

# /// I FEEL LIKE AN F1 DRIVER ON POLE WAITING FOR THE LIGHTS TO GO GREEN...

...standing with one leg forward and my arms outstretched like an eagle ready to soar, I listen for Alex's instructions over the headset. The propeller on my back rumbles and purrs. It makes my arms shake – or is that the adrenalin making me quiver?

Kes, my usually placid instructor, has three fingers outstretched in front of my face; each digit ready to count me down to my first ever paramotor launch.

He makes eye contact.

Gone is the mild mannered expression that I'd got so used to during training. Instead, he's taken on the persona of a boxing coach, willing on his fighter to a knockout. Alex

later jokes, "It's as if he's looking into your soul." He's right about that.

Kes' body language tells me it's show time. I wait to hear the bell ding for the start of round one but it doesn't come, instead I hear Alex's voice in my headset telling me to throttle up to half power.

I'm ready for this now. I gently squeeze the throttle trigger in my right hand. Instantly the prop spins up behind me and tries to push me over by I resist with my legs. As the propeller shoots

up a laminar jetstream of air behind me that'll help the wing come up more easily in just a few moments time, thoughts about what I should be doing next come haphazardly and out of order. I try to get control of my thinking and OK, so it's off the power. Run forward. Lift the wing up. Arms up. Release the A-lines. Keep directly into wind. Hold the direction. Check my wing is straight above me. Trickle the power on. Then give it full power. And Run, Run, Run...

I check the windsock one final time and make absolutely sure

I'll be running straight into wind. If I fall outside of the wind line, it's most likely I'll end up on a heap on the floor and face the embarrassment of breaking the carbon fibre prop. I'll then have to sign it and it will go alongside the others who have met the same fate and are now trophied on the hangar wall at Skyschool.

Kes counts me down. "THREE, TWO, ONE" "GO!"

I run forward with all I've got. Kes pulls on my harness and ensures I'm tracking into wind. It's tricky to run because of the

weight on my back and the harness straps across each thigh. But the wing is up now, I've released the A-lines and I'm keeping into wind. Alex directs me all the time. The wing stays right above me. That's a good thing. I had been worrying about it falling to one side and throwing me off the wind line but it's all working out right for now.

"Trickle the power on now Dan," Alex calls quickly over the radio. The prop reacts instantaneously as I manage to use a free brain cell to make my fingers squeeze the trigger in

amongst all these things happening at once.

"Full power now Dan, full power now," urges Alex.

Music to my ears. I squeeze my fingers all the way on the trigger. Suddenly it feels like someone's behind me giving me a huge push forward like a child on a swing. It becomes easier to run, the pack feels lighter and then I'm off the ground. And it feels absolutely magic. I keep my legs running following the advice and they're still kicking through the air as I climb up overhead Alex..."



Skyschool's MD, Alex Ledger.

## THE KIT

Skyschool uses paramotor equipment made by Parajet in the UK. Headed up by Gilo Cardozo – the man behind a number of engineering feats such as the 'Volution' range of paramotors, a supercharged paramotor that flew him and Bear Grylls over Mount Everest and more recently, the Skycar which is the first, two seater, high performance, road legal, bio-fuelled flying car; capable of providing rally car performance on and off road, and light aircraft performance after just a few minutes of wing preparation.

Once you have the paramotor, you can then choose the type of wing you want depending on your weight, the type of flying you want to do and your experience. Highly recommended are wings designed and manufactured by Mike Campbell Jones of Paramania Powergliders.

[www.parajet.com](http://www.parajet.com)

A Parajet paramotor with a single cylinder engine and carbon fibre propeller. The fuel tank is at the bottom of the cage.



## MY FEET DANGLE OVER THE PLOUGHED FIELDS OF THE CATALAN COUNTRYSIDE

"I'm surprised how high I get so quickly. All I hear now are words of congratulations over the radio as I soar upwards. I'm grinning ear to ear and let out a whoop of excitement. I climb too high so I power back off but my finger throttle control is not quite there yet and I dip and climb, dip and climb before Alex directs me left to turn crosswind for my first ever paramotoring circuit.

My field of view is like nothing I've seen before; just my feet dangling over the ploughed fields of the Catalan countryside. Looking further round the horizon I see the coast of the Costa Brava and then further north, the mountains on the border with France with a dusting of snow – the first of the winter season.

Alex brings me back from my daydreaming and asks me to sit down properly into the harness. I'd practised this on the ground and I was soon reclining in a lovely seated position and taking the strain off the leg straps across my thighs. It felt like relaxing into a

sunlounger next to a swimming pool. I could imagine cruising along on a long cross country flight on a summer's evening back in the UK after a long day at work.

For the next 10 minutes, Alex lets me fly circuits around Ordis Aerodrome. Unlike the first solo in a light aircraft which is one circuit to land and over far, far too soon, in the paramotor I got to stay up for as long as I wanted.

"Let me know when your hands start to get cold and we'll bring you down," Alex calls over the radio.

"They're fine for the moment," I call back, pressing the PTT button on the side of my headset. I am in fact starting to feel the chill on my fingertips (it's surprisingly cold even in Spain in November) but I want to stay up here as long as possible and take it all in.

Turning left and right, I begin to get used to controlling the wing and my throttle control and height keeping improve very quickly. Making fast progress in any sport or new activity is a

sure fire way of keeping you enthusiastic about it and already I know a Parajet Volution paramotor will be going on my Christmas list.

I turn base leg and throw my hips forward to get out of the harness in preparation for landing. Just like in a light aircraft, you land into wind but with a paramotor it is absolutely critical. There are no medals here for attempting any kind of crosswind landing. A cross wind here will see you kissing the ground. My attention turns to the windsock once more and Alex also passes turn corrections over the radio as I turn final.

At about 200ft Alex gives me the call to cut the engine. What? Cutting the engine? Yes this is absolutely fine to do this, even during flight. This lets you fly as a paraglider then all you do is power up the engine again when you need it. I press and hold the red (kill) button under my thumb. The engine keeps running. I'm not pressing it properly. I try again and it cuts out briefly then re-starts.

Finally, I change my hand position, hold the button down long enough and then everything goes silent. I continue my approach.

"OK Dan that's looking good now, come right slightly, come right slightly."

It's working out great. The approach feels good. I feel good. In fact, coming in to land wasn't concerning me half as much as launching was. I remember to get my head and chest forward ready to start running on landing. I flare two metres above the grass, look ahead (not at the ground) and I land with a slight stumble, more due to the surprise of taking the weight of the 20kg paramotor on my back again.

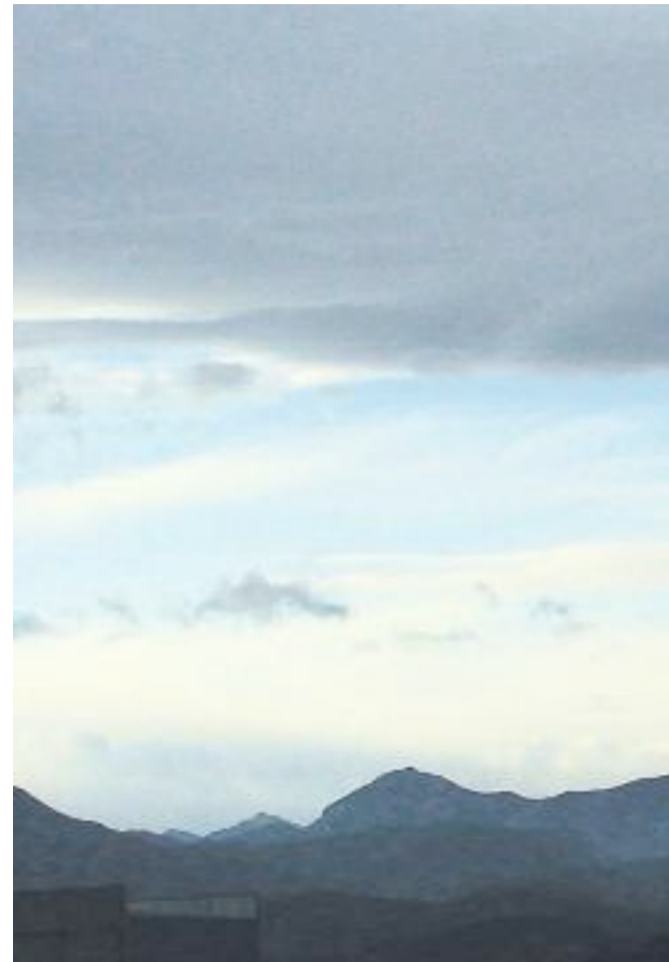
I am absolutely elated – as the video footage on *GF's* Facebook page shows. Alex, Kes and Deano have done a great job in helping me achieve my first ever paramotor flight... and I can't wait to do it again.

That evening we make a drive down to the skydiving mecca of Empurai Brava on the coastline. In the Skybar, we drink

beer, talk about flying, skydiving, skiing – you name it – and then spend the rest of the evening surrounded by like-minded souls watching and voting on a skydiving competition filmed earlier on in the day with clapping, cheering, loud music and laughter. As far as flying days go, it's well up there as one of the best I've ever had."

### POWERING UP

Rewind a few days earlier to when I first arrived at Skyschool at Ordis Aerodrome. From April until November, director Alex Ledger runs weekly paramotoring courses and has taught over 100 students this year. Flights to Girona Airport with Ryanair are easy to pick up cheaply. Ordis is then just 30 minutes by car. Accommodation is on site in a converted barn and meals are taken in the log cabin base or on trips into the local town of Figueres (birth town of Salvador Dali and has a museum dedicated to him). In short everything is in place for you to learn how to



Alex flies you in a trike first for familiarisation.



**Flying solo: Dan paramotors for the first time in front of beautiful scenery in Spain.**



**The view overhead Ordis Aerodrome in Spain.**



**Picturesque: Skyschool's log cabin base at Ordis.**

paramotor and make it into a holiday. Alex adds, "It's a little adventure capital here, everything you want is within driving distance whether it's skiing, skydiving, or mountain biking."

Currently there is no formal pilot's licence for paramotoring although training is well advised. The sport is overseen by both the BMAA and the BHPA but there are also independent instructors and the Paramotor Club (legally you do not have to be affiliated to any of these organisations to fly a paramotor). The BMAA stopped its paramotor training courses in April 2008 and deferred training responsibilities to the BHPA. Alex, however, has built up a great reputation for paramotor training and his Beginner courses (6 days £745) and Intermediate courses (a further 6 day course £745) are proving extremely popular. The Beginners course culminates with you flying at least one solo flight. You can then go and do your own flying depending on your level of confidence back home in the UK.

However, many go on to the Intermediate course to learn low level flying, precision landings, limited fuel tasks and cross country tasks. All of these advanced flights are shared with Skyschool instructors. Later on in your paramotoring career, if you're ever stuck with people to fly with they're more than happy to go up with you. It's a big community and friends are quickly made. Would-be paramotor pilots can also do a 12 day 'Addiction' course which is a combined Beginner and Intermediate course for £1245. Two-day tasters are also available in the winter months in the UK at Mere in Wiltshire (Parajet's HQ).

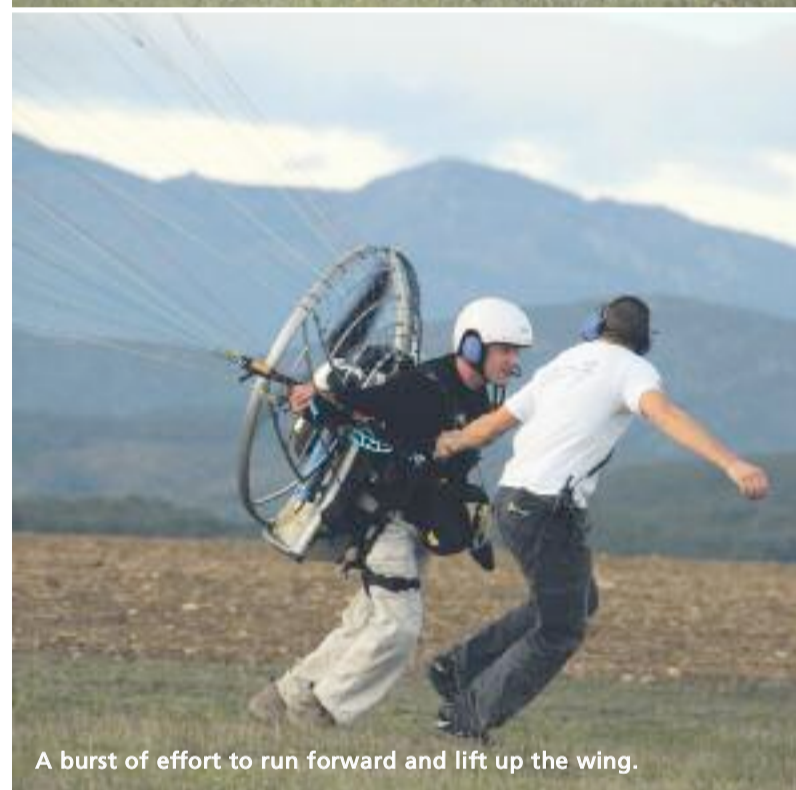
So what kind of people are learning to fly paramotors? Alex says most are aged 35 to 60 years old with about five percent under 30. "We get a lot of airline pilots with thousands of flying hours who find paramotoring reinvigorates their love for flying again," he says. Groups of friends or father/sons tend to book up a week away together

too. Paramotoring tends to appeal to the more adventurous pilots who may also ride motorcycles and go skiing too. As Skyschool instructor Dean Eldridge or 'Deano' puts it, "Paramotoring is motorcycling for the sky", and like motorcyclists, paramotors often like to take to the air with others. It was video footage from a flight that Deano made with Danny Weston, a paramotor pilot who learnt with Skyschool last year, instructor Kester Haynes and Rob Furnival that really opened my eyes to the beauty and appeal of this kind of flying (type 'flying in Catalunya 2009' into YouTube to see it). A day before my arrival, the group had flown along a valley up to medieval town on a hillside called Castello Follite de la Roca. Deano is a video and photography guru (check out [www.paraviation.com](http://www.paraviation.com)) and with the help of a video camera attached to his helmet he captured all that's appealing about paramotoring. I'd not even stepped near a paramotor wing but after watching his footage I was

## LAUNCHING



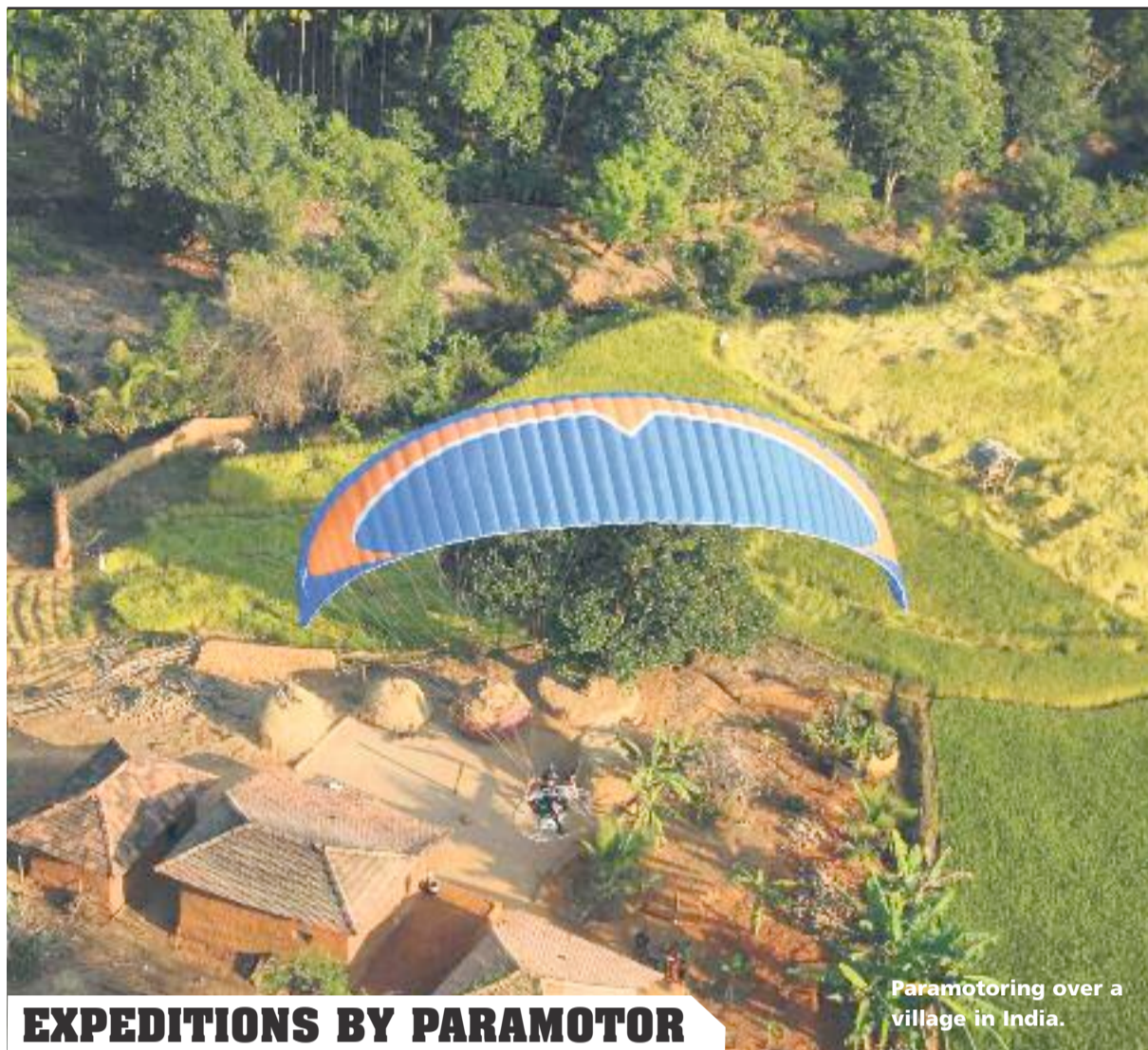
**Kes helps Dan get the lines set up prior to launch.**



**A burst of effort to run forward and lift up the wing.**



**Dan squeezes the throttle in his right hand; instant power.**



Paramotoring over a village in India.

## EXPEDITIONS BY PARAMOTOR

Alex is well aware of the fun you can have paramotoring but he also has plans to use them for more serious reasons. He is keen to push the boundaries and show that they can be flown for practical applications such as pipeline inspections or aerial surveying. Taking this further, he wants to fly in areas of Botswana next year and show how the vantage point from a paramotor can be used to observe changes in land use, to seek out new water supplies and also land out at remote locations delivering support, medicine and supplies to those

communities that desperately need it. The principle has already been proven after SkySchool supported John Blashford Snell and the Scientific Exploration Society (SES) on an expedition in search for a remote meteorite crater in the middle of the Bolivian rainforest. In July 2007, Deano took off from the local village football pitch to carry out an aerial photo mission of the site. John said afterwards that it was "one of the SES's most successful blends of scientific discovery and community aid under very difficult conditions".

certain that this was going to become a new hobby for me. The seed for wanting to become a paramotor pilot is planted in many ways but like so many sports it's important to think ahead to how you are going to keep it up. Perhaps the draw for many is that there is pretty much no regulation; you can load a paramotor in the back of your car and launch from anywhere that's suitable. You can even land in a field next to a petrol station, fill up, then take off again and continue on your way. Landing out in this way is a big step for any paramotor pilot but the trick is keeping tabs on your fuel. There isn't a contents gauge so Deano says fuel usage is something you have to time for yourself. It depends a lot on weight and how you use the throttle but generally speaking you'll use about four to five litres an hour. Add some two-stroke oil into the tank and you're looking at an hour's airborne time for just under a tenner. It means that long cross country flights are doable for very little cost –

providing you land somewhere without a retrieve problem i.e. you want to land where someone can drive and pick you up. It's perhaps best to fly a circular route but you must keep in mind that stronger than expected headwinds can affect a return journey. Wind is key and this tends to limit the number of flyable days, particularly in the UK. Ideally you want a day with anything from 5 to 12 knots of wind. More than 12 knots and/or bumpy and thermic conditions should mean you make the wise decision to stay on the ground.

Planning a route is similar to light aircraft flying and rules say you must not fly below 500ft agl except for landing or takeoff. Generally, most pilots cruise around at 800 to 1000ft. GPS can be used though as well as normal aviation charts for navigation. Of course, you have to remain clear of controlled airspace and it can be also good practice to carry a handheld VHF radio to make position calls.

There's no doubt that everything

within a paramotor course is possibly that bit easier if you already hold a PPL and have flying experience. Airmanship principles can be applied to any kind of aerial activity.

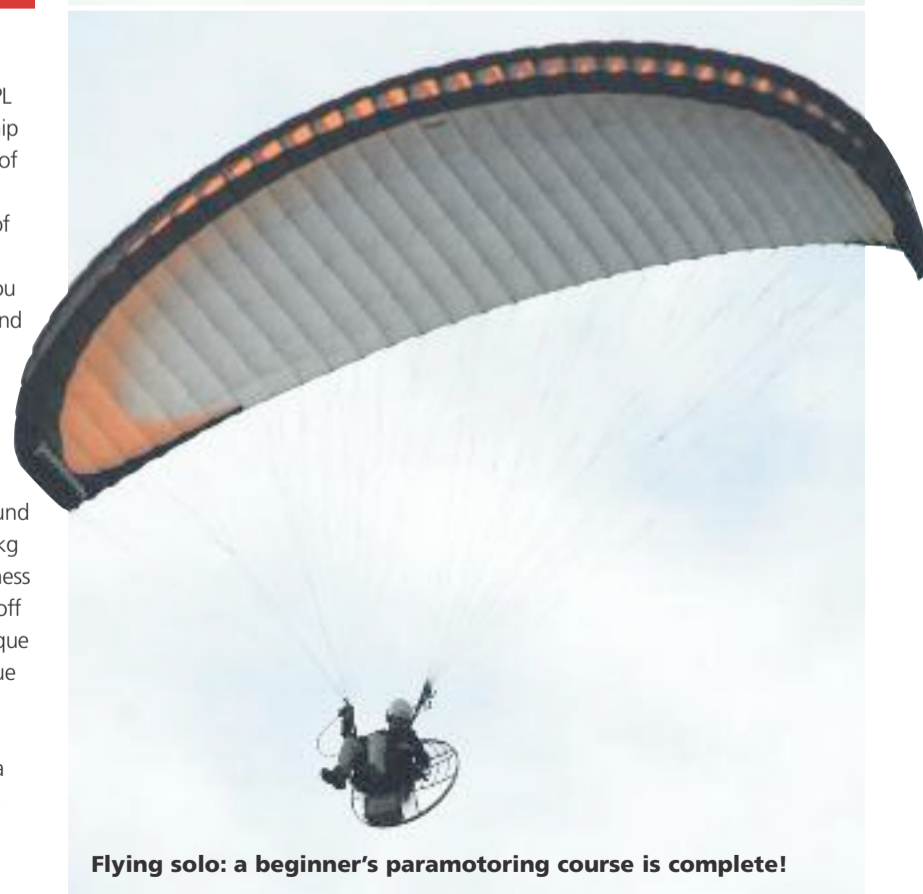
In short, if you're finding the cost of light aircraft flying too much, then paramotoring may be the flying fix you need. You can improve very quickly and this keeps the enthusiasm level high. Young or old you needn't think it's too difficult either; paramotoring, although it looks like it, it is not an extreme sport and flights are steady, relaxing and cover the ground at around 30 to 40mph. You need to take a 26kg load on your back but all levels of fitness should be able to cope with the takeoff and landing runs once correct technique has been learnt. And correct technique is vital as I discovered later on in my course. They say you don't become a true paramotor pilot until you break a propeller. I'll leave it for you to decide whether I did or not... **GF!**  
www.skyschooluk.com



The legs just starting to break free from the ground.



Airborne: keeping the power on full, Dan climbs up and away.



Flying solo: a beginner's paramotoring course is complete!