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Free Flying In The Himalayas

To fly alongside the Vultures among the spectacular mountains of the Himalayas is something most of us can only dream about, but Skyschool boss *Alex Ledger* has just lived that dream, as he explains in this stunning eight-page feature.



In January 2010 I spent 3 weeks Paragliding in Nepal. As the proprietor of SkySchool, a European Paramotoring and Paragliding school, things tend to go very quiet during the winter. This leaves plenty of time to explore and I know of no better way to do this than with a Paraglider! What appeals to me about Paragliding is that all of the equipment fits into a large rucksack, it costs nothing to fly and you can do it almost anywhere in the world.

Places To Paraglide List!

Nepal had been on my 'Places to Paraglide' list ever since I watched a Paragliding film entitled 'From Nowhere to the Middle of Nowhere'. In the film, John Silvester, a renowned British competition pilot, attempts the first crossing of the western Nepalese Himalayas by Paraglider with tandem passenger and camera man Alun Hughes. It remains one of the best Paragliding films ever made and continues to be an inspiration for many pilots. I left a cold, miserable, wet England on January 11, just as the snow was starting to melt.

Kathamandu

After a long journey I finally made it to Kathamandu before catching a 45 minute flight to Pokhara, the Paragliding Mecca in Nepal. I had arranged my transport and accommodation through Blue Sky Paragliding, a local company run by the renowned Swiss Acro pilot and instructor David Arrufat. Within two hours of my arrival

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Misty mountain peaks surround the launch site at Pokhara.



I was promptly driven to the main take off area and given an introduction to the local area. Pokhara is in the Gandaki zone of the Western Development Region, in no other location in the world do mountains rise so quickly; within thirty kilometers the elevation rises from 1,000m to over 7,500m.

Stunning Scenery!

The northern horizon is dominated by the breathtaking Annapurna mountain range and has three peaks higher than 8,000m. The take off site, near the summit of Sarangkot mountain, faces south east towards Pokhara at a slightly more modest height of 1,600m.

I was so overwhelmed by the sheer scale of my spectacular surroundings that I almost forgot to ask about the landing area. Although not visible from take off, I was reliably informed it was adjacent to

the Phewa lake and very easy to spot from the air. While preparing my kit I watched the other pilots taking off and noticed that every 5 to 10 minutes a thermal would trigger in the valley below, drift

Campsite on the roof of the world!



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up the slope and generate enough wind to make reverse launches very easy. The more experienced pilots would wait until the thermal passed over the launch area, by which time the wind was less turbulent, before taking off and heading directly towards the house thermal, approximately 500m away.

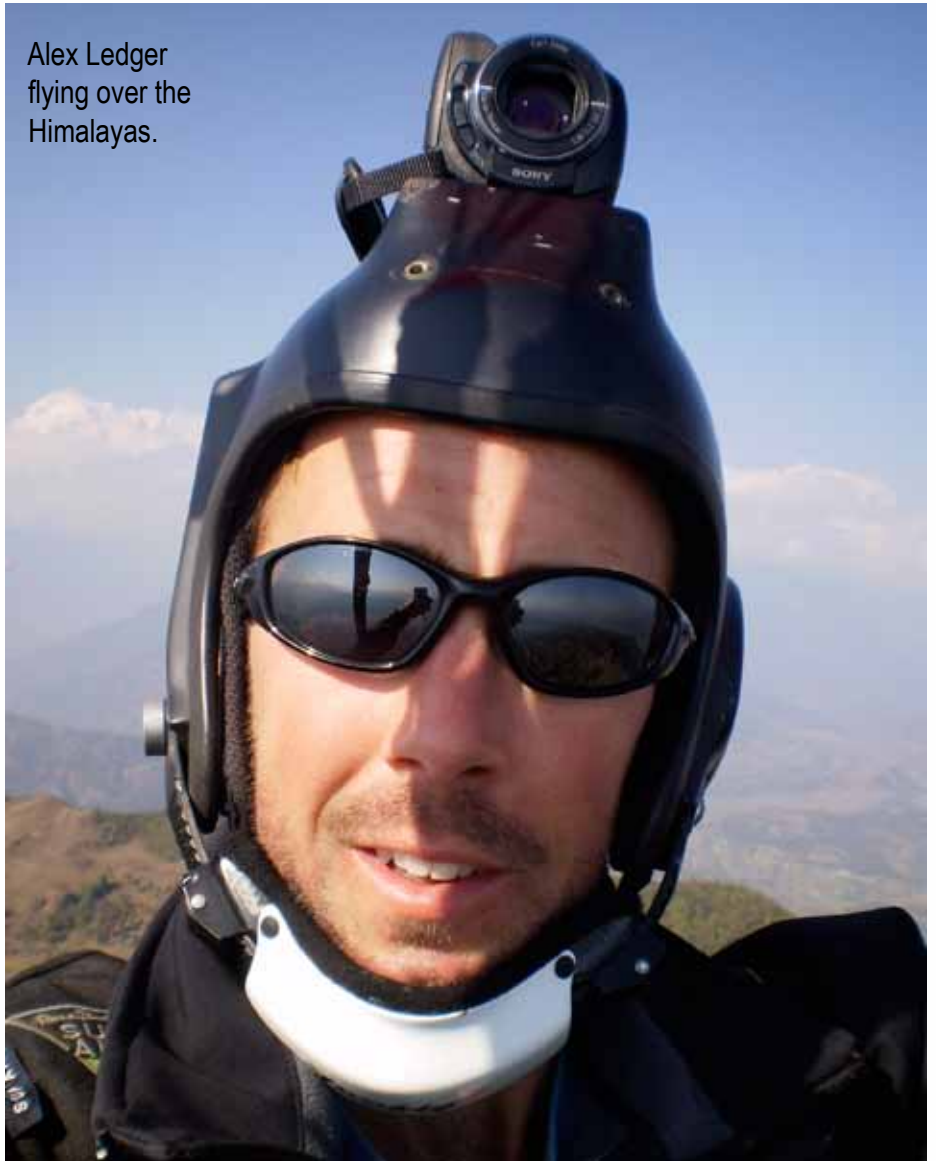
Griffin Vultures

I decided to follow their example and was soon in a steady two metres-per-second climb, during which I became aware of the enormous Griffin Vultures. They were awe inspiring to watch and I felt very privileged when one of them, with a wing span of more than 2.5 meters, started to core the same thermal a mere five meters from me. I tried to stay with him for as long as possible however he soon out climbed me, providing a stark reminder of just how new humans are to aviation.

Riding The Wing

After an hour I decided to locate the landing area, which was where it was supposed to be, adjacent to the lake. I calculated I would have enough height to safely practice some manoeuvres over the water before landing. I was flying a free style wing called the Niviuk FGravity, which is capable of being used not only for cross country, known as XC, but also for acrobatic maneuvers, known

Alex Ledger flying over the Himalayas.



A Griffin Vulture shares a thermal with Alex.



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as Acro. One of my favourite Acro manoeuvres is the SAT, which looks like a spiral and quite dynamic, yet is actually very easy to do when you know how. However, unlike a spiral which is when the pilot rotates around the wing with a high rate of descent and a lot of G force, a SAT is when the

rotation point is between the pilot and the wing, with the pilot turning backwards and the wing turning forwards. It also has a low rate of descent and less G force. The dangers with the SAT are either entering too fast, causing the glider to spin which potentially results in

line twists, or creating a deep spiral dive at the beginning or end of the manoeuvre. All Acro manoeuvres have an element of risk which is why pilots are advised to practice over water, with plenty of height and preferably a safety boat on standby, while wearing a life jacket and carrying at least

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The sunsets over the Himalayas are absolutely spectacular!



Nepalese children picking up wings after flight.

one, sometimes two, reserves. Suffice to say, I was not wearing a life jacket nor did I have two reserves; further more, the safety boat consisted of some local fisherman in a small kayak whose only form of propulsion were two wooden oars! I did however have plenty of height

and having performed this manoeuvre countless times before was confident enough in my ability to not make a mistake. With a final check above, below and around me I adopted the SAT position by putting my left hand against the toggle pulley on the left hand riser, I then

proceeded to lean and turn right, as the glider started to turn beyond 180 degrees I applied more right brake and extended my left arm. In doing so the glider quickly went from a nose down spiral into a smooth, slow, controlled SAT. At first the sensation is very strange however once you are

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The landing area at Pokhara is a small beach next to Lake Phewa.



locked in, it feels fantastic. I held the SAT for almost 20 seconds and in doing so lost approximately 350ft. I still had lots of height to prepare for landing, which gave me time to take in my surroundings before joining the circuit pattern.

Awesome First Flight!

The landing area, although quite small, was easy to navigate into and upon touching down I felt utterly elated after a truly awesome first flight. While one of the local kids packed up my wing, I sat down to enjoy a beer and asked myself, "Why did you only book three weeks?"

My experiences on the first day set the scene for the weeks to come and every day I continued to develop both my XC and my Acro flying.

Himalayan Birthday

Half way through the holiday I was invited on an expedition organised by Blue Sky and, as it coincided with my birthday, I seized the opportunity to celebrate it in style. After driving for several hours we finally arrived at the top of a 6,000ft mountain, known as Sirikot, from where I had a late afternoon flight around the local area. Luckily I managed to land back on top of the

mountain, which saved me another long, bumpy journey back up. As the sun set over the myriad of Himalayan peaks I helped the guides set up the camp site before enjoying a fantastic meal under the stars.

The Lone 'Brit'

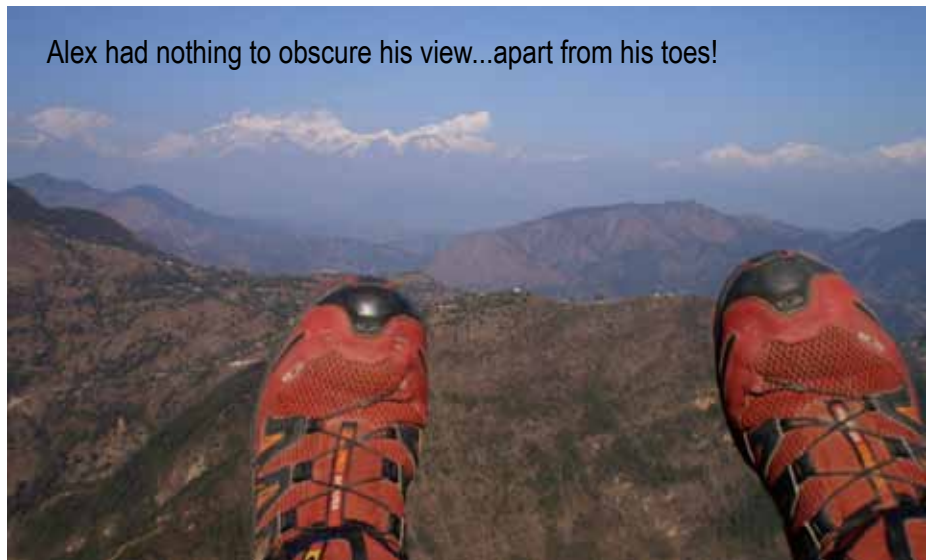
I was the only Brit in a group made up of two instructors and six students, all of whom were French! As the only 'Anglais' I experienced the usual banter, as well as the age old Anglo/French rivalry, particularly when it came to Paragliding. I therefore had a lot to prove and was determined not to let the side down the next day!

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After a surprisingly good nights sleep in the tent and a very relaxing morning, I was ready for the challenge which was to fly the 40kms back to Pokhara. Naturally, I let the French go first in order to give them a head start. In actual fact, I was learning from their mistakes and gaining an understanding of where the best thermals were. There were six mountains we had to navigate over to make it back to base; the first mountain provided some very good climbs and I managed to get over 2,000ft above take off.

Easy Glide

This set me up for an easy glide to the next mountain which also offered some great thermals. By this stage I had been flying for over an hour and the pack had been whittled down to just four pilots, consisting of an instructor, two students and myself. Prior to the flight our local guides had given us a good briefing and pointed out the hardest leg was from mountain two to three. I therefore gained as much height as possible before setting off on my glide, however I still arrived with very little height. Unfortunately, after frantically searching and scratching around for lift, I had to admit defeat and landed in a dry river bed in the valley. At first I was a bit disappointed but soon realised I had been airborne for over one and half hours and covered more than 20kms. My spirits were



Alex had nothing to obscure his view...apart from his toes!

raised even higher when one of the French pilots landed soon afterwards in the same area. It had been an excellent birthday and I had managed to keep the British end up! In my final week I was starting to feel very confident, both with my cross country and my Acro skills. The beauty of Paragliding in Pokhara is that it allows pilots to develop in both disciplines, which is very rare and the only place I have flown which rivals it is Lake Annecy in France.

Roll On Next Year!

By the end of the three weeks

not only had my Paragliding improved, I had also met some great people which made the trip all the more fantastic. The guys at Blue Sky were great and provided an excellent service. The local food was delicious and the accommodation was not only very comfortable but also very affordable at only €6 a night! I can not wait to return next year, this time I intend to stay for the whole of February and March. In doing so I hope to run some paragliding trips from Skyschool and thus share the magical experience of flying in Nepal.

