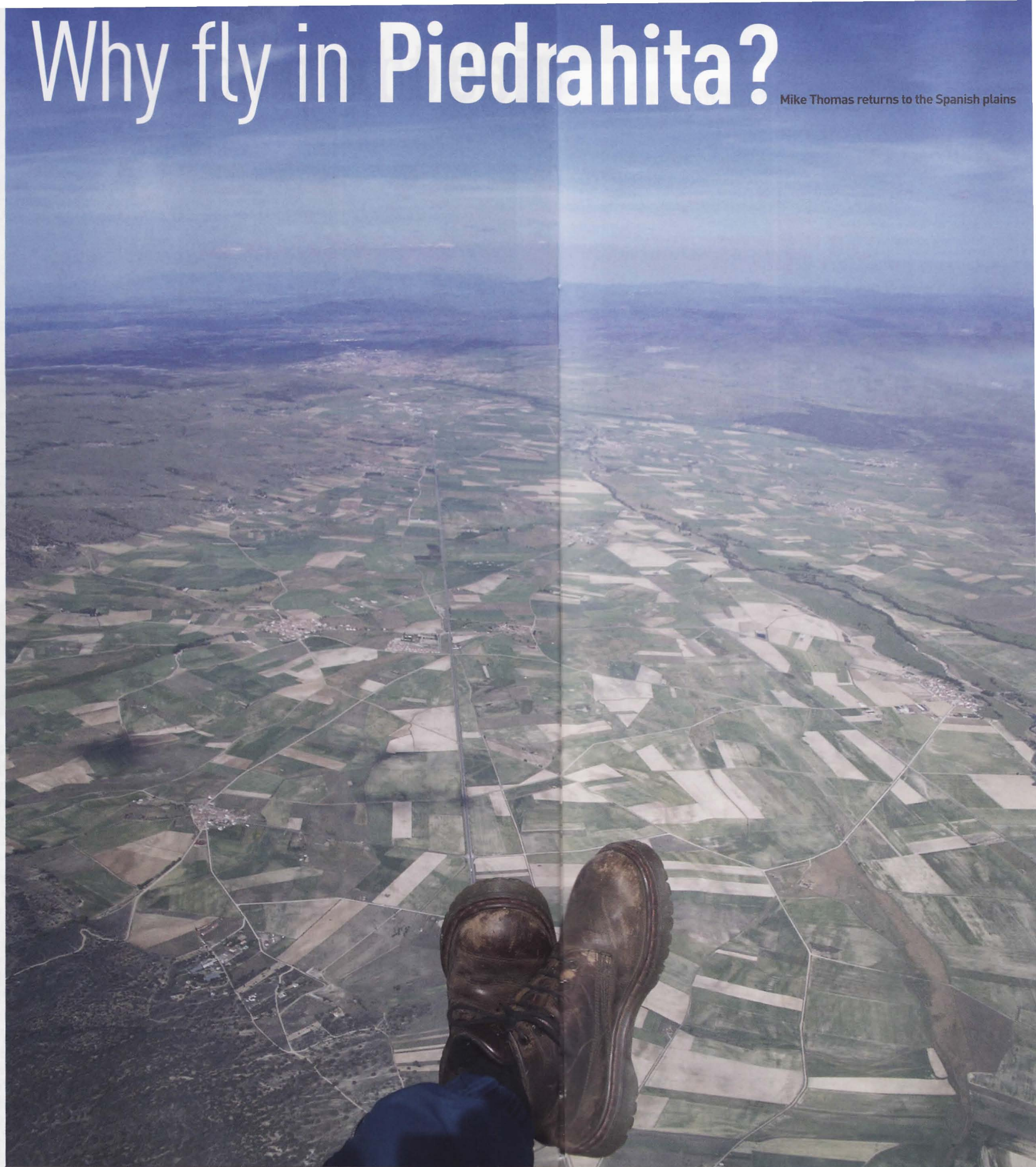
It's easier said than done, believe me, but I'd managed all this on the Wednesday of my visit and was running out of height when Steve radioed a possible low save from the Cemetery. Nice dead people! Two of us caught it at under 100m, and he coaxed us over the pass into the valley beyond. The place is teeming with birds of prey, and it's both exhilarating and tiring working the lift.

I flew 28km that day, but the next day I did better. Again crossing the pass, I found my own low save at 80m above the Avila valley floor (1,000m) to top out at 3,250m under a newly-forming cloud. I topped out again some time later, finding a thermal by seeing a Swift hunting insects at 2,800m. I eventually landed after three hours and 45 minutes, having flown 47km from the Peña Negra take-off. I was so happy, and was in desperate need of relieving myself by then anyway, so I wasn't that miffed at being 3km short of the magic 50.

If you like good flying in a cheap location, great guiding, with fantastic food cooked for you every other night, you could do a lot worse than Piedrahita. Am I going back? I want to, but have to check with my darling and remarkably attractive wife first. Did I say she was a fantastic mother?

Why fly in Piedrahita?

Mike Thomas returns to the Spanish plains



Above: composite of two photos taken over the Avila valley - 31km and 47km/h!

Below: standing on the Avila road, a long way from home! ALL PHOTOS: MIKE THOMAS

