

The day I flew further than Chrigel

ROBERT SMITH HAS A LUCKY FLIGHT SHADOWING THE SWISS OPEN

It was only a couple of days later, when I looked at the XContest.org page for July 30th, that the penny dropped. Somehow, a bimbling Brit on an EN B had launched from the same site as the X-Alps Champion on his comp wing, and landed with 96km under his belt while Chrigel Maurer had clocked up just 88km. Not only that, mine turned out to be the longest recorded flight within Switzerland that day. And it might never have happened without that text from my wife as I was setting up.

All photos: Robert Smith



Setting off across the sunny slope towards a nearby cumulus

The evening before, I check out my usual meteo links, which suggest that the next day will be too windy for paragliding in the high Alps to be safe, let alone enjoyable. Out of curiosity I take a look at the website of the Swiss Open, which has been taking place this week. The competitors have just enjoyed a fantastic 95km flight, and I'm surprised to see that they anticipate similar conditions tomorrow and an 80km task from Disentis to Schiers. I decide to head over from nearby Andermatt in the morning to listen in on the task briefing, with a view to following a similar route, though hopefully avoiding any scary comp gaggles.

My heart sinks as I take in the briefing - 15 - 20 knots (not km/h!) of west wind predicted at 3000m. Only a one-way trip

will be possible, thick cirrus is expected at an undetermined time, and competitors are encouraged to call 'Level 3' if turbulence is getting out of hand. I hope it won't become necessary to abandon my flight to avoid the risk of getting caught in dangerous conditions. As I get ready, a text arrives from my wife: 'J&A invite us for BBQ this pm, OK?' I reply: 'Fine. Not an epic day, hope to get a couple of hours out of it. Unlikely to be back late.'

From Disentis, the route heads east along the south-facing side of the upper Rhine valley, which extends for 55km with no big gaps until Chur. The ridge line is mostly around 2000m above the valley floor, along which regular trains provide an easy retrieve all the way back to Andermatt. The west wind should be a mixed blessing,

speeding transitions through sinky areas and providing the opportunity to use some dynamic lift off windward aspects of the terrain, but also increasing the potential for turbulence.

Amongst the competitors launching every few seconds from their area 50m below the free-flyers' take-off, Chrigel is easy to spot from all the logos on his wing. He glides across in front of us to the house thermal and climbs out effortlessly. As the next cycle comes through, I lob off directly into a lively climb, but my initial delight at bypassing the comp melée evaporates as several sharp-eyed pilots spot that I'm going up more quickly than they are and come over to join me. To my relief, as soon as the lift begins to weaken they head off towards the higher terrain



Easy cruising amongst spectacular alpine terrain

to the north in search of something better, but I'm in no hurry, and hang on until base before setting off across the sunny slope towards a nearby cumulus to the east.

On my left I can see obvious wind effect on the clouds as the comp gaggle glides past above the spine of the ridge. To my surprise, my GPS indicates that although I'm at 3000m I'm in just a light tailwind, around 5km/h. There's promising cumulus development ahead, and I enjoy some delightful cruising amongst spectacular alpine terrain, free to choose whether to top up my height in the frequent thermals or to keep going.

Soon the clouds ahead are ragged and confined to the peaks, and the climbs weaken. However the tailwind has picked up to around 10km/h and I change tactics: circling and drifting in the gentle thermals, speeding up through sink and tracking north towards the higher terrain in occasional dynamic lift off windward faces.



Catching up with some of the slower competitors, crossing from the other side of the valley



But soon the cumulus ahead become ragged confined to the peaks

A couple of hours into the flight, I'm catching some of the slower competitors who are crossing from the other side of the valley. A turn-point has been set there and they arrive back low down on a sunny slope, providing an 'interesting' climb out (as the briefing put it), to contrast with the initial high alpine section of the task. Ahead and below I can see a Boomerang and an Enzo circling tightly and climbing well together, so I push full bar to join them as soon as I can. It's a rough little thermal and I chuckle as these wings roll and yaw with their wingtips flapping, while the much lower aspect ratio of my Rush 4 enables it to stay in the core without effort.

I reach the Calanda, the mountain overlooking Chur, to find around 15km/h of westerly wind at 2500m. The thermals here are bumpy and drifting across the slope. Staying with the comp route would not only entail a long transition into a narrow valley with which I'm completely unfamiliar, in dodgy meteo conditions, but also make it impossible for me to get back in time for the barbeque.

The very pleasant 50km flight which I've enjoyed so far has exceeded my earlier expectations, and I don't really mind calling it a day now. However landing around here is not an attractive option as the easterly valley breeze typically exceeds 30km/h. This wind will be much weaker 10km to the west where the village of Flims sits on a large plateau 500m above the valley floor, so I turn around to head back in this direction.

Arriving at the Flims landing field with plenty of height to spare, I wonder if I can bypass the bus trip from here down to Ilanz (and catch an earlier train back to Andermatt) by flying there instead. Down at 1500m I'm in the easterly valley flow which will assist my progress. My GPS tells me that I need a glide of 7:1, so if I can just avoid any serious sink as I meander over the plateau, whilst enjoying a great view of the Rhine Gorge, I'll make it with ease.

To the east of Ilanz, the cumulus are wind-torn and high cirrus is developing in the distance, as predicted at the briefing.

However as I reach the south-facing slope above the town I pick up a solid climb and decide to continue still further in this direction. Back up at 2500m I need to accelerate to maximise progress against the high-level westerly headwind, but as I lose height the easterly valley breeze takes over again. I come off the gas and concentrate more on finding rising air.

When I reach the turquoise lake at Brigels the high cloud is thickening, but there's still enough lift around to maintain adequate height without difficulty. A few km further on I find an excellent thermal which takes me up to 3000m. I allow myself a glimmer of hope that I might get all the way back to Disentis, where I started some four and a half hours ago. According to my GPS a glide of 9:1 would be enough to reach the landing field there, but even pulley-to-pulley I'm only getting half that with a groundspeed of around 20km/h. It's obvious that I'll need to find more lift to succeed.

The sky above Disentis is now looking very murky with the only cumulus ahead



The Calanda overlooking Chur



Arriving at Flims I begin wonder if I avoid a bus trip and push on to Ilanz

out of range. The general westerly flow has now overcome the easterly valley breeze which has been so helpful. Suddenly, just 6km out, I'm going down at 3m/s and my glide has dropped to just 2:1. In the vain hope that this could be the sink before the thermal I so desperately need, I stay on full bar but continue to plummet.

Paragliding can be a cruel sport – in just a couple of minutes dreams of reaching goal are replaced by concerns about finding somewhere to land. A large flat field of recently-cut grass, right by a train station around 2km downwind, is the obvious choice. Fortunately it's the Swiss National Day and there are plenty of flags around showing a light westerly at ground level, and I touch down without any drama.

Postscript: Reaching Disentis would have amounted to an out-and-return of just over 100km. One of the comp pilots threw his reserve in the valley which I'd decided to avoid. And I made it back to Andermatt in time for the barbeque!



From Disentis the route heads east along the south-facing side of the upper Rhine valley



At Brigels the high cloud is thickening but there's still enough lift around to maintain height



Take Dr. McCoy's advice and have the BHPA's Pilot Handbook beamed into your brain.

*Alternatively, grab a hard copy from one of the universe's many good free-flight outlets – including your local BHPA flying school, dealership or the BHPA shop. As the good Doctor would say, **'You'd have to be out of your Vulcan mind not to!'***