



The legendary Steve Ham

The British summer of 2004 once again turned out to be very British and not much summer, so the prospect of two weeks in Spain got more and more enticing the closer we came to leaving. We had booked up with Fly Piedrahita (run by Steve Ham) early in the year, and decided to treat ourselves to a long holiday to lengthen the odds of good flying.

Having been for a week in April 2003 we knew what to expect, and were looking forward to the large, easy take-offs and plentiful landing fields. Knowing you are not going to have to hurl yourself off some unfeasibly steep scree slope or land amongst vicious spiky trees and boulders boosts the confidence and allows you to concentrate on the flying.

Piedrahita is a market town on the road between Avila and Salamanca. Bits of it are medieval, and the rest has grown up around it during various periods of prosperity. There is a lovely town square to enjoy a beer in during the evenings, and overall it has the really nice atmosphere of a quiet Spanish town. Quiet except for the Fiesta in August, that is, and then the place is a riot of live music, street bands, late night bars and livestock.

Steve has been there for years and introduced the free-flying community to the joys of the area. As a pilot he does not need introducing to British fliers, his name appearing all over the place in competition results. Steve's wife Puri is also an excellent pilot (she is the former Spanish women's champion) and flies or assists when she can. She has an excellent knack of talking people into thermals and providing radio-control low saves!

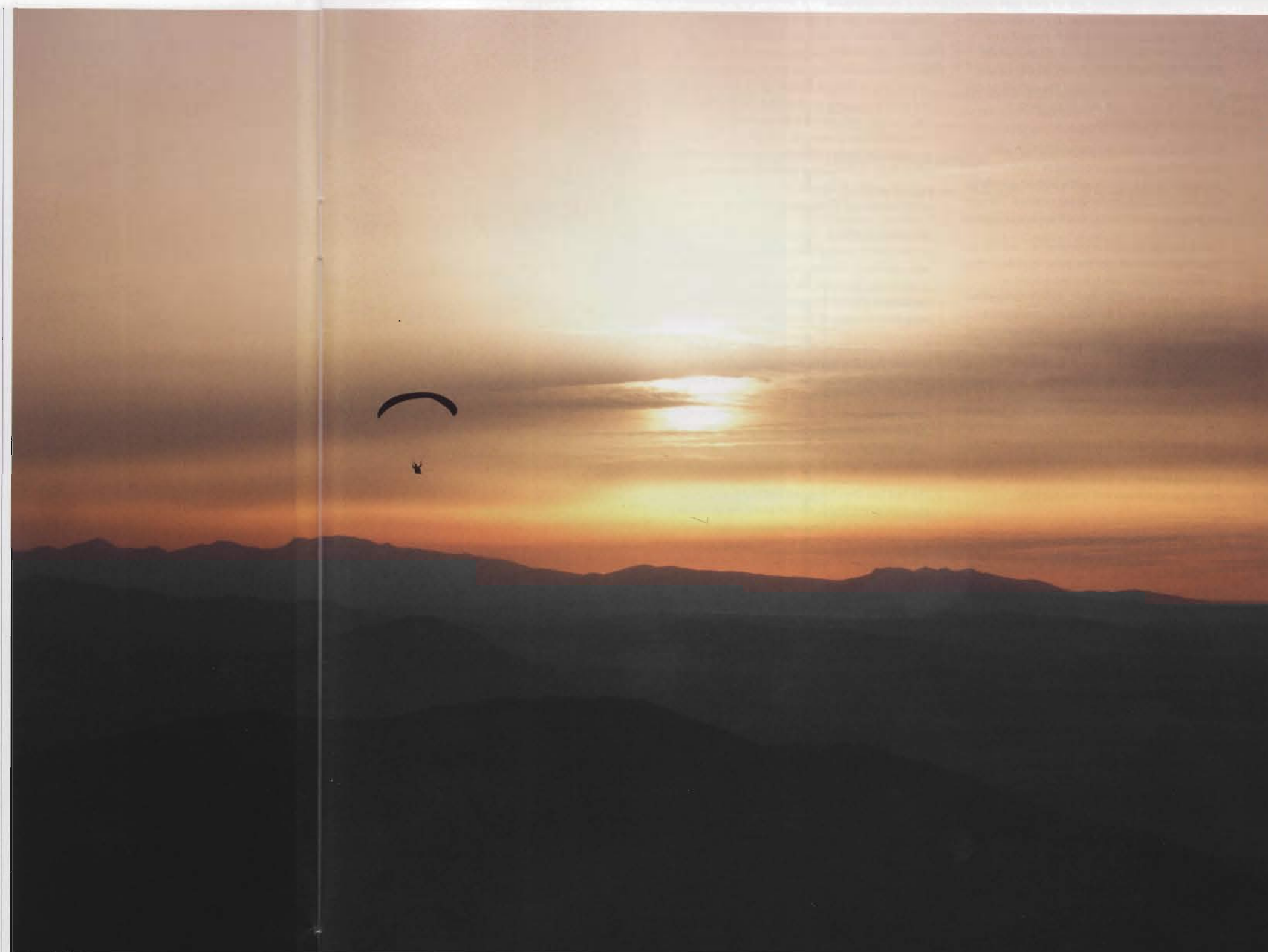
Together they run a superb operation providing guiding and half-board accommodation. You live with Steve, Puri and their son Oliver in their charming house on the edge of town. From the balcony you can see take-off, and it is a 20-minute drive to the top of the mountain.

A typical day starts with a leisurely breakfast and a quick check on the conditions. If the forecast tree that can be seen from the dining room is rustling very gently, then it is normally on. The bell is rung at 10:30, the signal to load up into the minibus for the first run up the hill. It is tarmac road all the way to the top, and for those who do not like precipitous mountain hairpins, the trip is pretty gentle on the nerves. Steve employs a driver so that he can concentrate on getting you flying, and be there in the air to guide you through the tricky bits. This also means an instant retrieve if you bomb out early, and a ride straight back to the top.

The first flight of the day from the house mountain, Peña Negra, is usually an easy float down, just as the first thermals are starting to wake up, giving you a 20 minute top-to-bottom. This gets everyone warmed up and ready to go for the big afternoon flights. With two official landing fields and plenty of unofficial ones should you spend too much time scratching the hill, the fly down is very pleasant. Just avoid the fields with one large cow in them, and the temptation of a spot landing in the bull ring.

Depending on the conditions, it might be straight back up again or a break for lunch. The bigger flights happen in the afternoon, and as usual in hot mountains, things can get pretty boisterous in the heat of the day. Steve takes great care to ensure people are flying within their ability and the low-airtimers are not lobbed off with the skygods. The target is to get away during the afternoon, or explore the valley, depending on the prevailing wind. With the retrieve driver on hand, you'll be back in time for an evening soar even after a 50km XC, and we enjoyed some really nice sunset flying.

After a hard day's flying, it's either back for supper at the house or out to dinner in town. Puri cooks fantastic meals every other night, and the town has enough tapas bars and restaurants to



And sunset flying too PHOTO: DIANE HEDGES

keep you well fed the rest of the time. The local bar seems to cater very well for pilots: huge steaks and burgers for the carnivores and the odd salad if you're at the top end of your weight range. Post-flight beer comes in iced tankards and slips down a treat.

All of our flying was done from the local site, Peña Negra (there are plenty of others, should the wind require it, but we did not need to travel when we were there). Peña Negra is a north-facing take-off at 1,900m, on the top of a long ridge running just about east to west. To the north are the flatlands,

pushing out towards Salamanca. In the summer these are burned brown with the heat, dotted with livestock and Spanish oak trees. Flying out towards the plains above the town usually rewards you with good thermals, and Steve points out the house triggers.

Behind take-off the ridge drops away slowly, before a serious chain of mountains rises up to the south which provides a stunning backdrop when you are in the air. Running down the ridge to the west you head towards El Barco, along an opening valley. If you head to the east you fly up the ridge to the

famous Villafranca pass. Here the hills rise up and you have to get high to make the crossing onto the Avila plain. Once you are through the pass the big distances are on, running down the plain towards Avila and beyond, or heading up towards Segovia.

There were seven of us for the first week; Steve Etherington and Claire from the Lakes, Alan, a Piedrahita regular, and Ian, Andy, Diane and I from Avon. A quick stop at the house to dump the excess baggage and we were straight up the hill and off, with our goal at a bar about 8km away. We all made it in the buoyant evening air.

The weather took a turn for the worse the following day, so we raided Steve's toy cupboard. Steve keeps plenty of amusements on hand, including kayaks, rafts, kites, buggies, boards, etc.

Things didn't get much better for much of the week. We were on take-off in a howling over-the-back wind on the day the European record fell. We even saw the pilots scud past below us in the valley having taken off at a different site. The two Steves did not really get peeved until the stories started filtering back about a 280km flight, breaking Steve Ham's own recent record.

Salamanca provided another day's entertainment. This beautiful university town is fantastic for drifting down little streets and around small shops. There are plenty of bars on the square, and for the culturally-minded the cathedral has lots to see, inside and out, as do various museums and galleries.

The rest of the week was plagued by high winds. One day ended as Diane got snatched by a dust devil and yanked through a small gap in a barbed-wire fence onto the road. Luckily she was unscathed. The wind got stronger from then on, and the day was canned.

Friday brought a break in the weather, and the two Steves and Alan got over the pass, to make it most of the way to Avila, which turned around an otherwise bad weather week. Jocky's competition arrived at the end of the week and managed a couple of tasks. The town was packed with pilots and the bars resounded to tales of "There I was...", usually with the words "going backwards" or "a tad rough" sprinkled in the conversation.

The following week was much better. We flew every day, although some of those were just a morning and evening flight, the wind still blowing strongly from the west. The evening flights were superb, watching the sun go down over the hills to the west, with good conditions and great sunsets.

Thursday morning finally brought more normal Piedrahita conditions: high pressure with a light northerly wind. After an early flight we were back up on take-off and starting to get excited. Steve and Diane set off on the tandem but got pretty low and were heading towards the landing field. I got off after a bad start, the delay giving that extra bit of time for things to heat up. Against all the odds, Steve had managed a low save on the tandem and was climbing out in the valley. I managed to join them in their climb. The sky was totally blue, not a cloud to hint at the lift, but there was plenty of it and Steve knows just where to look. We stuck to the high ground, drifting down the ridge, before pushing forwards for the corral and the usual house thermal. A slow climb there took us up and back towards the mountains, getting to about 2,900m before setting off on the glide over the pass.

Crossing the pass up in the mountains is fantastic, the hills below us now free of civilisation. On the horizon are the serious mountains to the south, and as you cross over, the plain gradually opens up. We headed out for the flat ground as we left the pass and picked up some good climbs. By now the wind had changed and we were facing more of a headwind as we pushed on. We got low, into the hot air above the fields and had to work the low climbs pretty hard. Half-hearted thermals and scrappy lift kept us up for a few more km, but the game was pretty much over as the wind went further round.

We landed in a large field, and the retrieve van had arrived before we had even packed up. The flight was a personal best for me, and my first real taste of climb-and-glide XC. We had flown 37km, crossing the famous Villafranca pass, and after all that we were back on take-off for a nice evening fly down!

Friday brought an even better flight. I nervously crossed the pass on my own and we all met up on the other side, stayed in the mountains for longer this time, gliding fast down the range before a strong climb and a push into the valley. Once again the wind turned and picked up. We all called it a day and landed at 45km, another personal best, and an even better flight than the day before.

The last two days flying had been fantastic, the pleasure of the flights and breaking my personal best enhanced as Diane had been there too. With too few hours to go XC by herself, flying tandem with Steve she had the opportunity to join in and really feel the fun of XC flying. I am sure we will be back again next year and maybe Diane will have a go flying solo over the Pass.

Over the two weeks we managed some great flying and had a fantastic holiday. We did not witness the hypoxic cloudbases or climbs so strong you have to turn your vario off before you go deaf, but we did leave elated and in one piece. Steve's guiding and Puri's hospitality were faultless, and to make it even better, we missed some of the worst summer weather the UK has seen for years. So if you are after great flying, good food and friendly après-fly, drop Steve an e-mail, book your ticket to Madrid and get out to Fly Piedrahita ([www.flypiedrahita.com](http://www.flypiedrahita.com)).



Salamanca, "drifting down little streets and around small shops"



Out in the Plains PHOTO: STEVE ETHERINGTON