

first time paraglider

Paragliding looks easy doesn't it? Well it is really compared to flying a hang glider, but it's still a skill and one that takes a while to master. This little article describes the first flight of an Avon member on such a vehicle. Names have been changed to protect the innocent.

It was a spring weekend on Westbury, one of those days that never lives up to its forecast. We'd been flying hang gliders earlier in the day but the air had become boring and the wind had shifted around to the west. Tiny, a practiced flyer of both types of flex wing had a few flops around the bowl on his mattress and pronounced it smooth and a little dull. Enter Estephan, ace hang glider pilot and general lay-about. "As it's so smooth could I have a try at ground handling your chute," he asked hopefully. Being a perfectly decent chap, and knowing Estephan to be a very competent pilot, Tiny agreed and set about explaining what all the strings and things were for.

At this point I should mention a few things about Westbury on a weekend in Spring. It's crowded. Not only with rabid aviators but with dog-walkers, mountain-bikers, nude sunbathers, screaming brats, ice-cream scoffers and the like. More like a beach than a hill side. The flying is usually watched with interest and is accompanied by cries of "you must be raving bonkers mate!", "what's the sleeping bag for?" and "don't your arms get tired hanging on for so long?". Those who were clustered around the bowl that afternoon were in for a treat.

Estephan was strapped in and proved to be surprisingly adept at inflating (not entirely unrelated to his ego). After twenty minutes of doing Joe 90 impersonations dangling beneath the bright yellow canopy Estephan was growing more and more confident. "This is piss easy," he thought. At least I assume that's what he thought, because he then asked Tiny if he could have a fly around the bowl for a while. He'd top land he assured him. As there was nobody else in the air it was just perfect, wasn't it?

Tiny gave in to pressure and agreed to let Estephan have a go. Up came the chute, no problem in the 8-10 mph breeze. Estephan tottered towards the edge of the hill, leaning into the wind with his arms held high. I was reminded of a Scottish country dancer. I shouted "hoots mun, the noo" just as Estephans feet left the ground. For a full 0.0234 seconds he remained motionless, balanced against the wind. Then he moved backwards and downwards as the chute arced back towards the assembled spectators. I noticed that the wind had picked up a bit as I too dived for cover to avoid being tangled in the collapsing canopy. Estephan hit the deck with a mild thud and headed off in the direction of the hill-fort in pursuit of the semi-inflated canopy. He didn't really have any choice in this manoeuvre as he was flat on his back whizzing along like a yacht under full spinnaker.

"Look at that, Ethel" said an old lady to my right. Her eyes joined those of a hundred others as they followed the progress of the impromptu land yacht. Then all of a sudden he was gone, whump! down into the hill-fort's outer ditch. The crowd erupted into a fit of giggles. They'd have something to tell when they went home that night. "Told you it was dangerous" said Ethel's partner. The reply was interrupted by a fresh wave of laughter as the canopy reappeared from the ditch a few yards from where it had entered, still towing the prostrate Estephan. He'd picked up some passengers too. A lump of stinging nettles clung gamely between his shoulder and neck.

At last his progress was slowing. But would it slow enough before... No, whump! he crashed down into the next ditch in line and once more disappeared from view. I admit we should have been chasing him, but the fit that was afflicting the majority of onlookers was also disabling us as we clutched our stomachs and frantically wiped tears from our eyes to ensure that we had a perfect view of the proceedings.

The crowd waited with bated breath for the second coming. Nothing. The belly laughter was once more reduced to giggles when the bedraggled figure of Estephan finally appeared from the ditch clutching the now deflated canopy in his arms. A small round of applause greeted his reappearance and his smile indicated that neither he nor the paraglider was seriously damaged.

Prolog.

Did it put him off? He's now ex-European record holder and current UK PG distance record holder, though I believe he was airborne during those flights.