

## **Where in the world to learn to Hang-glide? By Angie Weir**

You've probably experienced how difficult it can be to get the right kind of weather to learn to fly in the UK. This coupled with the fact that I wanted to learn in February added to my decision to look outside the UK to convert from paragliding to hang-gliding. Investigations on the Internet led me to Quest Air, close to Orlando in Florida, USA. Quest were the most flexible of the American schools I contacted and agreed to modify their standard package to suit my experience.

On arrival in Orlando with my partner Chris, who came along to do a little flying, we were collected from the airport by Bo Hadgewood who was to be my instructor. He took us back to the Quest Air clubhouse where we were shown to our air-conditioned room. Bo advised us to sleep in the next day and take it easy to get over the jet lag, he was right.

We got up late, lounged around, and then took a leisurely walk around the grounds of the 120-acre air-park. The runways are two 2000' smooth grass strips that can be used in all wind directions, surrounded by orange groves. The perfume from the oranges and blossom is breathtaking. There are also two large lakes where alligators can sometimes be seen basking in the sun when you fly overhead. Later in the holiday we'd take a canoe or swim out trying to get a closer look, but the "gators" remained illusive.

I started my training flights early the following morning and I do mean early! To catch the smooth conditions training is carried out from just after sun-up until the thermals start popping and in the hours leading to sundown. This leaves the bulk of the day for more advanced flying or other activities. I took three tandem (dual) training flights to 2,500' on an Airwave Double Vision. This was my limit, as I was exhausted. Bo told me jokingly that I was going to have to build my arms up. Thankfully each day they became stronger and I was soon able to get the glider back into normal flight when Bo deliberately put the glider into fairly big oscillations as part of my training.

Training at Quest is all aerotow based using the three axis Dragonfly tug which is capable of towing hang-gliders at well below 30 mph. Quest is home to the original Dragonfly team, including designer Bobby Bailey. All the training gliders come with a set of purpose made landing gear made by Russell Brown the chief instructor and vice president of Quest Air. Initial flights are made on a tandem glider using a harness system pioneered at Quest that has the student suspended below the instructor. This allows the student to get the feel of what it is really like to be the pilot but also allows the instructor to have as much control input as required. Having flown as a passenger using the side-by-side harness set-up I can confirm that this method is far superior when towing. They also use a different tow bridle to the type we use in the UK called the V-bridle.

With the V-bridle system tow points are located on the keel and shoulder straps or tow loops of the harness, causing the tow forces to be distributed evenly between the pilot and the glider. The attachment position on the keel is adjusted so that minimal pitch force (pull-in) is required to follow the tug. The main release point is at the keel and is activated using a Quest manufactured system utilising a bicycle brake lever located on the upright or base-bar. A secondary release is located at the shoulders and is usually a tube/webbing type. When qualified I used my normal UK release as a secondary.

During our stay, for a few dollars a head Connie Bailey would cook up a fantastic evening meal. On one of the Saturday evenings she held a party night and made fresh sangria to accompany a Mexican main course and a really tasty pinacolada desert that was such a hit we came back with the recipe.

We were made to feel right at home, not just paying customers thanks to the relaxed atmosphere of the place.

By the end of the second day of training I was setting-up and making the landings, as well as doing all the flying. Bo did occasionally give me a little help but this was mainly when he thought I wasn't strong enough to get the glider round. He particularly stopped me making sharp, low-S turns when setting up my landing approach. Bo said this was my PG side coming out, and he got me to make more elongated 180 turns.

On the third day I only had one morning flight as it was a little bumpy and Bo had to have more input. He said he would take me up in the tandem Exxtacy later in the day, to let me have some thermalling experience. The Exxtacy was something else, steady as a rock, you pulled the bar in, and it seemed to have a life of its own and whoosh, you were off. I felt it was easier to fly than the cumbersome double vision. In the evening I had two more tandem flights on the double vision, with more induced oscillations on tow, to prove that I could fully control the glider on the tow. Then just before sunset Bo, knowing how eager I was to solo asked if I wanted to give it a go.

I was ready in a shot! As it was getting late in the day, the tow was only to 1500' whereas all the previous ones were to 2500'. The solo glider was a Wills Wing Falcon, with an extended keel fitted with a wheel on the end, and landing gear identical to the tandem glider. Also there was a fin fitted to the end of the keel to help reduce the likelihood of any oscillations whilst under tow.

The glider was a breath of fresh air on tow and just as good off it. It was so much easier with only my own weight to contend with. Unfortunately, I was having trouble judging the roundout with my face so low to the ground. It was an alien position for me to land in and I bounced up about 5 feet! I let go of everything which is the usual drill if you are going to land heavy, but still managed to hit my hand on the base bar. My first and hopefully last hang-gliding injury!

During the heat of the day training was not possible so we had to find other attractions. Do you remember those cool adverts for Wriggles Gum on the TV many years ago featuring a hang-glider? Well the star of those adverts, Robert Combs has been designing and building a system he calls Water-Gliding. This consists of a high-powered speedboat with a hydraulic payout winch and rear deck for launching hang-gliders. The system is completed by a tandem glider equipped with large floats to land on the water. With this set-up he runs a business similar to the paracending operations you can find at most resorts. This has to be a great way of introducing people to the sport of hang-gliding. Luckily for us Rob was in Florida for the winter and he took us both out on a nearby lake for Tandem rides. Landing on water was great fun, and towing over the water was as smooth as glass.

Over the next few days my flying progressed. I was dead keen to fly as much as possible. Bo was constantly telling me "imagine you are laying on a ball, if you start to roll off to one side you have to be on top of it as it begins to happen, do exactly the same when you fly." I found this to be very useful advice. Sometimes there was quite a bit of wind at 2500' when I released from tow and I thought that I needed to have quite a bit of speed on initially to move forward over the ground towards the airfield. There really wasn't a problem I just wasn't used to being a hang-glider pilot and being able to penetrate in stronger winds.

I was encouraged into running round the airfield with a "normal" Falcon to get used to the feel of it for hill take offs, landing and flaring. I wasn't too keen at first as it was hot and I was feeling lazy after my flights. The uprights were very uncomfortable on my arms, and were bruising me. Thankfully another female pilot Michelle came to my rescue with a set of 12" upright-pads. I have to say that I've stolen the idea and have made a set of my own, colour co-ordinated of course with

my harness. (I am still essentially a PG pilot at heart). All that running about in the heat turned out to be time well spent as those 'practice flares' have proven invaluable.

The next stage of my training was to move to a Falcon fitted with large wheels on the base-bar; much like those used in the UK. The glider still had a fin on the keel, but in every other respect it was just a normal hang-glider. The previous training gliders had all been capable of launching on their own gear but this glider required the use of a dolly (cart) as used by qualified pilots. I found that launching from the dolly was little different than using the full landing gear.

I was still landing on the wheels and was disappointed that my landings were not perfect. I wanted to start landing on my feet, as I would be doing in the UK. Eventually I got my round-outs better judged and Bo decided it was time for me to prepare for foot landing. On my next flight I practised flying out of prone, in the budgie position. I was only doing 1000ft tows, as I wanted to get in as many take offs and landings as possible. Despite it being thermic and rough low down, I was able to do good foot landings. I definitely feel more at home coming into land on my feet and find it easier by far to judge the round out.

On the last day of my flying, the air was the roughest I had yet experienced on a hang-glider, but I was very confident and enjoying the trust that Bo was having in me. He was letting me fly when he wouldn't let other trainees. The first flight was good, I was on top of the situation, it was challenging and I was having fun and feeling really great. My second flight was bumpier, so much so that I had a real struggle keeping behind the tug, but I was going to hang on no matter what. I flew around enjoying the view and did a perfect foot landing. A perfect ending to a perfect holiday.

But that is not the end of this story. I was so taken by the place that I returned this summer to fly my own Avian Elan hang-glider and to learn to fly both a trike and the Dragonfly with the intention of becoming a tug-pilot. I now have over 30 hours on hang-gliders and over 30 on powered flight. Most of my hang-gliding has been thermalling; I've very little ridge soaring on a hang-glider. I've progressed to a Wills Wing RamAir, flown short XC's, landed out and had Bobby Bailey kindly fly the tug out to tow me back up again with the encouragement of the local farmers, brilliant! I've been towed up above the clouds, over a mile above the airfield for a photo-shoot with Adam Hunt who photographs for Moyes. Not bad for my first six months of hang-gliding!

Quest Air is an excellent place to fly hang-gliders. They even have a Koch winch that they use to tow paragliders. This summer I saw a pilot from Colombia get to 2000' by step towing on his Sigma-4. The paragliding scene is only small at the moment but it is set to expand. Winter and early spring are the best months for XC flying with many 100 milers made in Florida each year. In the summer the cloud-base is low, 2000-5000 with storms often developing by late afternoon. But XC flying is still possible; I've seen a barely qualified student thermal for over an hour and weekend pilots fly more than 40 miles in August. If you want to train then any time can be good, just be aware that Florida is hot and humid in the summer. Post Christmas offers the cheapest flights from the UK and makes Quest a great escape from the dreary winter blues. They can offer on-site accommodation or if you are on a tight budget you can camp on the airfield and use the communal kitchen and bathroom facilities. Unless your visit co-insides with that of hurricane Floyd or his kin you'll have great airtime. You might even see me there as "I'll be back."

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**Angie Weir**