



Above the spine of the main ridge

No grief at Greifenburg

Robert Smith reports on a guided paragliding trip in the Austrian Alps



PHOTO: DOUGLAS THAI

GREIFENBURG IS A SLEEPY LITTLE VILLAGE IN THE AUSTRIAN STATE OF KÄRNTEN ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE ALPS. It lies at the foot of a large south-facing ridge with a big reputation amongst free fliers as a starting point for long XC's.

Regular clients of Kelly Farina's Austrian Arena will have heard him enthuse about the potential of the Drautal and surrounding valleys for many years, and I was delighted to be able to join

his first-ever guided visit to the area in May 2013. The group comprised Andrew Craig, Simon Goodman, Ioan Tudur Jones, Roger Turner, Swedish pilot Patrik Andersson and myself.

The village itself is the location of the main landing field in the valley floor, which runs east-west at around 600m ASL, but we're staying close by the Emberger Alm take-off at 1800m.

Kelly's new van breezes up the long climb and we arrive at dusk, to a friendly greeting from Wolfgang, owner of the hotel and the launch area. A hang glider pilot there since the 1990s, his



Flight No. 1: Tasting the air

By late morning we're checking out the take-off, which appears ideal. The site is large and grassy, with separate hang glider and paraglider preparation areas behind a slightly steeper launch slope in front. Although it's quite cloudy, with base only a few hundred metres overhead, we can see from the few wings thermalling in front that the air is buoyant and smooth, with no significant wind.

hear the occasional pilot radio back to Kelly, 'Down and safe in the landing field.' Overall I'm losing more height than I'm gaining, so I head back east towards Greifenburg with some bar into a light headwind.

For a while I'm checking out the bomb-out options as it's clear I'll need some lift to reach the landing field, but there's enough buoyant air around and I land after a pleasant hour's flying. I discover to my surprise that Roger and Ioan are still airborne. Rather than taking what had

We can see them as tiny specks in the distance, working their way slowly along the ridge.

We clarify the location of the main landing field in the valley to the east. Kelly is satisfied that it's safe to fly. He feels it's not worth setting a route and opts to remain on the ground to monitor conditions and retrieve any of us who land out. We unpack and prepare to take to the air.

The regular gentle cycles produce easy launch conditions, and soon we're all airborne and wafting around in light, smooth thermals. After a while we notice some rain a few km to the east, and discuss this with Kelly over the radio. It appears to be just a small shower confined to a small section of the ridge; it isn't blocking our route to the landing field but we need to monitor developments closely.

Reassured, it seems obvious to me that the best plan is to work to the west along the south-facing slope away from the rain, where it's shady but dry. I struggle in the scanty lift and

seemed to me to be the only option, they had avoided the shower by crossing to the north-facing side, which turned out to be working much better.

We can see them as tiny specks in the distance, working their way slowly along the ridge. It's always a bitter-sweet experience to follow the progress of your buddies from the deck. Whilst enjoying the vicarious pleasure of sharing friends' excitement, I really dislike the feeling that I haven't made the most of the conditions. But the lift gradually fizzles out and they both land in the valley, and we set off in the van to pick them up.

Next morning our initial mood is again pessimistic. The clouds overhead are travelling at some speed and the synoptics point to blown-out conditions. However the wind could ease off and allow some local soaring in the afternoon.

PHOTO: KELLY FARINA
The Emberger Alm take-off



familiarity with the local area and meteorological conditions will be useful during our week.

In the morning there's a spectacular view across to the other side of the Drautal valley, with more distant Alpine peaks visible beyond. Resigned to a day of ground-based activities due to very moist air and a forecast strong northerly airflow, we're pleasantly surprised when the local forecast suggests that conditions could be favourable for some thermal flying later.

Flight No. 2: Brass monkeys

It's getting on for 3pm and even more cloudy at take-off than the previous day, but the wind has indeed died down. Again Kelly feels that the conditions aren't suitable for a formal task, but suggests that we all get airborne and then decide what's possible. He runs us through the format for texting our coordinates to Luigi, our retrieve driver, if we land out. This time I'm one of the last to launch and find myself chasing to get up to join the rest of the group.

The radio conversation is all about the temperature; most of the group are finding it uncomfortably cold. Anyone who wants to keep flying is welcome to do so, but the majority elect to land. After yesterday's feeling of slight disappointment I'm in no mood to give up early, and I take advantage of the warmth of skiing clothes inside my pod harness and continue along the ridge.

I glide across to the other side of the Drautal. My fingers do become slightly numb at base (3000m and -4 degrees), but I'm well satisfied when I land back at Greifenburg two and a half hours later having crossed back again to close a 40k triangle. Ioan has also put up with the cold for a decent flight around the valley.

Next morning we're delighted to find a clear sky and light winds. Kelly is confident that this will be the best day of the week and Wolfgang agrees; he is planning to have a flight himself today.

Flight No. 3: A bridge too far

The vibe at take-off is very different today. Deep in thought, Kelly is formulating his plan to maximise the day's potential. Eventually, the oracle speaks: 'OK lads, gather round. Here's the route..' The map is spread out and the index finger jabbed.

'T06, T15, T12, L01. 60k flat triangle. Any questions?' Some of us struggle to remember how to program our instruments, into which our Dear Leader had downloaded the turnpoints on the first morning. The plan is to head west along the south-facing side of the valley, turn around to return past launch to the east, then to cross to the other side for the last turnpoint, a bridge over a lake, before finally landing back at Greifenburg.

Kelly is full of advice about how best to tackle the route and

conditions: expect a headwind at first, watch out for turbulence near the first turnpoint, top up to the max for the valley crossing near the end. With an eager sense of anticipation, we get ready for the task ahead.

Andrew is first off and soon showing us the underside of his wing as he cranks it round in a lively thermal well in front. I launch next and find a stronger climb closer in. He's the first to get to base, 1000m above take-off; it seems to extend in an almost unbroken line along the ridge in both directions.

There's no point in hanging around for the others when it's so obvious where to find lift, and we set off as planned to the west, separated by a couple of hundred metres. The anticipated headwind is trivial; we're in no hurry and are soon caught up by Simon and Patrik. Cruising along amongst beautiful mountains, in buoyant air near base with good ground clearance... can free flight get any better?

Mindful of Kelly's coaching about avoiding an unintentional visit to the White Room, the group makes good progress together towards the first turnpoint. Radio chat is minimal, but at one point I hear Kelly transmit 'Are you OK?' 'Fine now,' comes the reply. I find out later that one of the group has had a brief loss of control following a collapse on the bar, fortunately with more than enough height to regain control before the situation became dangerous.

As predicted, the air around the corner of the ridge becomes lumpy. Some of us are being hooped up in punchy little fragments of lift, whilst others close by are focussed on escaping the surrounding sink. But we all tag the turnpoint and turn round, at various heights, to head back towards launch.

Those who stayed high are finding it easy in well-formed thermals, but pilots traversing the slope lower down are having more of a struggle to top up in broken lift and the group becomes separated. Eventually I catch up with Kelly and Ioan near the next turnpoint at the other end of the ridge, and Roger joins us too. We enjoy the camaraderie of working some lively thermals together, helping each other map out the best lift.

We set out across the valley towards the final turnpoint, the bridge over the lake. The headwind strengthens and the



PHOTO: ROGER TURNER

Cloud streets along both sides of a broad valley - flying heaven!

air becomes more and more unfriendly, a mix of strong lift and sink with sharp edges between. Keeping our wings open begins to occupy more of our concentration.

We discuss the conditions on the radio. With one of Kelly's aphorisms in my mind - 'It's only a game!' - it's agreed that, although we may be capable of battling on and tagging the turnpoint, fighting turbulence when it's not nec-

essary is pointless, especially when we've had such great flying up to now. So we turn away and glide back to the landing field at Greifenburg.

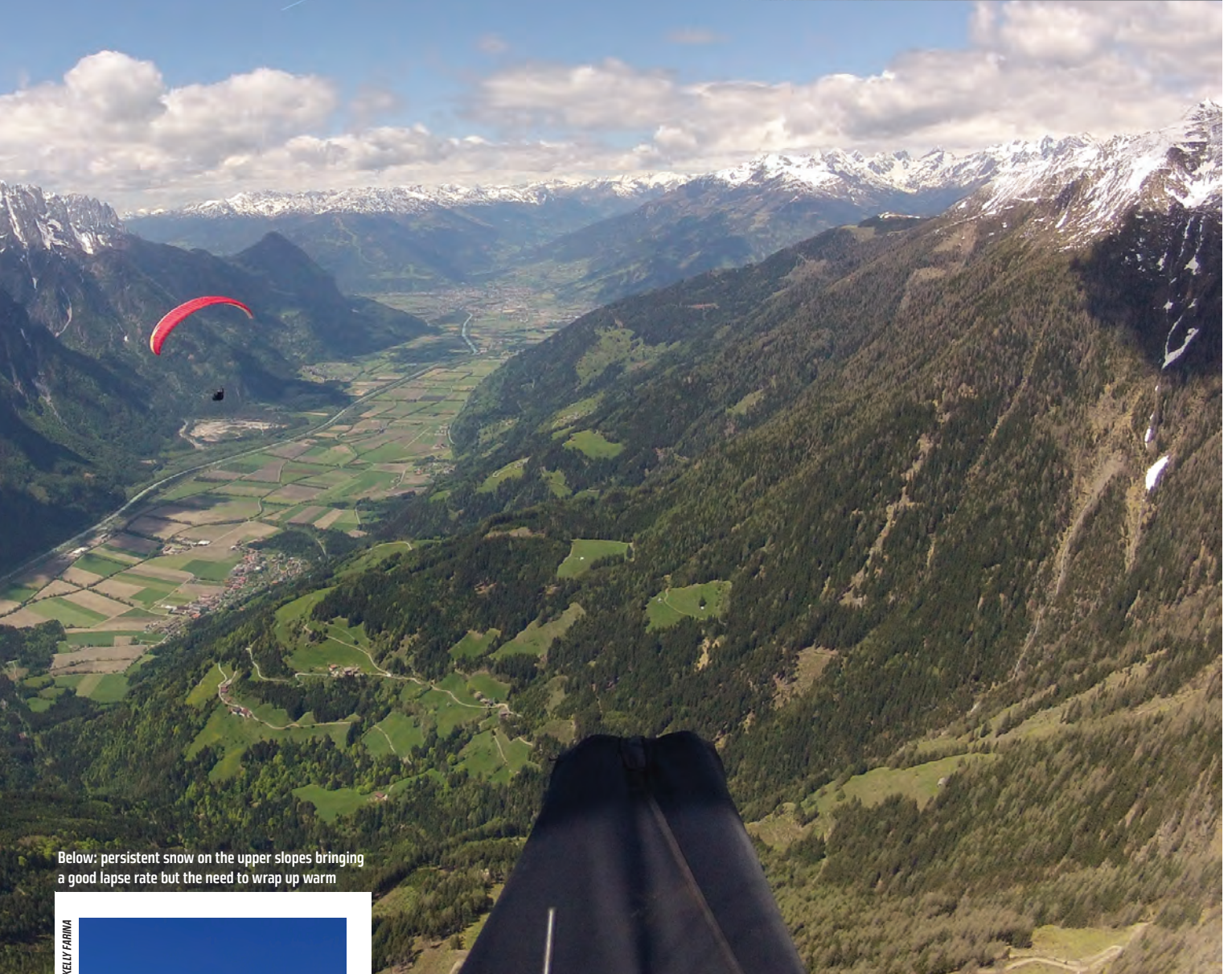
Weather!

Next morning it's sunny but we can see the clouds hoofing overhead from the north, their tops torn by the wind. Without the protection of the high



PHOTO: KELLY FARINA

Above: the group at take-off on the first day (L - R): Robert Smith, Roger Turner, Andrew Craig, Simon Goodman, Ioan Tudur Jones, and Patrik Andersson.



Below: persistent snow on the upper slopes bringing a good lapse rate but the need to wrap up warm

PHOTO: KELLY FARINA



mountains behind the area near take-off, we could find ourselves suddenly exposed to the north wind, especially where it's likely to funnel through at both ends of the ridge. We observe paragliders and hang gliders in the air but none getting high or even climbing consistently, and there's a substantial crosswind drift along the ridge.

No-one in the group is interested in flying in such conditions when the memories of yesterday's excellent flight are still fresh. Kelly says he's relieved that he doesn't have to play the role of the Grinch, standing in the way of pilots who are determined to get their feet off the ground but can't recognise the difference between 'good' and 'bad' paragliding.

As the poor weather pattern is set to continue, it's clear that there won't be any more worthwhile flying to be had in the Drautal this week. A decision is taken to relocate to Mayrhofen on the north side of the Alps, ending the Greifenburg experience. But for all of us the words of possibly the most famous living Austrian spring to mind: 'I'll be back...'