

# Paramotoring in the Pyrenees

**With the ever-increasing costs of light aviation, more and more pilots are turning to paramotoring as a cheaper way of getting airborne. Simon Hazeldine travels to Spain to try out this latest form of flying.**



Skyschool proprietor Alex Ledger.

Last November when the *Today's Pilot* team visited the Sport and Leisure Aviation Show at the NEC in Birmingham, I was amazed to see how fast the activity of paramotoring was growing. I would guess that at least half of the stands at the

exhibition were catering for this new genre of aviation and I couldn't help thinking back to the days when I was a dedicated skydiver, and remembering the feeling of freedom I had when riding the canopy down. I also thought it looked like a seriously cool way of getting airborne, so when Skyschool Flight Centre asked if I would like to do a paramotor course at its base in Spain, I jumped at the chance!

Paramotoring is perhaps the simplest and cheapest way to go flying. You can fly for about three hours on £10 of fuel and you don't need a runway for take-offs or landings. The equipment is also cheap compared to fixed wing or microlight aircraft and at the moment, you don't even need a licence.

There are however, a number of drawbacks to this most basic form of aviation. For example, paramotors have

limited range, they're slow and can only be flown in very light winds. These issues become only minor frustrations when you consider that you can climb over your garden fence into the field behind your house (with the farmer's permission of course!) strap on your motor, and take off into the sunset. Or maybe take your equipment to work with you in the boot of your car and go flying out of the company car park at lunchtime. How cool is that?

Skyschool Flight Centre is run by Alex Ledger; a 24-year-old adrenaline junkie and good friend of Giles Cardozo, the owner of Parajet Paramotors and Bear Grylls, the TV action adventurer. Like myself, Alex's first encounter with aviation was through skydiving but it wasn't long before both he and Bear started to learn about paramotors together. Bear's paramotoring exploits have been widely documented and earlier this year he flew over the peak of Mount Everest in Tibet using a paramotor designed by Giles. The whole thing was filmed and the resulting documentary was televised in the UK, which led to a surge in the number of people taking up the sport.

In 2004 Alex took over the running of Skyschool from its previous owner and

started to run training courses at Enstone airfield in Oxfordshire. The business proved to be successful but its biggest obstacle was the British weather.

Having spent a few years grappling with the UK climate, Alex decided he'd had enough of cancelled lessons and cold fingers, so he packed up and moved the whole operation to Ordis Aerodrome near Figueres in Spain. With its warmer weather and beautiful scenery, Ordis offered the perfect environment for paramotoring, and with flights from London Stansted to nearby Girona airport costing as little as £30, it was still within easy reach of the UK.

The aerodrome lies in the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains about 10nm from the coast on the Costa Brava. It has a small wooden clubhouse, on-site accommodation, a beautiful outdoor swimming pool and even a church. It has two small hangars accommodating a variety of light aircraft and two grass runways, each about 400m in length.

On the night I arrived at Girona airport, the Spanish national football team was playing Germany in the final of Euro 2008. As I stood outside the airport casually admiring the passing

taxis draped with red and yellow Spanish flags, I bumped into Will Drew who was also heading to Skyschool to write an article for the Sunday Times. Alex collected us from the airport and took us to a local restaurant to meet the school's two full-time instructors, Kester Haynes and Rob Furnival. After sampling some of the local produce and joining in with the celebrations after Spain beat Germany, we got down to talking about paramotoring. Although the sport is currently unregulated, I was surprised when Alex said he wanted to see an official structure introduced, similar to those used by light aircraft and microlights. "At the moment anyone can buy a paramotor and attempt to fly it without any training whatsoever, which can lead to people seriously hurting themselves," he said. "At Skyschool, we won't even let you near a motor until you have mastered handling the canopy on the ground. We also teach air law, meteorology, navigation and instruct each student on good airmanship."

It was an admirable stance to take; after all, safety must always be the highest priority when it comes to any form of aviation, but I can't name a single other light aircraft pilot who



The airfield club house is small but well equipped.

would welcome the introduction of more rules. In fact, most think we have too many already, but if your sport, like paramotoring, has none, then I guess you would welcome a few rules.

The next morning, both myself and Will were taken over to the hangar to begin the course. Alex got out one of the canopies, or wings as the paramotor fraternity call them, and explained how they are constructed, what each piece of the equipment was called and what its function was. I had been used to flying skydiving canopies, but the ones used in paramotoring are much more complex. Each wing has four sets of lines running from the

Below: Ready to go. Will Drew about to make his first ever paramotor flight assisted by Alex Ledger, Kester Haynes and photographed by Sunday Times photographer Neil Haynes. (All Key - Simon Hazeldine)





risers (which attach it to your harness) up to the canopy. The A lines are at the front and D lines at the rear, which naturally leaves the B and C lines in the centre. Also attached to the risers were the brake lines. These double up as steering controls - pull right to go right, and left to...well, you get the idea! The brake lines are attached to the trailing edge of the wing. When you pull both lines down simultaneously, it slows the descent of the canopy, so the brakes behave in a similar fashion to the flaps on an aircraft.

We took the wings out on to the runway and Alex briefed us on ground handling and launching. I had always believed that to launch a paramotor you just ran along with the wing behind you and the engine at full power and off you go. Unfortunately, my simplistic view of things was about to shatter in a big way.

Before you can run down the runway and take off, you have to get the wing flying above your head...and that's the tricky bit! Alex taught us how to do a reverse launch first, which is where you stand facing the wing to launch it, but then turn 180 degrees before you

can start running. You have to stand with the wing facing into wind, with the A lines in your left hand and D lines in your right hand, then you have to launch the thing in much the same way as you would launch a kite. To lift the canopy, you step backwards and at the same time pull sharply on the A lines while releasing the pressure on the D lines. If you get it right, the wing inflates, rises gracefully up and settles above your head.

My first attempts at this bizarre 'kite-flying ritual' were less than successful. The wing would rise up filling me with expectation, only for it to crash to the ground in a crumpled tangled mess after

only a few seconds. This wasn't as easy as it looked! We carried on practising this launch method for the rest of the morning and each time the wing came down in a heap, one of the instructors would be there calmly explaining what went wrong and how I could prevent it from happening again. It is at this point I should perhaps mention that all of Skyschool's instructors have the patience of saints. No matter how many times I kept making the same stupid mistakes, they were always calm and reassuring, and never got annoyed.

As the temperature at the airfield soared into the mid-30s it started to get rather 'thermally' which made it even harder to fly the wings. "Not a problem," said Alex. "We'll take the kit down to the beach." The gentle breeze coming off the Mediterranean is constant and not affected by thermals - ideal for practice launches.

We resumed our canopy-crashing antics on a beautiful stretch of coastline near the Catalan town of Empuriabrava.

The locals seemed to be impressed with my canopy handling and it wasn't long before a small crowd had gathered to watch. I think they may have thought



Left: Alex Ledger giving an airfield brief in the training hangar.

Right: Before being allowed near a motor, students must master launches and wing control on the ground.



that we were some sort of strange formation kite-flying team, as both myself and Will staggered around on the hot sand trying to balance our wings on the sea breeze. I was starting to get the hang of it, but the intense heat was beginning to take its toll, and that clear blue water was just too much to resist. As I bobbed around in the warm ocean, I couldn't help feeling rather envious of Alex. This beautiful beach is basically his 'office,' and he gets to go flying nearly every day for the same cost as a pint of beer! It's a nice life if you can get it.



The next part of the training was the 'tow-launch.' The idea behind this is that the student can practise flaring and landing the canopy without the distraction of the motor.

I strapped myself into the harness and clipped the wing to it. Kester and Rob then tied a long rope to the front of the harness and started running... they were literally flying me like a kite! Landing simply involves keeping the canopy into wind and pulling both brake lines all the way down to flare the wing, just before you touch down.

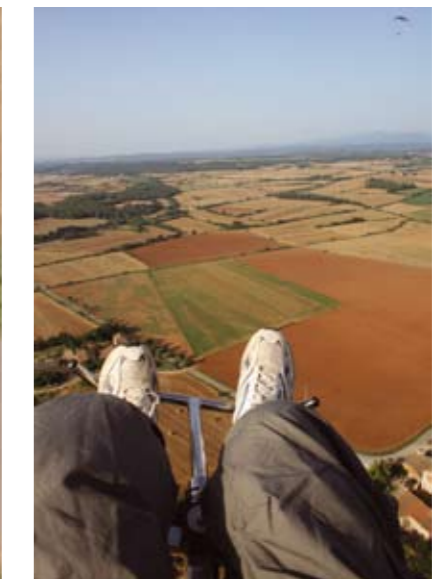
I actually found landing much easier

than taking off, but that could be because landing a paramotor is exactly the same as landing a skydiving parachute.

To give us a break from the training, and an idea of what it felt like to fly one of these things, Alex took each of us up for a ride in his 'tandem' paramotor. Imagine a Tesco's shopping trolley with a giant fan bolted to the back end and you won't be far wrong. It really was the most primitive-looking flying machine I have ever seen, and I'll admit I was a little apprehensive as I strapped into the tiny front seat and rested my feet on

Top Left: Will Drew gets acquainted with a motor for the first time.

Above: Alex Ledger takes students up in his 'tandem' paramotor to give them a taste of what's in store.



Left: The passenger's view from the tandem paramotor. Cockpit floors don't get more basic than this!



canopy at the same time, the instructors introduced us to the 'aqua-jet pack'. Sounds exciting, doesn't it? Actually, it is just a paramotor frame where the motor has been removed and replaced with heavy bottles of water. Another session of tow launching ensured we could run, handle the wing and land with the weight of the motor strapped on our

*Far Right: Alex Ledger prepares to take-off from the beach at Empuriabrava.*

landing off the airfield. After the hang test, Alex declared both myself and Will ready for flight, but we would have to wait until the morning as it looked like a thunderstorm was forming over the mountains and heading our way. We agreed to meet at 6.30am the following morning to take advantage of the still air before the sun had created any thermals.

The next morning was indeed very still; there was barely a breath of wind and the windssock hung motionless on its pole. We took all the equipment down to the end of the runway and the instructors laid the wing out while I strapped on the motor.

"There isn't any wind so you'll have to run quite a bit," said Alex. "Just pull down on the brakes a little while your running and that will give you more lift," he explained.

Alex ran through a quick brief, checked that I could hear him on the radio and then pulled the handle to start the engine.

To make a successful take-off, certain things have to be done in the right order. As there was no wind, I would have to run forward to inflate the wing. Once it was up I would have to release the front risers (which were pulled down to help the canopy inflate) and then pull down on the brakes slightly to prevent the wing from flying over my head and crashing to the ground in front of me. As soon as I was running with the wing above my head, I could apply full throttle, run like hell and hopefully get airborne. My first attempt went horribly wrong after I released the risers before I had the canopy over my head, but as I lined up for my second go, I felt more confident, especially as a slight breeze had picked up which would help on take-off.

Alex counted me down: "Three... two...one...GO!" I ran as fast as I could and looked up to see the canopy over my head. I let go of the risers and pulled a touch of brake at the same time. "Throttle!" shouted Alex, so I squeezed the trigger and released all 22 horses. Before I knew it I was running on thin air and off the ground.

The initial climb out was straight ahead which took me out over the very impressive Torremirona golf course. I had been told to fly a left hand circuit so at around 200ft I pulled down

the flimsy-looking T-bar.

Alex fired the engine into life and opened the throttle as I held on tight to the side of the 'trolley' and my camera. It was off the ground after around 25m and demonstrated an impressive rate of climb. At least that's what Alex told me...I had my eyes shut so I couldn't say for sure! One thing's certain though, it was without doubt the best view I have ever had from any type of aircraft. Alex passed the brake lines to me and let me have a go at flying it around. It was much as I expected, the same as a skydiving parachute but much heavier.

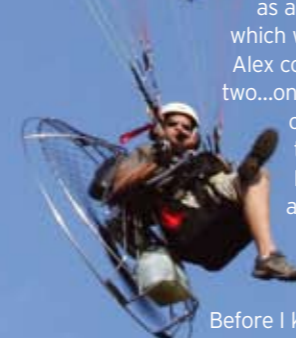
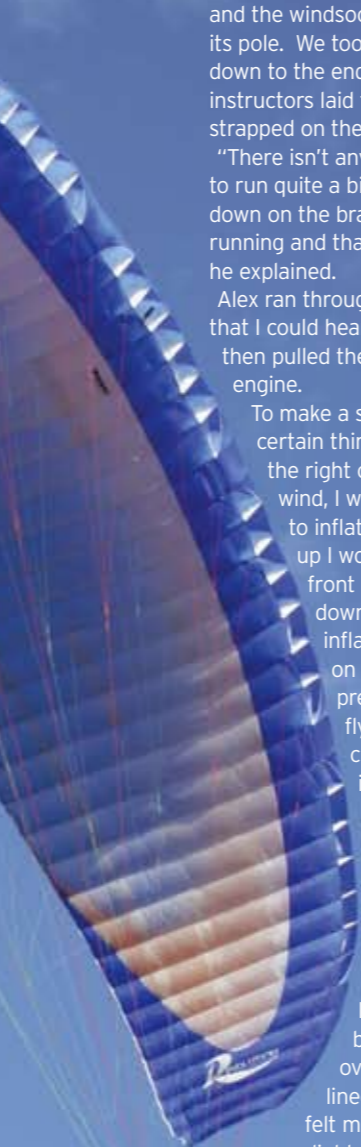
A couple of days later both Will and myself had mastered the wing control on the ground and were confident we could just about launch the thing. We had cracked the 'para' bit so now all we had to do was master the 'motor' part. To get us acquainted with running with the weight of the motor and flying the

backs, and then we moved on to the hang test.

This involved wearing a full harness and motor which was then suspended by two ropes from the roof of the hangar. Alex explained how, after take-off I would initially be hanging in the leg straps and would have to climb into the seat. This meant grabbing hold of the harness just below the reserve parachute and hauling myself up into the seat. He also said that care must be taken with the hand throttle while performing this manoeuvre as it would be very easy to knock the engine kill switch while wriggling into the seat, and that would almost certainly mean



Skyschool & friends: (L to R) Rob Furnival, Kester Haynes, Will Drew, Alex Ledger, Neil Haynes and Aldo.



on the left brake line and the wing responded positively. Once established on a climbing downwind leg at about 500ft, I hauled myself up into the seat taking care not to knock the 'engine kill' button.

Once settled into the seat, I had a chance to take in the surroundings and I started to appreciate just how much fun paramotors are. I guess the best way to describe it is it's like flying through the air in a garden chair! The view is unparalleled with any other type of flying and when looking directly below, the only thing obstructing your view of the landscape is your feet.

Having flown around for a while, the radio crackled into life and I was informed that the light breeze had swung around and was now favouring a different runway. I had to reposition on to a different circuit pattern which took me over a busy main road. Peering down I could see drivers in their cars slowing down and looking up at me. I turned and followed the track of the road which was already starting to heat up in the morning sun; the warm air rising from the tarmac was causing

*Above Left: A beach makes a great runway for a paramotor!*

*Above: Once you have landed, it helps if you bring the wing down in a controlled fashion otherwise you will have to untangle it before the next flight.*

thermals and the air started to feel rather 'bumpy.'

Back in the circuit the air was much smoother and once I was established on final approach, I pulled the webbing to release the front part of the seat and lowered the undercarriage (my legs!) by slipping forwards into the leg straps. When I was over the threshold of the runway at about 150ft, Alex told me to kill the engine and suddenly it all seemed very familiar. In fact, it was exactly the same as landing a skydiving parachute. I glided in towards the small group of people waiting on the runway and flared the canopy about 6ft above the ground. The landing was beautifully soft and I only needed to take a couple of steps to kill off the speed.

My first taste of paramotoring had been a success and left me wanting more. The course had been a lot harder than I had expected and if I had known how much physical exertion was involved I would have prepared for it a little better. But overall I had found the experience hugely rewarding and I now have an alternative method for getting in the air. It might have its limitations, but it is also

a very inexpensive way to go flying. Apart from the recreational side of paramotoring, some people are using the equipment for much more serious challenges. Last year, Skyschool was asked to help out on an expedition to Bolivia searching for a remote crater in the dense rainforest, and in 2009 a further venture is planned to Botswana where the team will conduct a six week survey around the Okavango Delta. Whether used for pleasure flying or survey work, there seems to be a bright future ahead for the sport of paramotoring. If it keeps growing at its current rate it will soon be the most popular form of flying in the UK, and I for one intend to be up there with them.

A six day beginner's course at Skyschool Flight Centre costs £745.00 but the school has kindly offered a 10% discount to any *Today's Pilot* readers. To book a course or obtain more information, contact Skyschool Flight Centre on 0034 617 556 934 or 07747 097527, or see the website at: [www.skyschooluk.com](http://www.skyschooluk.com)