

QUEST FOR FUN

Words by Adam Hunt

Australians love to travel, it's a fact, and I'm worst than most. In the past six and a half years, I've done a five month lap of Europe in a 1978 VW Campervan, lived and worked for a year in Amsterdam (nudge, nudge – wink, wink), spent three years in London, and most recently, two years in New York City.

Being, as I am, addicted to travel and hang gliding, I am currently two months into a six-month flying odyssey across the United States of America.

I don't really know where I'm going but ... I know I'm on my way!

I feel very lucky to have been able to fly at sites all over Australia, New Zealand, Austria, Germany, France, the Canary Islands and now the United States. You can take it from me, from the crater of majestic Mount Haleakala to the wicked saw-toothed edge of Austria's Wilderkaiser, to the endless sunset-colored sands of Oz's Rainbow Beach, the best thing about each journey without a doubt has been the people I have met.

You may not be aware of it, but hang gliding hospitality is a worldwide phenomenon. For, though their cultures, language, occupations and backgrounds may differ drastically, people who love to fly share a bond that transcends all differences. It has proven no different in America. At every site I've pulled up to, I've met extraordinary people who have gone out of their way to get me in the air. I feel as though I've made so many new friends here.

The above notwithstanding, I would like to make one observation about flying in the U.S. Whilst I will defend to the death anyone's right to try and make a living out of our sport, it's sometimes disconcerting to visit a site monopolized by a commercial enterprise. I totally agree that the safety and longevity of a site require a degree of organization, cooperation and (shudder) paperwork, but ... nowhere else have I paid so much, so often just to go flying.

Which brings me to why Quest Air Soaring Center is a breath of fresh air of hurricane proportions. Don't mistake me, Quest is a commercial airpark, but with a crucial difference.

Quest has the mood and attitude of a big flying family and that's due mainly to the people who own and operate the park. They have managed to preserve the atmosphere of the early days of aerotowing when a bunch of friends would get together in a pasture for a day of fun and aviation.

Another thing that sets Quest apart from the other towparks is that whatever your level of experience, I can think of no other park in the world that comes close to what Quest has to offer in terms of practical experience, level of skill, safety or facilities.

Allow me to tell you in brief about the hang gliding oasis of Central Florida and forgive me if I wax a little too enthusiastic.

The Dragonfly tug is the world standard by which all other forms of aerotowing are judged and Quest is home to the original Dragonfly Team, including designer Bob Bailey. The cast of characters also includes Russell Brown and Campbell Bowen, developers of the 'over and under' tandem harness and the landing gear that has become standard for tandem gliders. Did I mention Bill Moyes? Yes, that Bill Moyes, the always energetic, irrepressible visionary of Moyes Delta Gliders. Bill is a frequent visitor to the 120-acre park with its 2000' smooth grass strips covering any and all wind directions. He is always full of suggestions for improvements (which he backs up with hard labor, mate!)

Although I came to Quest to fly, I was pleasantly surprised by how much else there was to keep me occupied. My favorite spot was the 9 acre spring-fed, sandy-bottomed lake. I camped on the

grassy shore and spent a lot of time swimming, canoeing, riding the exhilarating boom swing or just appreciating the natural beauty from the observation tower.

For those who prefer their water chlorinated, Quest has a swimming pool in a 40'x40' screened enclosure with a child-safety door and a lounging deck with hot tub.

Beat the heat in the 3000 square foot clubhouse with its lively bar area, communal kitchen and large shower-equipped bathrooms. Watch satellite T.V. or a videocassette play foosball or darts but be wary of the pool table, there's a local named Tyler who has a fin growing out of his back. There's plenty of room for most any activity, which was proved to me one night when I watched Tyler and Russell take unicycle lesson from newly soloed pilot Eva White (everyone survived the experience with limbs intact.)

When you get tired you can retire to the loft bunkhouse or one of three private rooms.

I'd like to mention two non-pilots who are nevertheless very much a part of the Questarian family; Bob's lovely wife Connie and landowner, Frank Menefee.

Connie Bailey is surrogate mom to all pilots and one very lucky retired greyhound named Lizard (Lizard is very friendly and invites all h.g. pets to come and visit). Weekends and most weeknights, Connie serves Southern home cooking for a small donation.

Frank Menefee is not your typical landowner. He works as hard as anyone does at Quest, giving generously of his time and expertise to maintain and improve the facility, everything from mowing the runways and orange groves to helping a foreign pilot buy a car. He is the epitome of a true Southern gentleman.

But enough local color, I'll move on to the things pilots are most likely interested in, a little history and a bit of technical data.

Quest Air is located at Groveland Airport that was formerly Sheets Aerodrome. The facility was used after WWII as a training ground for returning servicemen to learn to fly Piper Cubs. The eight T-shaped hangars still stand and accommodate Dragonflies and hang gliders quite nicely.

Modern, safe aerotowing originated when Bob Bailey designed a tow vehicle capable of flying at the slow speeds necessitated by pulling a hang glider. Russell and Bobby, towed aloft by Campbell Bowen, made the historic first tandem aerotow. This led to an immediate revolution in how people are introduced to hang gliding and trained as pilots. About fifty per cent of all those currently learning to hang glide in the U.S. got their first taste of the sport through an aerotow tandem.

While Quest does its share of 'intro' flights, it is so much more than just a tandem towmill. The staff create and nurture pilots, an indispensable service for the future of the sport, but are also interested in the larger world of flight as evidenced by their recent acquisition and utilization of a winch which gives paraglider pilots access to the booming skies over Central Florida.

Their participation in the world of hang gliding beyond their school recently took the form of hosting the 1999 U.S. Hang Gliding Nationals (see article by G.W.Meadows, Hang Gliding, July '99) and Russell and Campbell together with G.W. Meadows are spearheading a bid for the 2003 World Hang Gliding Championship.

I guess you've got the idea by now that I'm rather keen on the place so I'll just say a word or two about one of the most unique individuals it's ever been my pleasure to meet: Bob Bailey, the quiet genius.

Having already designed the Buccaneer II amphibious ultralight, Bob looked around for a new challenge. Being a hang glider pilot since 1970, he wanted to make it possible to fly in Florida without towing behind a boat (which required a large lake, a willing driver and an expensive boat).

He then created the first tug by modifying a Cobra ultralight. Bill Moyes got wind of it and with his generous support, Bob designed and developed the first Dragonfly.

Bill, who knows a thing or two about hang gliding, reckons Bob is the "Einstein of Flight". All of Bob's ideas are elegantly simple, which is their main strength, such as the small but effective metal tip lever or the "Bailey Block" catch/release system for the tension pullback and nose-catch on hang gliders. Both inventions were first used on Moyes gliders and are now seen worldwide. Bob also designed the batten form and shape machinery that quadrupled the strength of the ribs and more than quadrupled the speed at which they are manufactured. But I could go on and on ... so I will: Bob designed the Bailey secondary tow release safety system, now widely copied, and, on a slightly larger scale, the Tempest sailplane.

I first met Bob in Australia some ten years ago when I did some photographic work for Moyes Delta. I was invited to watch and record the first flight of the Dragonfly. As it took to the sky it was not at all like watching the maneuvers of a three-axis ultralight – rather the craft became an extension of Bob and he an integral part of the machine - Bob became the Dragonfly. I was fortunate enough to be one of the first pilots to tow behind the tug and to this day it remains a cherished memory.

So I say to any pilot out there who wants something out of the ordinary and who may be just a little weary of being treated like a walking wallet, make the pilgrimage to Quest. It's anything but business as usual!