

## Chris, Nick and Dave - quick tour 95

At the end of July and the beginning of August this year, myself Nick Romanko and Dave Tyrer spent four weeks flying and touring about the south of France. The flying wasn't exceptional there this year for us, but we did get to fly a number of sites that we'd never flown before. They were not all epic XC sites but each one had something to offer. The variety made for an interesting tour, and I think we all agreed that it was a welcome change to the usual X weeks at just one site. Here's a brief (very subjective!) guide to the places we flew, check out the French sites guide for the pukka details.

### **Puy de Dome - 1450m, 420m ttb**

Martin Tillet is the only person I've heard say a good word about this place, but it is very scenic and incredibly well organised. It's an old volcano and hence is almost the perfect shape for launching into any wind direction you fancy. The trouble is, that few people I've spoken to about the place have ever been "up" there. Dave is probably a member of a very exclusive group, because he has. The best thing is that in the summer only cars with pilots in are allowed to drive up. The rest of the grockles have to travel up by coach. Mind you, you do have to pay for the privilege, but when you get to the top you find there are parking bays reserved for pilots. Can't imagine that happening in this killjoy country can you!

Verdict - Probably better for PG than HG. Only bother if you are in the area. Take a brolly.

### **St Hilaire - 1000m, 770m ttb**

Famous for it's festival that happens each September. Last years festival was a wash-out. A good place to go though if you want to see lots of films about flying and spend lots of money. The bit



**Nick has a perfect landing!**

where loonies dress up and throw themselves off the mountain disguised as fish, trains, chariots or whatever takes their fancy has to be worth seeing at least once.

Anyway we weren't there in September but in the height of the French holiday season. Even so the place was virtually deserted except for a few locals and students learning to fly the hard way. It's not really known as a great XC site although big XCs have been done from there. It's on the east side of a long N-S valley just north of Grenoble, hence it works early and finishes early. The PG's have a great big carpet to fly from, very nice. HG's must make do with a grassy bank/shallow ramp if the wind has any south in it, and the *death ramps* if there is any north in it. When we were there it was NW ☹️!

Dave loved the death ramps. In fact he loved one so much he got up early just so he could launch, even though it was far too early for thermals and a down flight was the only outcome - junkie.

Mind you, at first he hated it. Photos can't do justice to the death ramps. There are three but only two are used, and of those only one regularly. It is off this ramp that students are taught to fly. Aaargh, what courage.

*Imagine standing in a wooded clearing, just a little wider than a wing-span and looking out into a wide flat valley 2500' below. You are balanced on a five-foot square section of wooden decking that just ahead tilts down over a shear cliff at an angle of at least 70 degrees to the horizontal, and then continues for another seven feet or so before dropping off into nothingness. A streamer indicates that the gentle breeze is blowing across at 90° for most of the time, so you must wait for it to straighten. When it does you must be prepared to go. If you are lucky you will have wing men, but there is no room for a nose man, unless he has wings.*



Unknown Avon pilot prangs K4 at St Hilaire

I don't think I'm embarrassing Dave to say that on his first attempt it took him a least 15 minutes to launch. Each time he moved to the edge he'd creep back and wipe the sweat from his palms. I was lucky, it was my day to drive the car down ☹️. Nick had gone first and had stalled off, disappearing

virtually in free fall, causing the local HG instructors to cringe. "He fly's very well", said one, as Nick thermalled up above launch, "but his take-off was one of the worst I've seen". Dave had the benefit of some extra coaching but he was still nervous, even after watching several sub-CPC standard pilots launch, oblivious to the joys of a nice rounded hill. When he did launch it was sweet with very little drive, just a quick swoop and away. Dave got such a buzz that he was back for more the next morning and is now a self-confessed ramp junkie. He just loves them and so do I. I can't recommend it enough. Weeeeeeee!

**Verdict** - A great place to spend a few days on your way north or south. Visiting the festival would be ace if the weather was kind (see the hi-five video for a taster of the festival). Good place if you fly HG or PG, just don't expect epic flying. If you want epic go south. There are lots of other sites to try in the area.

Oh yeah I nearly forgot, the ramp is steep as it was designed for dual instruction. Sometimes students don't run enough. With the death ramp you can't help but fly.

### **Prapoutel Les 7 Laux - 1980m, 1750 ttb**

If you stop off at St. Hilaire you must fly this place just across the valley. Access is by chair-lift once you have driven up to the Prapoutel ski resort. It was the first time we'd taken hang-gliders on a chair lift and we were more than a little worried. We needn't have been, the lift operators have got it sussed.

You get on board the double seated chair before it rounds the end of the overhead track, place your harness bag next to you in the second seat and close the security bar. After the chair has turned around and is pointing up the hill the attendant will hand you the glider, which you rest on top of your harness rather like a knight at a joust. At the top another attendant takes the glider from you. All this is done without stopping the lift. Easy-peasy. The ride up is very peaceful, as this is another place that in the summer is nearly deserted.

At the top there is a grassy bank and a fantastically huge wooden ramp to launch from. Flying from here is extra-scenic, even on the average days like when we were there. The landing is in the St Hilaire bottom landing 10km away, and was an easy glide. If you thermal up you'll be treated to some fantastic views and the possibility of some decent out and returns.

**Verdict** - A great adventure if you've never carried a glider on a chair-lift before. Great views and a beautiful setting. If you are close by, don't miss it.

### **Laragne, Chabre - 1300m+, 720m ttb ish!**

Not as good this year as in previous years. Never-the-less it is the place to go if you want easy XC flying on a HG. Lots of places to land, lots of sticky-up things to produce and trigger thermals and an extremely HG friendly attitude from the locals. Plus the main camp site in town has it's own landing field which can be reached on all but the most naff of days. If you don't want to camp there are plenty of gites to rent. If you stay with Brian and Jane (see ad in Skywings) you can even get a guide/retrieve organised. Always a good bet but don't limit yourself to the one take-off, Chabre (unless conditions are epic!).

**Verdict** - Probably one of the best places to go HG in France for the average pilot looking for good flying. Lots of sites within easy driving distance and lots of "tasks" to do. This year we also tried Apres and the excellent Mont Columbus.

## **Aspres sur Buech - 1560m, 740 ttb**

Aspres is about 20km north of Laragne, top landable at a pinch and generally a more pleasant place to be during the really hot weather. The track up can give your vehicle a hard time if you're not careful, but it is worth it if the wind is westish. A good place to start for your first flight to the observatory on the 2700m Peak de Bure.

Verdict - A good companion site to the Chabre when there is west in the wind or you fancy a change.

## **Mont Colombis - 1700m, 1055m ttb**

Another good westerly site is Mont Columbus. It's driveable all the way to the top on tarmac roads. XC potential is limited for the less experienced pilot unless conditions are epic as the valley is narrow and full of vines. Nevertheless a ttb of over 3000' can't be sniffed at. On a reasonably good day it should be possible to fly SE to the 2500m Dormillouse or back to Laragne.

Verdict - More limited than Aspres but worth a look just for the ttb. Great views from take-off and there is shade!!!! Not really for PG, although it has been flown.

## **Plaine-Joux nr Chamonix - 1380m, 790m ttb**

The Chamonix is very popular with danglers but hangers haven't really raved about it much. I guess this is mainly due to the limited out-landings available in the narrow valleys. Plaine-Joux is the exception, it must have the biggest bottom landing field in France for HG (and strangely probably the smallest for PG!).

Why would you want to go there? One word - scenery. Boy is it fantastic.



Unknow Avon pilot on launch at Plaine-Joux

Plaine-Joux is on a shelf just outside the west end of the Chamonix valley. Behind take-off there is a sheer cliff rising 4000' or more. Standing on launch you have a superb view of the snow covered white mountain, Mont Blanc just inside the Chamonix valley. Once you've thermalled up the cliffs behind take-off the view becomes simply breathtaking. All of us agreed that this was the flight of the holiday just to be able to take in the view of snow capped mountains stretching into Italy and Switzerland.

Verdict - What a view!

### **Annecy - 1217m, 767m ttb**

Annecy has long been a popular holiday destination for HG pilots. It is one of the main holiday centres for other kinds of holiday makers to, hence in summer it is a very crowded place. When we were there the weather was crap so I can't comment much on the flying, but Pierre Bouilloux has done some massive PG flights in the region, so it must be good occasionally! You have to like trees though as there are many of them. I saw at least one Brit HG pilot drag his wing through one on take-off before luckily making it out into clean air.

Verdict - A good place to take your kids as there's lots to do. Very pretty. Billions of PG's that tended to get in the way of the HG take-off. I spent some time with a couple of Austrian pilot pretending to be ack-ack gunners, shooting at any PG that hung around in front of launch (O.K. so we were bored and fed up with waiting!) A great place to get your photo taken by the zillions of grockles who crowd around the take-off ramp. (This ramp is crap, being very poorly sited.) If you're looking for a purely HG holiday go someplace else. If you do choose Annecy then try Semnoz 45 mins drive away, you'll not regret it.

### **Semnoz - 1700 m, 1150 ttb**

A group of Brummy HG pilots described it as being like the Long Mynd only 10 times higher, they were not far off. It has a large grassy take-off, and I guess top-landing area, although it is a 5 minute carry to reach it (shock horror!). The site is a long west facing tree covered ridge, with a cliff section forming about 30% of the drop. We only had a short flight there, but it was very pleasant and it shouldn't be too difficult to make it back to the Annecy lake and camp grounds.

PG and HG have separate take-offs (about a mile apart, which should please some!).

Verdict - Nice site.

Thats it, so hows about the rest of you telling us where you flew this summer?

**Chris**