

# The learning tourist

Reeve Martin grows wings in Verbier

On a recent ski holiday in the Alps I found myself looking up at the swarm of beautifully-coloured wings circling above my head... and to my surprise also found myself craving to be up there amongst those crazy men and their flying machines! And so it was that I realised a lifelong dream and signed up for a paragliding course the following summer with the local flying school.

I returned to Switzerland a few months later, filled with a sense of excitement and anticipation of the two weeks that lay ahead of me. It was the first time that I would visit the Alps in summer. As I sat on the train heading west along the edge of Europe's largest lake, looking at the giant snow-capped mountains towering in the distance, I knew that this was going to be the experience I had been longing for. I also wondered if I had completely lost my mind!

Stepping off the small mountain train in the modest Alpine village of Le Chable, I looked up to see a sky filled with paragliders and felt, yet again, a rush of excitement. I was met on the platform by Mike, one of my instructors to be, with a beaming and welcoming smile. As we drove up the winding road towards Verbier I gawped out of the window, feasting my eyes on a familiar yet strange landscape. Where there should have been snow were wild flowers. The pure white fields were now green, dotted with cows and farmers with hay-laden pitchforks over their shoulders.

We arrived at my new home for the next two weeks, the beautiful Verbier-Summits chalet. Sitting in the garden with my cup of tea, I felt that I could reach out and touch the spellbinding mountains of Argentiere and the Mont Blanc massif.

My instructors were twin brothers Stu and Mike who run Verbier-Summits. The passion that these two have for flying, despite the years that they have been in the air, was contagious. It didn't take long for me to realise the pair are exceptionally talented at what they do, which was extremely reassuring. My first day consisted of tandem training flights. These were quite different from the scenic tandem flights that I had experienced a few months earlier, as this time I had the controls the whole time whilst Mike explained things to me thoroughly. I also knew that these flights were leading to me being up there alone, the idea of which filled me with delight.

During one of these flights Stu was flying next to us on some prototype acro wing that he was testing. Watching from above, I couldn't believe my eyes as he looped and fell end-over-end out of the sky! Despite Mike telling me that tandem gliders are not very aerobatic we nevertheless did a manoeuvre called a SAT where I was spiralling down backwards. Mike insisted that we did not actually do a loop, but I'm pretty convinced that we were completely upside down on more than one occasion! I felt ready to go solo, but very much doubted that I would ever feel ready for acro flying!

I was given my own equipment and then spent some time at ground school. I spent most of the day running up and down a small slope, learning the important elements for a safe and successful launch and landing. Although I was now getting eager to fly solo, I thoroughly enjoyed ground

school - especially when the breeze picked up and we were able to learn to kite our wings above our heads and play with them in the wind. It was a lot harder than certain people make it look.

My first-ever solo flight is something that I will never forget! A rush of excitement and apprehension, and yet also a feeling of total tranquillity and self-confidence. I have never felt such a sense of utter self-achievement. Despite being talked in all the way by Stu on the radio, after landing I felt that I had just conquered Everest!

I found that the more I flew during my two weeks in Verbier, the more I enjoyed my time in the air... to the point where I just didn't want to come down. This was partly because the more experience I gained the more relaxed I became, making the whole adventure all the more enjoyable.

I feel that as the years go by my 'favourite' flight will change. But it will also become harder to determine my 'favourite' flight as my experiences become more and more magical. For now, however, it is still quite easy to say that my most incredible moment in the sky was the day I had a close encounter with an eagle. I had only just started learning to use the thermals, and on this particular day Stu said to me... 'Just follow me out and I'll talk you through the thermal together.' Usually Stu or Mike would fly down first, making sure that the air was friendly enough for us beginners, and we would not take off until one of the twins was at the landing field to talk us in. Apparently I was now ready to start flying with the big boys...and it felt great.

Sure enough, as I stumbled into a lovely smooth thermal it was invaluable having Stu's calm voice coming through on my headset. Not just telling me what to do but reassuring me that I was doing





ALL PHOTOS: REEVE MARTIN

things correctly! And then, as I circled higher than I had ever been before, it happened! First I heard Stu's excited voice, 'Reeve! Eagles! Look up!' As I looked up I saw the two enormous birds above me. When one of them swooped down within a few feet of my canopy I appreciated the true magnitude of these beautiful beasts, and as I looked across at Stu gliding through the air next to me I felt a huge privilege and honour to be doing what I was doing. This was one of the most incredible moments of my life so far! I understood that day how one's passion for flying can only increase with time, and I doubted that flying would ever become tiresome for me.

I feel I must also mention Le Grand Combin. I call it my temporary home because that is exactly how I was made to feel there. Flying all

day exhausted me, and coming home every evening to such a wonderfully comfortable chalet was the perfect way to unwind and finish my day. The chalet is run by a lovely couple, Dan and Oli, the best chefs and warmest hosts I have ever met. Dan and Oli are also passionate about flying and we were able to have very interesting and amusing conversations over dinner about various flying experiences. Verbier-Summits caters for students as well as offering a guiding service for experienced pilots, and I found this to be great as we were such a mix of abilities. Talking flying over dinner with such a varied group of paraglider and hang glider pilots was so beneficial to me, I would often feel that I learnt almost as much over dinner as I did in the air.

During my fortnight in Verbier we had a few days of bad weather which actually turned out to be quite nice, especially one day when it was too windy to fly and Stu and Mike took us on an incredible hike along a glacial lake and then up to a mountain hut in the middle of nowhere. Another time Stu taught me to repack a reserve parachute which I found very interesting.

*Thank you so much Mike and Stu for your incredible patience and for sharing your passion with me. You are the luckiest guys I know... but I think you deserve it. See you next summer!!*

Details: [www.verbier-summits.com](http://www.verbier-summits.com).