

This story was published in Skywings in 2003, but without the diagram at the end, for copyright reasons

FABULOUS FIESCH

Robert Smith and Rebecca Hedges enjoy flying tandem in the Swiss Alps

Becca: We're on the Galvera take-off at Fiesch, in the Swiss Alps, and the conditions are rowdy. Although we've often launched in stronger winds in the UK without difficulty, some of the paragliders trying to get off are being tossed around like autumn leaves. As Robert checks our tandem, he is not amused when he has to scramble to dodge a particularly wild pilot and slips in a fresh cowpat. I manage to maintain a straight face, and remark how lucky it is that there's running water available at take-off, in what must win first prize as the loo with the best view in the world!

Robert: Good cumulus clouds have already formed high above take-off, where there's a lively thermic breeze pumping through – we're a bit late starting today. I'm never embarrassed to ask for help to reduce the chance of my passenger tripping over in such conditions. The first person I approach – a large German - replies that he got his dual rating the week before, so he and his friend will be pleased to assist. The strength of the pull from 44 square metres of rising glider surprises them, and they fail to hang on to Becca, but she stays on her feet. A strong yank on the brakes as the wing surges overhead converts its speed into lift, and we're off. The house thermal in front of take-off is working well, and we settle into a wide circle with no drift.

Becca: When we first met, Robert's original chat-up line was to offer to take me flying on his tandem, which didn't impress me at all. I remember thinking "no way, not on your nelly", but three months later - on St Valentine's day - we had our first flight together, skimming a few feet above the ground in very light conditions at Kimmeridge. I found out later that he'd only had his dual rating for three days when he made the proposal! Our next outing was on a snow-covered Hay Bluff, when we launched straight into a frisky spring thermal and I was a bit shocked to find myself hundreds of feet above the ground in a few seconds. Since then, we've had some awesome flying together, and I've disposed of my red streamer many times over now.

Robert: My initial feeling about dual paragliding was that saddling yourself with the responsibility and hassle of a passenger on a big clumsy wing was a silly way to spoil the enjoyment of free flying. Then the record-breaking exploits of the Westgate brothers and the infectious enthusiasm of Ulric and Ruth Jessop began to change my mind. Finally, my first flight as a passenger, with Quentin King, convinced me that tandems really could be a lot of fun. I pestered dual-qualified friends to be passengers for my training flights, and got my rating in 1997. Now I enjoy dual as much as solo flying. It's added a new dimension to my enjoyment of the sport, to be able to share special moments, and to re-experience, through novice passengers, that euphoria of being airborne for the first time.

Becca: I've been a keen photographer for a long time, so paragliding provides me with unique opportunities. I'm not interested in learning to fly solo, though I do enjoy weightshifting. I like having my own separate motivation to come flying, rather than just being a passive passenger. For landscape work, I usually take plenty of time to get into the perfect position and set everything up carefully, but that's quite impossible when we're airborne. Although Robert told me that the photographic opportunities in Fiesch would be spectacular, I was a little surprised when he suggested that we went there, as I knew he'd once had a mishap nearby. But as he always seems very cautious when flying tandem, I've learned to trust his judgement.

Robert: The scenery around Fiesch is the most dramatic of anywhere I've ever flown. XC's along the south-facing ridge are easy. If you can't get back by air, there are no problems landing out and then returning on regular trains in the valley. It has a reputation for strong thermals and tricky winds at times, particularly in springtime. Flying solo from there a few years previously, I was trashed in a violent high altitude wind-shear, leading to a large cravat, twisted risers, and a reserve deployment. On a subsequent autumn visit I found much more benign conditions, and decided to return in the summer with Becca to fly tandem.

Becca: Our launch hasn't earned us many style points, but I don't enjoy scratching about near the ground, so I'm pleased when we start to climb immediately. I relax into my harness and get my camera out, as green fields are replaced by a spectacular alpine panorama. Suddenly, behind the 3,000m Eggishorn, the Aletsch Glacier begins to appear. The longest glacier in the Alps, at 24km, this is an almost unreal sight, and with every 360, I can see more and more of it, stretching away into the distance, with the 4,000m peaks of the Eiger, Mönch, and Jungfrau behind.



Robert: Our plan is to work our way along the south-facing side of the valley, and then to consider crossing the Furka Pass, about 25km to the east. We flew above the Aletsch Glacier yesterday, so when our thermal fizzles out, at about 3,300m, we don't hang about. We set off towards the village of Bellwald, which sits on a shoulder about 5km away, a spot which generally seems to provide plenty of lift.

Becca: As we cross the Fieschertal valley, I'm fascinated by the spectacular contrast between the lush green meadows 2,000m below, and the Fiescher Glacier leading up to the harsh peak of the Finsteraarhorn above us to our left. I'm trying out a new polarising filter on my camera, which really seems to be sharpening the clouds against the sky.





Robert: After a relaxed glide in gentle sink, we arrive with several hundred metres of altitude above Bellwald, to find some bubbles of weak lift, in which we maintain height. To the east, small gaggles of gliders, scattered at various heights over the south facing side of the valley, extending into the distance, promise plenty of thermals in that direction.

Becca: Further up the ridge, but still well below us, there's a large bird circling lazily, which I point out to Robert. We immediately fly over towards it, and as soon as we come directly overhead, there's a sudden strong tug upwards, and we begin to circle tightly.

Robert: Becca's always looking out for birds, and has found many of our best thermals this way. This time, she's spotted an eagle in a small but smooth 6m/s core. He climbs past us effortlessly, but we follow to cloudbase. Finding a good solid climb after leaving the security blanket of the take-off area always settles me down. Until then, I always have a nagging worry that my high expectations of a good flight will be dashed in a disappointing bomb-out.

Becca: Sharing a thermal with an eagle is a really stunning experience. It must be the aerial equivalent of swimming with dolphins. Despite his hooked beak and 5ft wingspan, he seems really welcoming and friendly. I'm so excited, I almost forget to take pictures! We're soon nowhere near solid ground in any direction. It really feels as though we're on top of the world. In all directions, the views of mountain peaks extend into the distance.

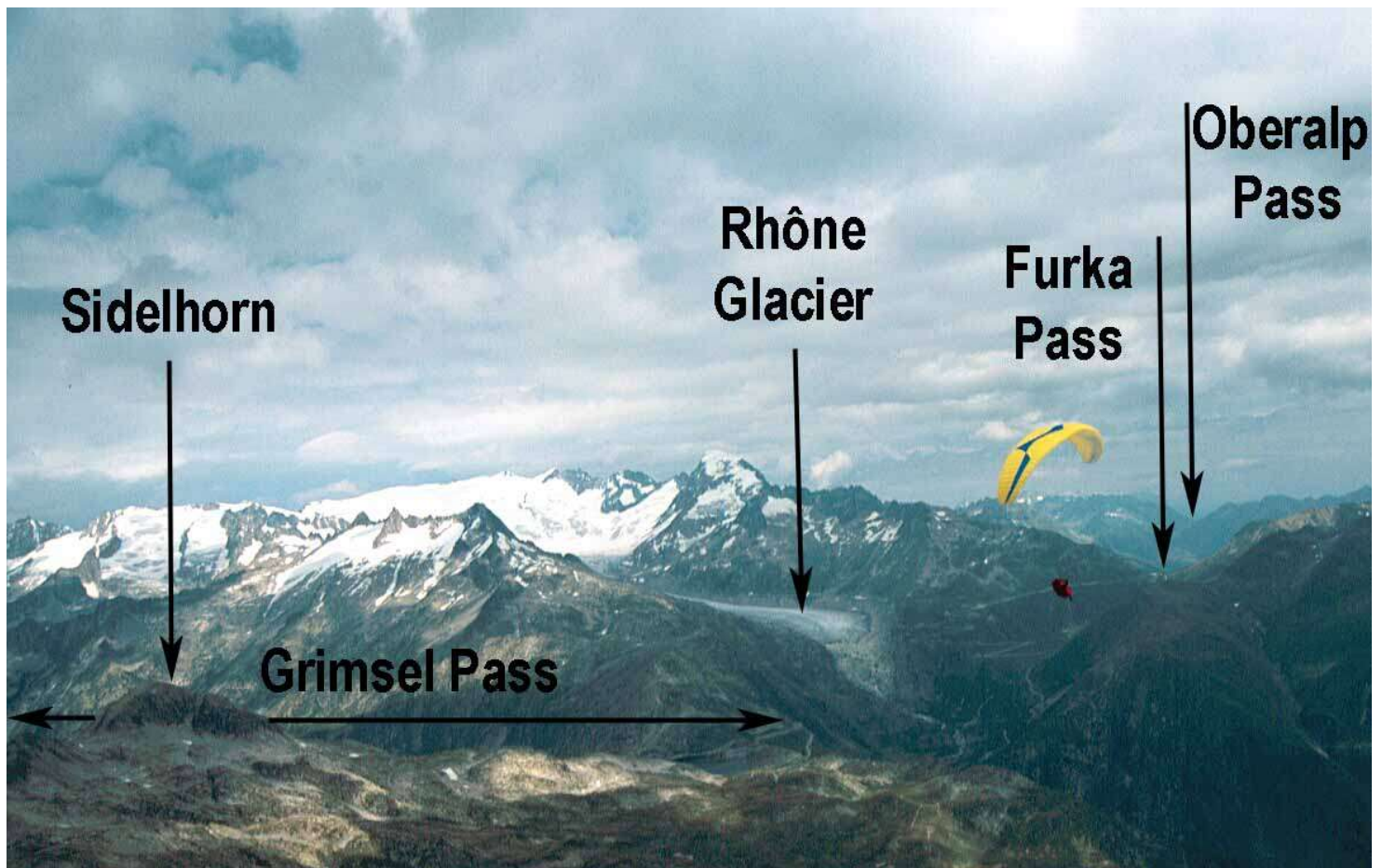
Robert: I look ahead to the Furka Pass, now about 20km to the east, with confidence. We find plenty of lift, and work at a leisurely pace from thermal to thermal, at times exploring towards the higher peaks, then returning nearer the valley. Most of the time we're well above 3,000m. Sometimes I feel as though I'm cheating by hanging around in lift until I can see others climbing within gliding range, but then we find our own thermals too.



Becca: After we've been flying for an hour or so, Robert calls for glucose, so I feed him a few tablets. With only light turbulence, I 'm finding it too easy to compose my pictures, and realise that I will soon run out of film unless I become more selective. Trying to keep my hands warm, I put my thick gloves back on and relax for a while.

Robert: As we near the head of the valley, I begin to assess our chances of getting over the Furka. Although cloudbase seems high enough, much of the area which we'd have to cross is in shadow. The GPS has been reassuring me about the lack of general wind by showing no consistent difference between our ground speed and the glider's trim speed.

Becca: Below and to our left, a gap in the main ridge appears – the Grimsel Pass, leading to the north. At the same time, the Rhône glacier is coming into view ahead. Then, in the far distance, through the Furka, I can see the little village of Andermatt, and the winding road above it, where I first skied on snow. I get busy with my camera again.



Robert: The surface of the lake in the col of the Grimsel Pass appears smooth. This is an important indicator that the notorious wind there which can flush you down into the valley is absent. But in contrast to our trip so far, I can't see any other gliders ahead, and I'd like to know why! Although Andermatt beckons, failure to get over the Furka could force us to land out high up in the mountains in rough conditions. The west-facing head of the valley is still basking in sun, so we glide across to see if we can get up there, but it doesn't seem to be working, so we return to the security of the south-facing slope again.

Becca: I've been enjoying our tour of the head of the valley, but I let Robert know that I've now become quite cold, and we discuss our options. The proposal that we could head back towards Fiesch meets with my full approval.

Robert: I've always promised Becca that I'll respect her wishes when she tells me that she's had enough, so I choose a lower route for our return journey, to try to warm her up again, though I know this could deck us. The air is quite buoyant, but we encounter no real thermals, so our altitude gradually declines. Suddenly, it becomes much warmer, and I realise we're now below an inversion, and unlikely to get up again.

Becca: The feeling returns to my fingers, and I begin to take an interest in the series of picturesque little villages below, just a few kilometres apart, which become closer with every minute. I'm a bit disappointed when Robert suggests that I should be ready to put my camera away, as we could well be landing quite soon.

Robert: The GPS shows a gradual decline in our ground speed as we descend into the narrowing valley, and we're soon only a few hundred metres above the floor. Instinctively, I've been avoiding the enormous gullies running up the slope, fearing rotor from the valley wind blowing across them. Then we glide past a more prominent ridge, with a large mountain hut – the Galmihornhütte – perched well above us. Next to it, a Swiss flag streams out steadily, showing clearly that the breeze there, though strong, is laminar, and smack on the spine.

Becca: I wasn't expecting to be ridge-soaring in the Alps, but we S-turn in front of the slope and the vario starts making the right noise once more. I unpack my camera again. A group of hikers outside the hut wave at us enthusiastically, so I return the greeting. We soon climb past them, but after a few minutes we're only maintaining our position.

Robert: Although we've gained a few hundred metres, I feel that this has probably just postponed the inevitable end of our flight, as the air feels so stable. Then I spot a paraglider, which has been gliding towards us just a few hundred metres ahead, turning back and starting to 360. We head over to take up an opposite position in the weak thermal, and watch each other intently. Tightening – straightening – tightening..... gaining – losing – gaining.....working together enables us to stay in the lift, and avoid the sink

Becca: I get a good close-up of our companion as we circle together, but I'm running short of film. I don't want to use it all up, but I have no idea how much longer we'll be airborne. Gradually we gain altitude, but we seem to be drifting back the way we've come.

Robert: It becomes turbulent, and I recognise that we've reached the inversion. Suddenly, the air is crisp and cool, and our climb strengthens. It's easy again, with the vario singing happily all the way round. We're out of the valley wind, and soon it's obvious that we have enough height to reach the landing field at Fiesch, so we set off on our final glide.

Becca: At Bellwald again, just as Fiesch comes into view, we fly straight through a massive area of lift, gaining several hundred metres. Then we're out in the Fieschertal valley and sinking steadily, so I put the camera away.

Robert: Now with so much more altitude than we need, we continue our glide until we're upwind of the landing field, where the windsock is showing the usual steady breeze, and gently spiral down to set up for a straightforward landing.

Becca: I like Robert to "talk me in" at this stage, as I sometimes find the final approach a bit stressful. I become uneasy if he goes quiet, because I've learned this can mean he's anticipating a problem. From his relaxed manner, I expect a simple landing, and I'm content when we touch down gently, 2½ hours after our takeoff.

