

"Kelly, this place is insane!" I squawked down the radio. It may have been poor English, but seemed to sum up the flying around the Val di Fassa so far. Perhaps I'd meant to say that we were insane to be flying in this spectacular arena, very up close and personal to the huge, imposing limestone rock formations of the Dolomites, riding the strong thermals and trusting our lives to little more than sheets of nylon and string.

It's the middle of September and I meet up with fellow pilots at Innsbruck airport baggage hall. Within 15 minutes we are in the van heading towards the autobahn signs and a capital 'I' on the road for Italy. My fellow travellers include UK pilots Nick and Gill, experienced and motivated; Ian, an ex-pat living and flying regularly in Spain; and Doug from Hong Kong. Now that's dedication! He said he hoped it was worth it, and so it certainly turned out to be.

Within a couple of hours our van is climbing over the Sella pass and we stop to take in the first views of the Fassa valley. Kelly, our guide, pointed out the main formations. I've seen photos on the web and in magazines, but nothing could have prepared me for the awesome sight from beneath the huge Sella wall. The following is just a few mental snapshots taken over an exceptional week of mountain flying.

We used the first few days to get used to the surroundings. We knocked out a series of 30km XC tasks going in most directions. The sky was very active with huge climbs under some pretty big clouds. Kelly assured us that it was safe to fly and I never felt threatened using his very logical 45-degree rule... simple but clever.

However on our way to the Marmolada, Kelly told us on the radio that the climbs were looking like "more of the same if not stronger." After two and half hours of avoiding cloud-suck we figured enough was enough and agreed to land. Funny how it always looks better when you're on the ground. Not that it was dangerous, but as Kelly explained later, if your processor is burnt out it's better to call it a day. 'Risk nothing, guys!' was the mantra of the week.

After breakfast one day, Kelly said at the briefing that it was looking like today was the day for a big one. Base was forecast higher and the wind at all levels was less than 5km/h from the north-west. A ten-minute cable car ride later we were stood on Col Rodella launch for the third time. Our guide and longtime Val di Fassa fan gave us our pre-flight brief. The 50km triangle would take in all of the impressive rock formations in the northern half of the Val di Fassa. The waypoints were given in order: Sasso Lungo, Rosen Garten, Sella, Sass Pordoi and Marmolada. To close the triangle we'd have to cross a high barren plateau to take the last turnpoint and then glide back to the LZ.

Launching within a few minutes of each other, once high we agreed to wait until everyone was in position on the Sasso Lungo. There are worse places to be hanging around and I never tired of staring at its jagged peaks, an iconic backdrop used by many a paragliding company to photograph their new gliders. We then set off. How Kelly kept track of us all is a mystery, but he seemed to know exactly where everyone was.

# Spiral around the Dolomites

Steve Newcombe regains his faith in the Alps on a one-week XC course at one of the seven wonders of the paragliding world



PHOTO: KELLY FARINA

The mighty Sella wall

Rounding us up at the turnpoint was the cheerful Luigi from Bassano, up for the day on Kelly's recommendation. Together we glided in formation to the next cloud. Like clockwork we all climbed again, and other pilots seem to tag along. I must admit it did start to look like we vaguely knew where we were going and that we had a plan.

As we surfed the cloud-suck close to the Rosen Garten our guide peeled off deeper into the lunar landscape. There was a small col, and with little ground clearance we followed. Not being the boldest of pilots, I was getting to that uncomfortable point where I was thinking of gliding out again, but I saw Kelly climbing ahead, went in a bit deeper and found the lift, and started to breath again. Kelly's confidence was inspiring, no doubt helped by a couple of thousand hours of Alpine experience. The views were incredible. The photos speak for themselves, I hope, but they can never replace seeing it with your own eyes.

With the Rosen Garten turnpoint in hand it was time to set course for Sella. Clouds marked the whole distance, but we were reminded of the 45-degree

rule and I was careful stay on the edge of the climb. We now saw why, as close to base the climb went ballistic. Nick was hoovered up into cloud at this point and I chuckled as I saw his glider reappear folded in half, B-lined and slowly descending. A big lesson in respect for cloud-suck. Together we all carefully surfed a cloudstreet for around 10km to the mighty Sella wall.

It was now around 13:30 and the climbs were really strong and quite turbulent at the inversions. Kelly warned the slower pilots about the thermals at the Sella and I don't blame him. But the scenery was incredible and I was happy to push on too. Tucking in close, Kelly and I got drilled. Doug, who was very experienced, took a better line further out and got the jump on us. He then pushed on alone to the Marmolada and we lost sight of him.

Looking down on Kelly, now struggling in the broken lift below, I asked if he was happy for us to crack on. "Yeah, no worries - I'll catch you up," he replied. Now alone, I could see many gliders circling on the sunny flank of the mighty Marmolada, Queen of the Dolomites.



PHOTO: KELLY FARINA

First waypoint - Sasso Lungo



PHOTO: NICK LEGRAS

The group glides towards Rosen Garten



PHOTO: STEVE NEWCOMBE

Gliding for the Marmolada

After the long crossing I arrived quite low and had to work hard. Close in to sheer, jagged cliffs and riding a bucking bronco through the inversions, I used the technique our guide had explained: when the thermal ends move to the higher terrain. It seemed to pay off as I watched some of the other pilots get stuck under the warm layers. Finally, near base again, I could make out Kelly's wing coming up from underneath. Never write that guy off! Now level with the Marmolada summit I savoured the moment, looking across at the glacier on top. I snapped a few pictures before pushing on, following my GPS arrow to the next turnpoint.

At the next turnpoint I was again greeted by good climbs. Kelly, close behind, took a better line which avoided pushing into the strong valley wind after the next crossing, and arrived over the LZ a few minutes before me. Another lesson learnt. I then gently lost height over the LZ, enjoying the tranquillity of the smooth valley air away from the active mountain sides, and landed in the huge field at Campitello. Doug, Nick and Gill all made it; only poor Ian had gone down en route.

We flew the following days, but even if we hadn't we would've been happy. Doug even changed his flight to go home to Hong Kong early. He said nothing could top that flight, and with limited time off due to a demanding job, he wanted to spend it with his family. Many thanks again to Kelly for organising the trip. Keeping us safe and guiding us through this amazing aerial playground. It will be a tough act to follow!

Kelly Farina of Austrian Arena has been running trips to the Val di Fassa region since 2007 and has been a regular visitor here since 2000. The best time to visit is Autumn as the thermals and valley winds have calmed down to more manageable levels. Be careful if flying alone - the area can become very dangerous if the north wind breaks through. I recommend that you fly with an experienced mountain guide such as Kelly who understands the area and its less-obvious hazards. Check out [www.austrianarena.com](http://www.austrianarena.com) for details (and movies and photos).



PHOTO: STEVE NEWCOMBE

Returning to Sasso Lungo