

Island Outdoors

By James Kerr

A new feature looking at the range of outdoor pursuits on the island. This issue we focus on paragliding.

Hanging a few hundred feet in the air suspended by a few strings from an airborne canopy may not be everyone's idea of relaxation but that's exactly how a handful of paragliders choose to spend their weekend afternoons on the Island.

The high-adventure nature is part of the thrill of paragliding but it is also one of the more gentle 'extreme' sports, allowing participants to float gently on warm thermals while enjoying the spectacular sights over land and sea afforded by a bird's-eye view of the Island.

The basics

A paraglider is a free-flying, foot-launched aircraft in which the pilot sits in a harness suspended below a fabric wing. The shape of the wing is formed by the pressure of air entering vents at the front of the wing. Controls held in the pilot's hands are used to pull down the rear portion of the wing, which controls speed and allows the pilot to make turns.

Paragliding and hang-gliding are closely related sports. Both use foot-launched gliders with flexible wings, with options for tow- launching or powered flight. Paragliders are cheaper than hang gliders but less durable.

Fair-weather flying

There is a strong tradition of hang-gliding and paragliding on the Island and it has been the training

ground for a number of top British pilots. Favourable weather gives many flyable days and there are 12 official flying sites in the South West of the Island, all within a 10 mile radius, and facing in all wind directions. The Island offers participants the chance to fly both land and sea thermals.

Getting started

The Isle of Wight is an excellent place to learn to fly paragliders. Most people begin with a taster flight of about 20 minutes, usually in tandem with an experienced instructor, organized with a school. Popular paragliding regions have a number of schools, which are registered with the national governing body, the BHPA.

Age is no limit to enjoying the first take-off and the Island has seen a 3 year-old and an 86 year-old take to the skies, so it's never too late (or too soon) to get started!

Further training

Beginners who have a go and get hooked will need to undertake a full pilot training programme before they can take up the sport seriously, and 8 or 9 days flying are required before a pilot is fully qualified.

The full instruction programme begins on the ground, and covers the basics, including the structure and operation of a paraglider.

Students then learn how to control the glider on the ground,



practising take-offs and controlling the wing 'overhead'. They will then move to low, gentle hills for the first short flights, at very low altitudes, getting used to handling the wing over varied terrain.

As they develop their skills, students progress to steeper and higher hills, taking longer flights, and learning to turn the glider and control its speed. Instructions are given to learners via radio, particularly during the first flights.

A good paragliding instructional programme also includes training in basic meteorology, aerology, aviation law, and air-borne etiquette. There are plenty of 'rules' once you are up in the air!

Cost & equipment

Clearly paragliding is not a cheap sport. Close to £2,000 will get you a starter glider, although these can be purchased second-hand. If you are taking up the sport seriously,

you'll also be shopping for the following from specialist mail order companies: helmet, a reserve parachute, clothing, and other accessories. Radio and GPS are all vital communication, safety and monitoring instruments.

Safety

Paragliding is often viewed as a high-risk sport. Sensible and safe flying techniques will keep most pilots out of trouble, but there is potential for injury. Safety precautions include pre-flight checks, use of flying helmets, harnesses with back protection, a reserve parachute, and careful pre-launch observation of other pilots to evaluate conditions. Most properly trained, responsible pilots suffer nothing worse than minor injuries, such as a twisted ankle or sore back.

Schools have to advise all new participants that paragliding can be a hazardous pursuit. But they



Island instructor - XXXX from Butterfly Paragliding

usually stress that the beginner's course, while offering some of the thrills and spills of the sport, aims to encompass a gentle learning curve that starts with an initial take-off of well below 15 feet on a flat surface. By the end of a weekend course, beginners can expect to be

soaring to approximately 50 feet.

Insurance

Paragliding is tightly regulated throughout the UK. The BHPA has negotiated with the Civil Aviation Authority on designated areas in which paragliding can

take place, and it oversees the activities of member clubs. Individual membership of the BHPA includes third-party insurance for participants, and temporary membership including insurance cover is included in the cost of the courses offered by most schools.

Eye on the sky

Paragliders need to keep an eye on the weather as pilots require favourable conditions in which to take to the skies. What are you waiting for? Keep your eye on the weather charts, give one of the Island schools a call and go and fly the friendly skies!

Details

Schools

Butterfly Paragliding is located in Chale.

It offers tandem flights from about £65 and beginner's day courses start at around £95. Camping accommodation is available on site for residential courses. e mail info@butterflyparagliding.co.uk or call Dave or Miranda 731611 for more details.

High Adventure is located at the Sandpipers Hotel, Freshwater.

Day taster courses start from £89 and a 2-day course costs £195 at the weekend (including BHPA membership).

Contact phil@high-adventure.uk.com or phone on 752322.

IOWHGC

Chairman of the IOWHGC Geoff Underwood can be contacted on 822505. The club's website is located at: www.flywight.co.uk/index.html.

On 28 July, the club organizes a Summer Fly In & Pig Roast at Compton Farm. Enquiries from prospective new members are always welcome.