

One week at Piedrahita

James Goldsborough



Briefing with Steve Ham (right)

Looking in the back of Skywings a few years ago, most of the adverts would have been for equipment. Look in the back of a current issue and it's nearly all holidays, guiding and accommodation. One advert that has always been there is the one for Fly Piedrahita, run by Steve Ham and his wife Puri.

My four friends and I were looking to go abroad for a week for more reliable weather and to push our flying skills a bit further. The group's experience ranged from 20 hours to over 100. We had done one or two XCs between us, but nothing above 40km in the UK. Mostly weekend pilots, we are hampered in the UK by only flying once every two or three weeks and sometimes a lot longer. A whole week abroad could double our airtime for the year.

Although we considered a couple of alternative destinations, the combination of the predictable weather conditions at Piedrahita and the guiding experience of Steve and Puri, established over many years, meant that this booking was always going to be near the top of any short-list.

With a bit of planning it's possible to get an Easyjet return to Madrid for around £50. Steve picks you up from the airport on the Saturday and it's a two-hour drive to the town. The set up at Steve and Puri's is great. The accommodation is guest-house style, and it's really clean and looked after. There's home-cooked food and plenty of wine every other night, all the transport and retrieves and of course the flying. All this adds up

to very good value (check out the details at www.flypiedrahita.com)

Our flight was delayed and we didn't arrive until around eight in the evening. Nevertheless, having stopped briefly to drop off our clobber Steve took us off to a late-evening take-off. Sorting out retrieve numbers and frequencies in the minibus as we snaked up the hairpin road to launch, I couldn't believe we would be flying this late into the evening.

We took off at a quarter to nine as the sun was just starting to go south. Amazingly, it was still soarable at the Chia take-off. The air was smooth as silk and we all flew for 20 minutes or so, some of us for the first time that year. When the wind inevitably switched off we pushed out for the short glide to the bottom landing. Steve picked us all up, and as we drove home in the dark he phoned home to get the tea on. Result!

Steve's plan for the week was to have us up the mountain for a flop-to-bottom early on, return for the XC flight and then have some evening soaring at a suitable site later on. Unfortunately for us, on day two the wind was a bit easterly and the legendary Pena Negra launch would not be flyable until the afternoon. We went back to Chia, an easterly site which tends to work earlier on for XCs.

Steve doesn't just brief you, he also flies the course with you (or Puri) and is able to pass on his vast experience over the radio on every flight.

Steve is currently the top Brit in the world rankings, currently ranked third in the world. Puri, a former Spanish champion, is no mean pilot herself and this experience is worth the fee alone.

Taking off into a blue sky with cu's starting to form, Steve gave us a quick commentary: where to fly, where he expected to pick the thermals from and where not to go over the back. Gaggling to be up there, we all quickly took off, this time with full instruments and radios. The plan was to push out and connect with the south-facing ridge, hook a big one to base and then cane it over the back towards Piedrahita town, carry on for 100km, then turn round and come back for tea.

As we all know flight, plans are subject to change. Once in the air it wasn't easy. The wind was breaking up the small thermals in "British" conditions. Steve and Jonathan did manage to fly a few km up the ridge but were very quickly decked. I didn't make it that far and missed the bottom landing (again). The shame of it!

Steve said it was quite a difficult day. As usual, on the way for some lunch the sky looked epic. This was bad news for us though as the wind was now making a safe launch impossible. As Steve said, "Every day is flyable, it's just that some days are more survivable than others."

Day three and our first chance to fly Pena Negra. However the wind still wasn't playing ball, having a noticeable easterly component. Steve expected it to come on as the thermal activity strengthened,



Piedrahita town

but having waited for a while it wasn't looking likely. We settled for a lower launch which was at least into wind. Well, no cross or back wind... nil wind in fact. We rigged and just sprinted off the side of the mountain; not quite as daft as it sounds as the sky was starting to look fantastic with a high base and a few big soaring birds about.

I pushed out far enough to find the lift was exactly where we had been told it would be. I was having a bit of a hard time climbing and only really maintaining in the choppy air, until Mark flew over my head and straight into the thermal I was on the edge of. Together we climbed for around 1,000ft before Mark took a glide to town. I stuck with it to near base, all the time wondering why nobody else was taking off.

It turned out that there was now a tailwind on launch. Mark and I had been lucky getting off when we did. Jonathan did get off, leaving his radio behind, and Phil opted for a run down a stream and a fall in the mud.

On my own, I left my climb at the top and took a glide to my next likely-looking cloud, encountering some sink as I did so. Nothing to worry about, I told myself. You always get sink leaving a cloud on a glide, and just over there is the next stonker. In fact, just over there was a more strong sink so I stuck the bar on. Further on where the lift should have been was even stronger sink, my vario now reading 1,000fpm down. I arrived on the deck wondering how I had managed to get down out of the sky quicker than when I went up. Later in the evening we returned to Chia for some more evening soaring, and this time I made the footie pitch!

The next day it was east and strong. Disappointed, we went white-water rafting in Steve's two-man inflatable rafts. The rafts are very high tech; they even have holes in the bottom to let out any water you take in. No, really, it does work! Steve, paddling a kayak, advised us which parts of the river to paddle. Alan and I ignored him and promptly fell in at the first rapid. We started to get the hang of it by the end of the afternoon. It was really good fun and the water wasn't too cold in our wetsuits.

Later on we were back at Chia for another round of smooth soaring, the kind where you just take photos of all your mates and practise those wingover things. We did use a different part of the mountain to take off on. It was a lot shallower than we were used to, and Steve reckoned that we wouldn't all get off first time as he peeled back the fence to give us a take-off run.

Steve doesn't actually instruct or make any decisions for you, merely guides you and lets you make your own decisions. I did hear him say, "You can take off just over there if you want. I wouldn't but..." We all managed it first time; if there is one thing most of us Brits are good at it's take offs.

The atypical strong east winds stayed for the next two days. We managed another section of river in the rafts and some more evening flights but the epic XC from Pena Negra just never happened. It wasn't all bad though - we flew every day but one, the sun shone every day except one and we had a great time. The potential is there for epic XC flying, as previous competitions and world records have proved, but it's also tame enough for a bunch of not-very-current Brits out for the annual flying holiday. Cheers, Steve and Puri.

Evening soaring



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