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Switzerland – a paradise for paragliding

There are 16,000 paragliders in Switzerland, which makes it the leading nation in the world in terms of participation in the sport. The beauty and diversity of the locations, numerous schools, the large number of ski lifts and the extensive public transport network all represent major advantages.



STÉPHANE HERZOG

This sport allows you to take flight in a paraglider – known simply as a “wing” by those who practise the sport – wherever you wish, “provided the weather conditions are favourable and the local farmer agrees to let you use his field”, explains Christian Jöhr. He is 63, has over 1000 flights under his belt and lives in Geneva. The sport, which was invented during the 1980s by mountain dwellers wishing to reduce difficult and hazardous descents to a minimum, now has 16,000 licence holders in Switzerland. “Switzerland is a paradise for paragliders and various factors contribute to this,” says Christian Poppart, head of the Swiss Hang gliding and Paragliding Association (SHPA). There is a good network of ski lifts, and, on the ground, the train or the post bus make it easy to reach the take-off point,” explains professional

pilot Olivier Biedermann. Having fallen in love with paragliding and the canton of Valais, where he relocated in 1998, this native of Basel offers flights to tourists in Crans-Montana with his small company Flyin’high, which he co-owns with Alexandre Lamon, his Valais-born partner.

The Alps and the Jura

The country’s topology is another advantage, says Christian Jöhr, whose favourite area is the Val d’Illiez, in Lower Valais, “where it’s almost always possible to fly except when it’s raining!” In the alpine valleys, the paragliders are protected from winds, such as the northern bise or the Westerlies. However, if conditions are poor in the mountains and wind speed does not exceed 40 kmph, the ridges of the Jura can be used for flying. Otherwise, you

Paragliders in the Bernese Oberland

could take off from the Salève, the most Swiss of the French mountains to the south of Geneva, which is also a peak used for paragliding.

Flyin’high sells around a hundred flights in Crans-Montana in any given year. It charges 150 Swiss francs for a 15-minute flight with a drop in altitude of 1000 metres, or 250 francs for a descent to the valley floor. The business is a sideline. “The major obstacle is the weather. The föehn, for example, with its gusty conditions, prevents flying,” remarks Olivier Biedermann, who works part-time (50%) for the local authority to leave himself time to enjoy his passion. “Paragliding is a niche sport which only appeals to a small number of tourists visiting Switzerland,” observes Véronique Känel, the spokesperson for Switzerland Tourism. This organisation only promotes paragliding in summer and its website (MySwitzer-

Speed and wingsuit flying: the joy of speed and adrenalin

Paragliding was born out of parachuting as the first flights during the 1980s took place using standard parachutes which were then developed into paragliders whose glide ratio – which is the relationship between the distance covered and the altitude of the take-off point – has increased almost tenfold.

Speed flying, the latest development in paragliding, is halfway between skiing and paragliding, and uses a smaller wing size. These jumps allow you to ski up to the edge of crevasses and precipices and to cross them in the air at high speed and with a proximity to the ground which amplifies the kinetic effect. The SHPA estimates that between 200 and 300 people take part in this sport and states there were two fatalities in 2014 in this pursuit, which involves “higher risk” than paragliding. Speed flying is banned on the ski slopes. However, some resorts, such as Saint-Moritz (canton Grisons), have set aside an area, “which can be used to practise the sport in safety”, says Christian Poppart.

Even more extreme is wingsuit flying. Flyers have further reduced the size of the wing, which now resembles a bat's wings and is an integral part of the flight suit. In this extreme sport, which is somewhat of a compromise between free fall and paragliding, participants fly over peaks at more than 100 kmph before opening a parachute. The discipline is a cousin of base jumping (parachute jumping from the ground), for which the Swiss hub is Lauterbrunnen (canton Berne), Switzerland Tourism notes that these high-risk sports are not featured in its promotional campaigns.

A guide to flying with wings

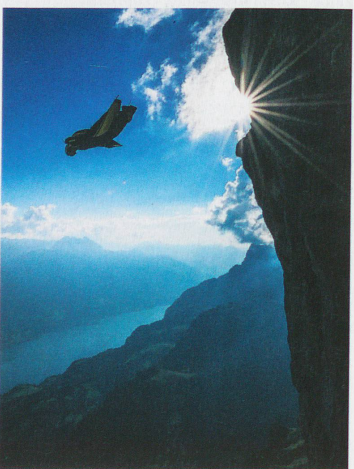
Would you like to go flying in Switzerland? It couldn't be easier, as the country is full of flying schools, clubs and commercial pilots. A trial day with a 10-metre flight costs 120 Swiss francs, according to the SHPA. Paragliding requires a licence, which generally takes one year to obtain in order to allow people to experience flying in various types of weather conditions, according to the association. Training costs around 1800 Swiss francs and full equipment approximately 5000 francs. Flying without a licence is illegal. According to Christian Jöhr, training in Switzerland is strenuous.



Paraglider at Alpstein



Speed flying is only permitted in a few areas



Base jumping with Lake Walen in the background

land.com > Interests > Adventure & Sports Summer) provides a link to the SHPA's website. Nevertheless, several thousand visitors – enthusiasts or tourists – come to fly in the Swiss Alps each year. Two spots top the bill, according to the SHPA – Verbier (Valais) and Fiesch, in Upper Valais, a location conducive for taking off on long flights and setting records, such as the historic voyage to Innsbruck. “Interlaken attracts the largest numbers for tourist flights. The town has around 60 pilots,” explains Christian Poppart. The head of the SHPA recalls that of the eight fatalities recorded in Swiss paragliding in 2014, half were foreigners. “The alpine weather system is more complex and severe than in flat countries such as Germany, and there is lower visibility. Visitors from these regions are often stressed by these conditions. However, paragliding is not a dangerous sport if the safety rules are observed. The risk is no greater than in high mountain regions,” says Christian Poppart reassuringly.

Flights as gifts

In Crans-Montana, Flyin'high's customers include tourists, young people fascinated by the sport and many people who have received a tandem paraglider flight as a gift. How do people react? “They are often a little apprehensive on take-off,” says Olivier Biedermann. “Customers sometimes have a racing heart or quasi-

ness, but we adapt the flight and it can always be cut short if necessary.” But once in the air, it is generally a sense of amazement that takes over. “You only have to take two or three steps and you're flying. It's magical and people sometimes find it a very moving experience,” according to the pilot.

Where does this love of flying come from? It's an outdoor sport where you work with the air and sunshine, which causes thermals by warming up the sides of the valley,” adds the Valais-based paraglider. “I fly over places which are difficult to get to and where I'd never go, such as mountain peaks. Up in the air, you can see eagles and bearded vultures and watch the fauna of the Alps, such as ibexes and chamois. And apart from the use of ski lifts and the energy required to manufacture the equipment, it's a sport that does not generate any pollution.” He recalls majestic flights, such as when he flew over the Dent Blanche, taking off from the summit of the Vercorin ski resort. Flying with the eagle close to the 4000 metre

peaks of the Couronne in Valais or above the Aletsch glacier – what could top that?

Christian Jöhr, who is a senior executive in the field of social welfare in Geneva, is enthusiastic about the physical sensations of flying. “It's all a matter of gliding and ascending with the thermals.” Paragliding also requires risk management and self-evaluation. “You have to be cautious while not allowing yourself to be conquered by fear,” explains the Geneva-based pilot who admits having experienced one or two “tree landings” and a sprained ankle but who has also lost an acquaintance in the sport. His motto: “It's better to regret staying on the ground and not flying than to regret being in the air!” Such situations can occur in changeable conditions when paragliders can find themselves carried up 1000 metres into the air in just a few minutes. They also have a rescue parachute which is activated in the event that the wing enters a chandelle and cannot be reopened.

A tandem paragliding flight from Vercorin crossing Lower Valais

With a 2% increase in new members each year, paragliding in the Alps and Jura continues to grow steadily in popularity to the delight of the SHPA. The current trend is seeing something of a return to the early days of paragliding based on “hike and fly”, made possible by lighter equipment. “The development of the equipment has been extraordinary over the past 20 years,” explains Christian Jöhr, “both in terms of the glide ratio of the wings (and therefore the distances that can be covered) and safety. You can now set off with a wing weighing five or six kilos compared to 20 kilos in the past.” Switzerland, a paradise for hiking, now offers ramblers the opportunity to transform their descents into flights. Feeling daring?

www.myswitzerland.ch > Interests > Adventure & Sports Summer

STÉPHANE HERZOG IS AN EDITOR WITH THE “SWISS REVIEW”

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