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Skyschool Flight Centre, Mere, Wiltshire

Words Maxwell Roche

SO, WHAT AREN'T you going to do? shouts my instructor Alex, his forceful questioning barely audible above the whirring propeller. "Stop running" I say, eyes locked on the turf ahead, deep in concentration. "Okay, good" he replies with a smirk, riling me further with a hard slap on the helmet "And what else aren't you going to do?" I look up from the turf with an ear-to-ear grin and yell back at the top of my voice "Stooooop running!" "Okay" he says satisfied "Arms back, chest out aaaaannd.... go go go, drop the lines, steady on the brakes, go go go, power power power!!".... and I'm airborne. It's not long until I'm 200 feet above the ground and still running.

Flying, I have always imagined, to be a complicated and wildly expensive pastime. A pastime thwarted by responsibility and requiring many thousands of hours of closely supervised tuition; days spent bent double over meteorological charts in windowless classrooms, practicing VRF radio calls; and weeks spent locked in dark simulators

performing countless take off and landing drills until every eventuality of flight has been entertained. But what, ladies and gentlemen, if none of that traditional training were necessary? What if your dream of piloting your own aircraft, and screeching across the heavens whenever and wherever you please was actually achievable in just a matter of days? What if all that was required to become a qualified and accomplished aviator were a basic level of fitness, the ability to understand simple instruction, and a few days annual leave?

The lofty downlands and wide valleys of Wiltshire in south west England is where British adventurer Alex Ledger (founder of the Powered Paragliding Association), and his close compadre Zebur Mercan have chosen to set up their paramotoring school. Since 2005 they've been running courses, introducing people to the emancipating art of propeller assisted parachuting. Paying no heed to old man gravity and his dogged oppressions, they have shown people a method by which a few determined







bounds, in an area of land no larger than a tennis court, can free them from their terrestrial bonds and have them making home among the clouds. Naturally, upon getting wind of Alex and his anti-gravitational guidance, I gave him a call to see if I could set about cutting my own slice of sky pie.

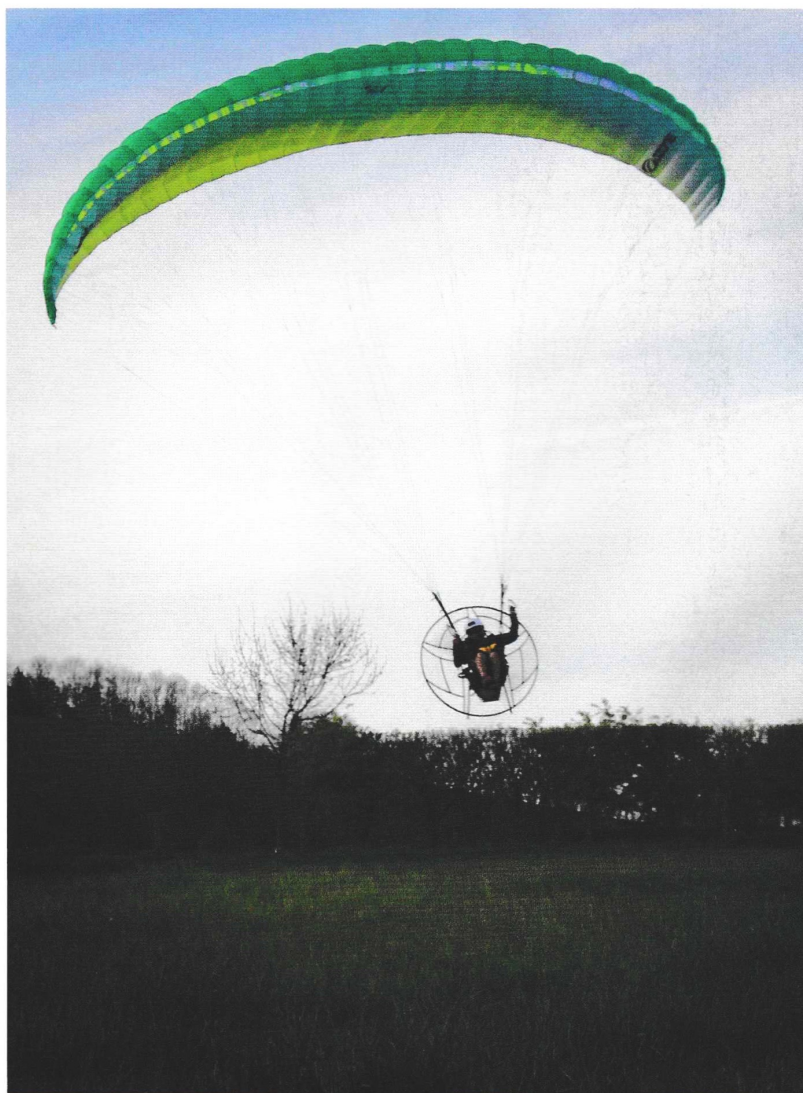
"She's a single cylinder, two-stroke motor" says Zeb "Around 180cc. Clear prop!!!". After a few jerks from the pull starter I feel the motor kick in beyond my ear muffs, Zeb hands me the throttle and jogs around in front of me. "Okay mate" he says "I want you to brace yourself, left foot forward and test the power. Squeeze the throttle gently, lean back into it and then squeeze a little harder, as hard as you dare, until you feel confident." I do as instructed, extremely tentatively to begin with having never harboured any particular fondness for, or understanding of engines, given their potential ferocity. It's one thing, I think to myself, to be perched temporarily on, or sat securely in a machine like a motorcycle or a car, where the moving parts are hidden away and silenced and I've always taken sanctuary in that slight detachment, but it's an entirely different thing

when I'm harnessed tightly to the roaring machine, supporting it's entire weight and completely unable to escape. My mind becomes solely occupied by the potentially devastating blade, just out of eyeshot, spinning at 3,000rpm, inches from my ears like some demonic barber threatening more than just a short back and sides.

When we arrive on our first day at SkySchool, just outside the town of Mere, my good friend Piers and I are delighted to find the Wiltshire countryside bathed in hazy sunshine. The barn at which we've arrived at the centre of a quintessential English farmyard houses a number of paramotors of differing sizes (formidable looking contraptions they are) and many large black canvas bags packed full of colourful synthetic canopies/wings. As we gaze around a number of the large bags closer to us move aside, seemingly by their own accord, to reveal a grinning man stretched out on a collapsible sunbed. "Just catching up on some ZZzz's" says Zeb as he hops up and shakes hands with both of us." We smile and share in a little banter with him, already caught by his contagious enthusiasm. It's not long before the

remaining few students arrive and we exchange continued pleasantries, under the cloudless sky.

"Okay" says Zeb "Grab a wing each, and follow me." We each sling one of the large canvas bags over our shoulders and march off after Zeb, past a few parked tractors, through a cluster of dairy cows, and into a large, gently sloping field of long grass, surrounded by hedgerows and hills. Letting go of our bags we all take a seat on the grass and give audience to Zeb as he explains the beneficial characteristics of said field with regard to paramotoring. He explains how such a field, sloping gently toward the wind as it was, makes for a perfect take off and landing spot for a paramotor. As is the case in all aviation he explains, wind speed over a wing of any type creates lift, and that, together with a bit of blind faith, is what a would-be pilot needs most. He goes on to tell us that although a breeze is useful, it must only be a light breeze, and consistent, free of gusts to keep the wing inflated and not create any minor changes in its rigidity. Blessedly for us, the wind is a favourable 10mph and steady. Zeb looks toward the heavens one last time and with an approving



nod puts us to work, first up it's "ground handling".

Before we can even think about strapping a 200cc propeller to our backs and burning off into the blue, we must first master the process of attaching ourselves to and launching the wing. The wing is made up of a series of cells or chambers Zeb explains, the entrances to which are on its leading edge. When the wing is laid out, leading edge upwards, and pulled firmly into wind, the chambers inflate, causing it to become rigid, generate lift, and launch into the sky. Once the wing is hovering above our heads we are told we must then use the various lines, primarily the brake lines attached to the back of the wing to keep it there, stable and central. Zeb demonstrates this, using less effort than is required to stir his morning cuppa. "It's just like flying a kite" he says nonchalantly.

Unfortunately for all those concerned this technique, like many when demonstrated by a master, turns out to be a lot more difficult than it looks, and absolutely nothing like flying a kite. The wing once up seems determined, like a wild dog on a leash, to be anywhere but where it is supposed to. After an hour or two of frustrating

wing-wrangling Zeb suggests we break for lunch.

After a few hours spent basking beneath a blanket of spring soleil, drinking in the cut grass aromas of the Wiltshire farmyard, we return to the fray. As is often the case, a full stomach and some time to recoup brings about a new clarity of mind, and we all begin to make much better

Towing, it turns out, is the point at which you stop "flying the kite" and the kite starts "flying you".

progress. Zeb, whose saintly patience has never wavered, grins all over with mirth as he sees us standing perfectly like dominos, wings flying steady and central above our heads. It's not long before Alex (founder of SkySchool) is seen jogging across the field to join us carrying a number of closely coiled ropes. Impressed by our perfectly hovering wings he shout's "Let's do some towing!"

Towing, it turns out, is the point at which you stop "flying the kite" and the kite starts "flying

you". We each take turns donning the harness, launching the wing, and once it's stable above our heads, starting to jog forward. Alex and Zeb lash on to us on each side with ropes and proceed to sprint ahead through the long grass. As we each launch our wings and begin to run, they use the ropes to tow us along. This extra speed gives enough lift to fly 20 or so feet above the turf, practice using our brake toggles to steer into wind, and crucially, land softly.

"If this wind settles down a bit we will definitely put you up today" says Alex hands on hips, sunglasses eyes squinting skyward, lips turned back to show teeth "Feeling ready?" he adds. It's day four of the course and after three long days, and one intensive morning of motor drills and ground handling, I've been given the green light. As the day progresses the wind starts to ease; it being a Saturday, many experienced flyers start to arrive and it's not long before the sky is filled with paramotors, buzzing like wasps round a jam jar. Craning my neck, hands on hips, I watch them as they swoop along hill and hedgerow. "You're up," says Alex with a smile as Zeb walks into my periphery carrying the motor. I feel the sudden



all-encompassing need to pee and salute nervously before jogging off to find a bush. By the time I return the wing is attached and laid out nicely behind the motor. Alex and Zeb help lift the motor onto my shoulders and commence fastening and tightening strap and buckle. Although only 25kg the motor feels surprisingly heavy as the imminence of take off starts to also weigh. "Clear prop!" barks Alex as the motor splutters into life stirring up smells of field, farmyard and fuel. He pulls my radio headset down over my ears and Zeb, already on the field's perimeter 50ft ahead speaks to me on the Walkie-talkie "Okay Max, clear for take off, raise your right leg if you can hear me". "Good" says Zeb. "Right, when I say, start your run, steady the wing and once you're up to speed, open the throttle". Alex still standing alongside, knocks me on the helmet and shouts "So, what aren't you going to do?"

Once airborne, it's seconds before I'm completely addicted. The feeling as you squeeze the accelerator, and run like you're climbing a set of invisible stairs into the sky, is like nothing else; the weight of the motor is taken by the wing and the harness becomes an inexplicably comfortable seat. After the initial climb is over

Zeb instructs me to decelerate slightly, which brings a welcome quietness, and I orientate myself in accordance with the agreed flight pattern. It's not long until I'm accustomed to the controls and feel confident enough to take my eyes off the ground and look out over the luscious and undulating countryside, beyond the endless

It crosses my mind at this point that, had I been more experienced, there wouldn't be anything to stop me flying down to the coast and buzzing along the beaches

fields of bright yellow rapeseed, toward the hazy waters of the English Channel. It crosses my mind at this point that, had I been more experienced, there wouldn't be anything to stop me flying down to the coast and buzzing along the beaches and cliffs. As master of a contraption such as I here describe, in a mere matter of days you can become the captain of your very own aircraft, take off where ever you choose, and just

explore. It's aviation in its simplest form that allows the everyman to jettison far above the hum and bustle of terra firma, up to the land of the endless horizon. My protracted meditations are soon cut short as Zeb's voice crackles in my headset "Okay Max, kick your legs if you can hear me, one more lap and then set up for landing."

The beginner course at SkySchool runs for six days and can be booked either here in the UK or abroad in warmer climes and usually culminates in one solo flight. Prices start at around £100 per day. If you then, as I did, become thoroughly addicted (which I'm afraid is completely inevitable) you can go on to do another six-day intermediate course, following which you will be awarded with your APPI PPG pilots licence and be certified capable of flying solo without supervision. Alex the big chief at SkySchool is a good man, full of passion, patience and enthusiasm. His team of instructors such as Zeb, here described, share that same passion and make the experience an unforgettable one, helping you become, in little over a week, something you thought you'd never be... a fully qualified pilot.

■ **To book your course, skyschooluk.com**