

Paraglide, and the sky is your playground by Greg Hamerton

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Imagine launching yourself from a high mountain peak, gliding out over a valley, without a care in the world. This is paragliding, and it is more accessible than you think. Paragliding began in the Alps in the late 1980s, with square parachutes used for rapid descents from peaks. Advances in manufacture and design have seen paragliders evolve into true aircraft, capable of soaring for hours on the power of the wind alone. The current world-record distance flight on a paraglider is 423km.

A gentle breeze blowing up against a mountain slope can provide smooth lifting currents, while thermals on a warm summer's day lift paragliders from the ground and allow pilots to circle skywards.

The paraglider is simple to control, and has the slowest take-off and landing speed of any gliding aircraft. Low speed equates directly to safety. To further reduce the risk of injury, pilots fly with large foam-padded harnesses, sturdy boots, and helmets. Under the auspices of a qualified instructor, the steps to mastering flight are simple, and good fun. Although all participants have to be physically fit, paragliding does not require strength. It has far more to do with good judgement, a spirit of adventure and a sensitivity to the shifting air currents. The paraglider is simple to control. To get started, contact a hang-gliding school near you by enquiring at the South African Hang-gliding and Paragliding (SAHPA) offices. Call Louise on 012 668 1219 or visit www.sahpa.co.za. In Cape Town you can try Birdmen on 082 658 6710 or Wallendair on 083 300 1755. Alternatively, book yourself on a tandem training flight, join an introductory course, or sign up straight away for a basic licence course. Comprehensive pilot's training takes you from ground zero to solo licence level. Once you've completed 40 flights under instructor supervision, which equates to approximately three hours' air time in total, and learnt basic glider control, theory of flight, good airmanship, safety precautions and emergency techniques, you're ready to fly on your own at any basic graded site. So, how much does the course cost? Prices change but, in 2007, the basic licence course cost R7 250, including all the equipment. The cost of a basic second-hand kit, which includes a wing, harness and helmet, starts at R15 000. A new kit, with all the bells and whistles, costs R40 000. The annual license fee is R800. A variety of flying conditions can be found around South Africa. SAHPA controls and regulates the sport, under the authority of the department of civil aviation. Each site is graded for newcomers' safety. It is best to contact the local club before flying a site for the first time, to learn the rules and to ask for guidance. A spirit of adventure Safety is a priority and newcomers are urged to take care. All aviation sports have a high-risk profile. Turbulent air currents are unpredictable, and paragliders can't fly in strong wind. You'll learn all the safety techniques at flying school, but caution and mature judgement are vital to minimising risks. Refer to The Fresh Air Site Guide for descriptions, flying tips, contact details and directions to all the registered paragliding sites. It has become the definitive reference for all paragliding and hang-gliding in South Africa and is available from www.etspress.co.za Are you ready for the adventure? Greg Hamerton, Weekend Argus, October 05 2007 www.ioltravel.co.za/article