

Outlook on Lifestyle

"Sailplaning" offers a unique calming experience



Vince Egan
Travel
Thompson News Service

I always used to wonder how a glider - or sailplane, to use the preferred term - ever got off the ground and into the air. No motor, no fuel, no propeller.

Now I know. First you find a nice, flat hilltop with a sharp drop-off. Next you arrange for a tow from a real airplane, one with motor, fuel, propeller and tow rope.

Then you clamber into the sleek, narrow sailplane, sit behind the pilot and buckle up. The tow-plane heads down the runway to the sharp drop-off and - yikes! - you're soaring.

What's it like? In a sense, it must be something like the days between the two world wars, when people would pay for short spins in two-seat airplanes just to experience flight, even though they would end up back at their starting point.

Similarly, today's sailplanes seldom travel anywhere. What they offer is the novel experience of motorless flight, the fragile craft kept aloft by air currents.

The experience is smooth and somehow calming. Those who seek excitement have to be satisfied with three passing moments - seeing the ground disappear suddenly at the edge of the take-off hill; hearing a slight thud when the sailplane pilot releases the 200-foot rope connecting his craft to the tow-plane; and touching down on the runway at the end.

WRIGHT STUFF

A bit of gliding history: Those aviation pioneers, Wilbur and Orville Wright, built and flew their first glider in 1902, the year before their first powered flight at Kitty Hawk, N.C. Orville became the specialist in gliding, Wilbur in powered flight.

Recreational gliding developed during the 1920s in Germany, whose aircraft industry, under the terms of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, wasn't allowed to construct motorized aircraft. Wolfgang Hirth, an enthusiast, moved to New York in 1930 and set out to find a suitable location.

Hirth concentrated on the Finger Lakes region in the centre of the state. Just west of Elmira - the summer home of famed author Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) for

many years - he found a high, flat ridge called Harris Hill, some 1,700 feet above the broad, flat valley.

Once the airstrip had been developed, Harris Hill quickly became recognized as the soaring capital of the world. The three Schweizer brothers of Elmira became the leading designers and builders of sailplanes. During the Second World War, Harris Hill was taken over by the military and crews were trained there to operate large, troop-carrying gliders.

After the war, interest in gliding grew rapidly and tens of thousands of spectators were attracted to Harris Hill each year for the National Soaring Championships.

TOP OF THE HILL

Today's visitors reach Harris Hill by taking Exit 51 from Route 17 (a major thoroughway traversing the southern tier of New York State) and then taking a poorly marked route to the top of the hill.

That's what we did on an overcast and frequently rainy Sunday afternoon recently. At the small terminal building atop Harris Hill, a sign advertises flights of 15-to-22 minutes' duration for the equivalent of \$48 Canadian.

If that seems expensive, remember that it has to cover the cost of the power plane that tows each sailplane aloft. The sailplanes' pilots themselves are amateurs who love soaring and hope only to recover some of their expenses.

My pilot was Martin Green, a middle-aged physicist originally from Norwich, England, and a soaring enthusiast ever since his undergraduate years there. Lifting the plastic canopy of his two-seat Grob-Astir sailplane, Green showed me how to wedge myself into the rear seat while he climbed into the cockpit - a much less awkward manoeuvre than my entry had been.

With no preliminaries other than fastening the safety harness, we were ready and the tow-plane started down the runway. At one instant, I was marvelling at how close to the ground we were. At the next, having suddenly left the runway, I was amazed to see the valley 1,700 feet directly below.

UP AND AWAY

The tow plane lifted us, in five minutes, to an altitude of 2,500 feet (according to one of the gauges facing me) before Green released the rope. On a clear day, the pilot said, it's customary to soar to about 8,000 feet to see a panorama of all six of the Finger Lakes.

But because of the overcast, Green said, we could fly no higher into the wild grey yonder. Briefly, he demonstrated his sailplane's capacity to bank to either side, to climb and to dive. We flew at a fairly steady speed of 45 knots, or 80 km per hour.

Without much thermal lift, a sailplane loses altitude at the rate of about 200 feet per minute. There's nothing scary about the slow descent, but it did bring us back to Harris Hill only 17 minutes after take-off - after a flight that was silky smooth and blessedly silent.

Aircraft, it has always seemed to me, are the most beautiful of man-made machines, and the modern sailplane - smooth, strong, made of lightweight fibreglass and carbon compounds, with its slender fuselage and long, thin wings - is no exception.

FLYING HIGH

The altitude record for a sailplane is about 49,000 feet (much higher than subsonic commercial planes fly) although Green said that the record for the Harris Hill area is 16,000 feet. In competition, sailplanes have achieved speeds of about 165 km per hour, flown nearly 2,000 km non-stop and stayed aloft for more than eight hours at a time.

Most sailplane flights, of course, are shorter, slower and end up exactly where they started. So despite their smoothness and silence, sailplanes offer no real prospect for conventional, point-to-point travel - especially since there is normally enough space for only one passenger.

Let's regard them, then, as exactly what they are - loads of fun.

Visitors to Harris Hill can take flights daily until mid-September, weather permitting, and on weekends the rest of the year (Call 607-734-0641 to inquire about flight conditions.)

For spectators, there's no charge to park beside the flying field and watch take-offs, flights and landings. Adjacent to the terminal building is the National Soaring Museum (adults: \$2 U.S.), with some 39 historic sailplanes on display, as well as films on soaring and a large collection of documents and other memorabilia. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Uphill battle

Continued from Page 4

greedy paws away from retail cash registers. He'll get lots of support from the retailers themselves, since the new tax will give them all sorts of bookkeeping problems.

John Bulloch, head of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, says we could be facing the biggest tax revolt this country has ever seen.

Not the least bit comforting for Mr. Wilson. And neither are the mutterings from the Tory backbenches - something the government didn't have to worry about during the free-trade campaign.

Something else that free trade

had going for it was a clearly defined "upside." The government could talk about lower prices, more jobs, better shopping, access to bigger markets, etc.

But what comparable selling points come with the new tax? I've yet to see luncheon crowds become red-faced with enthusiasm over refundable tax credits. Of course, if anyone is tired of tripping over tourists, there might be some consolation in the prospect of the tax discouraging them from entering the country.

Visitors, who have no particular interest in our federal-provincial peculiarities, are not going to be impressed with 20-per-cent worth of sales tax. They'll be even less impressed with information about refundable tax credits.

WHEN TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

Q: I am a working mother with an active family. My evenings are so hectic that I seldom have time to prepare nutritious meals for my family. How can I decrease the amount of convenience foods we consume?

A: Few people realize how detrimental our hectic lifestyles can be to a well-balanced diet. A little planning and preparation, however, can eliminate a dependence upon fast-food restaurants, TV dinners and high-calorie snacking. Plan for the entire week, including foods from all four food groups. Prepare foods ahead of time whenever possible. Keep in mind that those complicated sauces and gravies are not only time-consuming, but also high in calories. Keep plenty of fresh fruits, such as oranges, apples and grapefruit, available for a quick pick-me-up. Concentrate on foods



KATHY HAJAS
Diet Center Counselor

high in fiber and low in refined sugars, such as whole-grain crackers, fresh vegetables and fruits, and low-fat, high-protein meats. These foods will provide you with the most "staying power" and prevent in-between-meal munchies. For more information on how food preparation and planning results in better health, contact your local Diet Center at 877-2900

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