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A WEEK AWAY



Whether it's first-time SIV or coming back after a lay-off there is nothing better than a dedicated course to focus the mind and sharpen the skills. Surrounded by like-minded pilots and with nothing else to focus on your progression can only go one way – up.

This spring these three writers and pilots took three different courses – here's what they learnt.





THE CLASSIC XC WEEK

Guides: Ferdinand Vogel and Monika Eller

Pilot: Bastienne Wentzel, BGD Base 2 (EN B), Skywalk Cruise harness

Having never been on a thermalling or XC course myself, I hadn't been progressing much for a long time. So, an invitation to join a spring XC week in Bassano, Italy, with Ferdinand Vogel and Monika Eller was a classic case of "right time, right place."

Before the course I was a bit worried my level wouldn't be up to standard, but to my surprise the experience of the group of eight was widely varied, from just 18 months and a basic licence all the way up to flying since the 1990s with many long flights. I was right in the middle.

From the start Ferdi made it clear that, "This is not a thermalling course". We were expected to be able to, "launch from new places and land out independently and find the first thermal yourself." No need to worry. Ferdi and Monika turned out to be flexible and adaptable instructors. Each one of us received tailored instruction, be it tips for reverse launching in strong wind, finding that first weak climb in the morning or coring efficiently.

We learned soon that if you wanted to fly far you needed to launch early. That meant we were on take-off before 10am and we launched in the first light bubbles.

▲ STUDENT AND GUIDE

"We learned if you want to fly far, you need to launch early." Launching in Bassano, and, top right, your guide for the week, Ferdinand Vogel

◀ ◀ WISH YOU WERE HERE

Scenes from all three courses, including XC in Bassano, SIV in Ölüdeniz and mountain flying in the Ecrins
Photos: Charlie King / Bastienne Wentzel / Tarquin Cooper / Erwin Voogt / Jenni Fleming

Our first flyable day was post-thunderstorm. We'd had a freezing cold night followed by a day with a north föhn coming over the back, strong and increasing easterly regional winds with thermic wind, as usual, from the south to southwest. Thermal strength was forecast to reach 3.5m/s. The German DHV weather briefing spoke in large red letters of extremely demanding spring conditions, for experts only.

The challenge was on. Some didn't make the first crossing, but when they landed they were treated to a private course by Monika. She picked them up for another flight from her private launch – directly in front of her new flyers' lodge – which is a perfect afternoon site. They all flew again, until the wind became too strong.

The lead group quickly climbed past the well-known launches of Bepi and Stella. We crossed together and flew high along the next ridge in buoyant air, as Ferdi had predicted. We all gathered again and climbed to over 2,100m for the crossing in front of Monte Grappa summit. Base was over 2,600m, but we took Ferdi's advice not to climb to the maximum. The north föhn was strong up there and as we wanted to fly faster and further we didn't need all that height.

It was brilliant to fly and thermal with a group of pilots you know and very encouraging to hear



Ferdi's voice once in a while pointing out the plan, the best thermal or the best line. He brought out the best flying in me and I found I was enjoying it way more than I'd expected.

Four of us were still there at the end of the ridge. We flew as far as we dared before turning around and flying back into the stronger southwesterlies. I made it back to the Bepi take-off before going to land; the others pushed on and completed their goal of just over 30km. Not bad for a first day!

As the week progressed, conditions became milder, with lower base. That made for interesting weather briefings in the morning: where would we find reliable climbs? Where would the lee-sides be today? Where can we expect to push into wind?

On a day with a low base but still punchy thermals my head overloaded and I turned to land. Or so I thought. Monika spotted me from the ground and immediately came on the radio: "Don't think about landing yet. Up you go, up!" It was my turn for the private coaching session where she told me which thermals looked better and encouraged me to keep going. Just what I needed.

What did I learn?

Many of the Post-it notes we'd written with our goals for the week mentioned better thermalling and flying longer or further. We all did at least that,

in many cases reaching goals of over 30km. On the last day we all got a personal debrief and analysis from Ferdi about where we stood as pilots. Some received advice to get better at groundhandling or SIV, others that they should simply fly more.

Brigitte, who lives near Innsbruck, found motivation in flying with a group of her own level instead of others who fly longer. Veit from Dresden wanted to learn to make better decisions and gain confidence in longer flights: he succeeded in flying about 15 hours in four days with 30km+ XC's. Andreas needed confidence to get back from an accident. His big smile during the debrief was testimony of success. "I'm very happy with the long and relaxed flights I made this week, sometimes with almost private coaching," he said.

As for me, I got the interesting and unexpected advice to fly in one of the fun competitions, such as the Ozone Chabre Open or Gin Wide Open. Ferdi explained: "If you are good at finding your own way to learn new skills, these competitions will give you the goals during longer flights to keep you motivated. And they are fun!"

This course was run in German and guided by Ferdinand Vogel (ferdinand-vogel.de) and hosted by Monika Eller at her new flying lodge in Bassano (paraflly.at)

▲ CLASSIC BASSANO

Bassano is the perfect training environment, with a long south-facing ridge, plenty of crossings to keep things interesting, and lots of landings in the flats out front. Monika Eller's new dedicated flyers' lodge (top right) even has its own private launch.

In the group, Ferdinand Vogel is third from left, Monika Eller third from right.

Photos: Bastienne Wentzel and Ferdinand Vogel



FIRST TIME SIV

Guides: Jenni Fleming, Graham Grant, Tim Digings
from Revolution Paragliding (flysussex.com)

Pilot: Tarquin Cooper, Skywalk Arriba (EN B), Gin Verso harness

I went on a one-week SIV course in Ölüdeniz in April. It was eight SIV flights over four days with a supervised recce flight the day before and a mini XC afterwards included. Most of us were first-time SIV pilots with low airtime, although one pilot was on his fourth SIV.

I'd always wanted to fly Ölüdeniz as I'd been there before, and it made sense to go with Revolution as I knew them from my paragliding school, Fly Sussex. That was a big plus – having the same instructors from when I learnt. I felt they already knew a little bit about me and could therefore give better feedback.

My expectations were pretty good as I'd done my research. I fully expected not to enjoy the experience but rather to see it as training and an emotionally demanding experience. But I also hoped just to get my hours up and improve my flying under supervision. In particular, I wanted to improve my active flying.

The first day was admin, briefings and kit checks, with a recce flight in the afternoon. We then did four days back-to-back, two SIV flights a day. We went through the full list of SIV manoeuvres, from big ears to full stall, then over

the last two days there was the chance to focus on skills that we wanted to practise. On the last day we did a small XC to land on the beach at Butterfly Valley.

Overall, the flying was awesome: smooth air, great views and lots and lots of altitude which was a very welcome novelty. In the air I had good clear instruction and post-flight we all had good debriefs with video.

The highlights for me weren't necessarily to do with the moves. I got the most satisfaction after nailing a couple of good landings after overshooting previously. On the XC flight I got my first proper thermal and climbed more than 600m, which was great. That was the point where I thought, I'm a pilot now.

As far as the SIV goes, spirals and wingovers were fun. An obvious highlight was the stall just because... it's a stall. And it didn't disappoint with the hype, anticipation and execution.

My first full stall was properly scary. I didn't really do anything wrong. I followed instructions, got into back-fly but after releasing my brakes I had a horrible surge: it felt like being flung from a catapult and my lines brushed the back of my helmet. With no time to dwell, I went straight into a second stall and it went perfectly.

At the debrief the first video was shown and there were great cheers all round as I got thrown about. In a way, the bravado was quite helpful to laugh off my first effort. But a few days later I

▲ CLASSIC TURKEY

"Wingovers to the beach..."

Photo: Erwin Voogt

► UNDER INSTRUCTION

Pre-flight preparation on top; and in-

flight focus during a full stall

Photos: Jenni Fleming / Tarquin Cooper



watched the video again and it did make my blood run cold – I hadn't realised how bad it looked. I decided it was something I didn't really want to share. Even though I was nowhere near being gift-wrapped, I found this secondary fear a bit harder to process, and it stayed with me a few days.

Opting to do the full stalls was a personal decision, there was no pressure, but in hindsight, my time might have been better spent working on consolidating skills learnt earlier in the course, such as collapses and spiral descents or practising speed bar and big ears.

What did I learn?

For me, this was about building up my confidence as a pilot. As I hoped, I really left feeling that my active flying was much improved, knowing when to hit the brakes and how hard. I'm still a work in progress, but a whole lot better than before.

One thought I had afterwards is that I'd like to see more focus on the mental skills you need to manage fear in the moment. Fear is such an enemy of us low-airtimers, it's what causes us to make the wrong inputs that lead to cascade events, so that ability to stay calm and think clearly is crucial.

Doing an SIV has gone a long way to increasing my fear threshold, a bit of turbulence no longer holds me in terror, and that can only be a good thing. Flying after all, is supposed to be fun!

[instagram.com/adventuretarq](https://www.instagram.com/adventuretarq)

LIFETIME LEARNING

Whatever you want to do, there's a course for it

ADVANCED XC

Designed for pilots who want to push their distance in a supportive environment, advanced XC courses will often expect you to have already flown a minimum distance (eg 50km) and will assume you want to fly far and quite often fast. A brilliant way to step up from the intermediate plateau.

ADVANCED SIV

Once you've "ticked the boxes" on your first SIV, you can progress further by doing it again, or booking a shorter, two-day course where you work on the specific elements. Just back from Flyeo (flyeo.com) in Annecy, pilot Lawrie Noctor explains: "The key difference is you have the extra capacity to not only do the manoeuvres but also look around – you have additional awareness."

ACRO

Don't worry, you don't need to be Pál Takáts. "For me it's more about what is in the pilot's head than on their past experience," says former Acro World Champion François Ragolski (francoisragolski.com). "Acro courses are really about advanced piloting, and they will help any pilot, whether cross country, tandem or any flying adventure."

HIKE-AND-FLY AND VOL-BIV

For those who want to learn to be self-sufficient in the mountains for days at a time. Some schools like AlpWind (alpwind.fr) in Chamonix, France, specialise in running adventure flying courses: from introductory hike-and-fly weekends to vol-biv masterclasses.

COMPETITION

Fun competitions can act as an introduction to competition flying (and flying with dozens of others) and often come with a heavy dose of mentoring and XC guidance. Some countries have dedicated leagues or mentoring schemes – get involved, it's the best way to learn.



ALPINE XC

Guides: Pierre Chesne and Florian Sanchez of Pollen Parapente (pollenparapente.com)

Pilot: Charlie King, BGD Base 2 Lite (EN B), Woody Valley GTO Light 2 harness

My course was an FFVL (French Federation) Cross Country level 1 week. I live in the south of France and it was subsidised by the FFVL Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur Women's league, and was an all-women group. We were in Vallouise in the Écrins, French Alps, for four days.

The Level 1 Cross Country course follows the Perfectionnement (UK Pilot equivalent / USPHA 3) in the French training process. It's aimed at pilots doing their first cross-country flights. Six pilots were flying EN-B wings, one was on an EN-A (and flew exceptionally well on it!).

I've been flying for many years – since the early 1990s in fact. But I have not been focussed on XC for the last 17 of those because we've had children. It's only recently I've felt they are old enough for both of us to be potentially far away from them with a long retrieve. I thought the course would be a good way to brush up on XC skills, to fly with motivated pilots and have the security of instructors to rein in any bad decision-making. The Ecrins is probably my

favourite place in the world, and a friend was on it. No decision to make really!

I wasn't totally sure what to expect. I didn't come through the French system, so didn't know exactly where 'XC Level 1' and 'XC Level 2' fell. I was hoping to learn about weather, aerology and flight planning. I imagined us flying in a group like a string of ducklings behind mother, as we explored the Ecrins!

We met at 8am each day for theory, weather briefing and discussion of route options for the day. Then we went to launch. Most days we had one or two early flights before conditions switched on, working on glider handling skills with the instructors on radio.

Then we'd get back to take-off and get ready to launch as soon as conditions switched on, to attempt the XC course for the day. Florian sacrificed his flights twice testing the air for us (too early). We had "unusual" conditions for Vallouise on all four days, but I think it is very usual to have unusual conditions for most sites most days.

We ended up mostly confined to the valley arena (which is large, beautiful and impressive, with high mountains so no hardship to be confined in), once by stability and then by strong winds. But we practised thermalling, transitions and gliding efficiently. I found just flying close to the huge rock faces was a great experience, and I became more confident

▲►THE MIGHTY ECRINS

After meeting at 8am each day for a briefing and weather update the day took shape, with morning flights and then XC in the afternoon

Photos: Charlie King

getting close to them. We did not manage to do the mother-duck flying as it was difficult to keep the group together: climbing out took longer for some than others so those ahead eventually moved on. Our flight plans had to adapt to the conditions so we ended up criss-crossing and waving at our fellow ducklings as we passed, rather than following.

Each flight was followed by a debrief, and those who wanted to had the opportunity to work on their Brevet de Pilote Confirmé (an advanced pilot equivalent) exam. One evening we took advantage of strong valley winds to demonstrate our groundhandling ineptitude with 14m² groundhandling wings in a magnificent alpine pasture surrounded by marmots.

The flying throughout was great. The first day was a bit of scrabbling around in stable conditions in front of what I consider quite a crowded launch, so for me the least enjoyable flight, but the other three days we had good climbs to 3,400m or so, which takes you up among high peaks with fantastic views across glaciers and mountains. The general northerly flow we had was not ideal, and it made for some slightly turbulent air at times with areas of convergence and strong valley winds.

Overall I think the course exceeded my expectations. Even if we did not manage 50km XCs, we flew every day and practised a lot of skills. The briefings, lessons and debriefs were really good, and tailored to what we asked for or needed. The team did their utmost to maximise our flying and learning.

What did I learn?

1. To be more efficient on glides: decide where you are gliding to and then head there in a straight line, without wandering around.
2. Patience pays off and very slow climbs can get you up and out.
3. To look at and learn from other people's tracklogs, both on a large-scale to plan routes, but also on a smaller scale. On big mountains with complicated faces, it can be useful to see where pilots go, or don't, where they climb from etc.
4. Take the time to get as high as you can before transitioning. It's tempting to rush off if other pilots are heading off, but it's better to take the time to get maximum height before following. You will connect higher to the next ridge, and life will be easier.
5. Keep an eye on conditions: winds strengthening, clouds building etc and don't leave it too late to get out of there if you need to!

One of the things that holds me back most in my XC flying is the fear of flying into the lee of something and getting a big collapse. On the last day, I did this and learned a lesson. I connected to the sunny side of the ridge after a transition, but

I had left too early and was low, above a shallow forest. The thermals were weak and being pushed by the valley breeze back into the lee. I decided to go with a weak climb anyway, but I lost it. I had a sudden and unexpected front collapse. It all happened quickly and apart from a rapid and temporary increase in heart rate it was all ok. Apparently I reacted correctly and the glider reinflated with no change in direction, and I flew back to the correct side of the ridge and continued the flight. I know that sometimes you do have to climb in the lee, but my thermal was weak and vague, or I was not really in it.

Another day I failed to spot conditions changing: increasing instability, increasing wind, suddenly lift everywhere. Only the instructor Pierre and I were still in the air and I really struggled to get down. I'm a wimp when it comes to spirals. The instructors on the radio calmly suggested trying big ears and bar; then one ear, bar and gentle 360s. Eventually, with both ears, bar and weightshift-360s I eventually did get down, to much relief. I don't think it's very good for the glider to do that, and I'm not sure what I learned other than to try to foresee and avoid the situation, as I would be equally bad at getting down next time.

Looking back I think I could have prepared better. I was not expecting to need to speak on the radio (only to listen) so had not taken a PTT but this would have been really useful. And I knew my speedbar was not ideally set up in my pod, but I had not sorted it out. Sheer laziness. It is much more efficient to have everything set up properly, not just 'make do' and work round things.

For pilots thinking of doing a course to improve their skills I'd say just do it. You will learn a lot, and it is so nice to fly with other motivated pilots at a similar level, and to have a few days where flying is all you have to think about. ☺

