

foreign shores: Mayrhofen

Ed Bishop explains how to get more airtime....

For those of you who don't know, the Zillertal is a 3km wide, 30km long valley that runs north-south off Austria's Inntal. At the head of the valley is the small but perfectly formed ski resort of Mayrhofen, home to one of the most successful and active clubs in Europe, the Golden Eagles. Having seen their playground and the skill of local pilots it's no surprise.

So why are they so successful? Well, firstly the area has huge XC potential (see *A perfect day* in February Skywings), but it's more than that. Even on an average day, average pilots, myself included, can fly in thermic conditions from late morning to sunset, soaring the valley breeze which comes directly up the Zillertal in the afternoon. This, together with wide, gentle thermals, great climbs and spectacular views, means a lot of air hours can be clocked up! I'll explain a little further...

On a ski/fly holiday last year with a friend, Richard, we hooked up with some English guys on the Penken launch site. They helped us out with our forward launches and site assessment. Landing together after a good flight, it turned out one of them was a British Nationals pilot who had been living in Austria for several years, Mickele Farina.

Over a drink Mickele (aka Kelly) enthused about flying in Mayrhofen over the warm summer months. With the possibilities of soaring until late and bettering our modest XC bests, we decided to take him up on his offer to revisit.

We arrived back in August to find an unbelievably green valley, blue skies and light winds. We met up with the guys early that evening at the LZ. They were pleased to tell us the next day's forecast looked good. Fresh out of the sky, Kelly pointed out the huge soarable ridge at the head of the valley, 3,600ft high at its lowest point and stepping up ridge by ridge to the Ahorn Spitz, a massive 10,000ft pyramid visible from practically everywhere. Richard and myself looked in awe at the neatly arranged columns of gliders thermalling over the ridge and the peaks, where wispy cu's marked out the evening lift.

With a smile Kelly said, 'That will be you guys tomorrow!' I couldn't help but feel a little anxious, but they explained it was just like soaring a hill back home only bigger, and with a massive backdrop to admire.

The following morning Kelly arrived with the local flying forecast. Although the weather looked perfect, he reckoned it was a little too stable to be a big XC day. Nonetheless a good day to get reacquainted with the sites. After a short 15-minute gondola ride we arrived at the Penken launch at 6,500ft, just 50 yards walk from the chair lift. Our winter launching place was looking unrecognisably green now! The view was still stunning. Left stands the Pinzgau, the direction for many record flights, while to the right is the main glacial ridge of the alps and the border with Italy. Blue ice shone in the morning sunlight just 20km away.

The wind was light. Our previous practice at Alpine launches came in handy, and after checking our kit we were in the air with

minimum fuss. Once airborne Kelly pointed out the areas of lift that would maybe later get us high. The mid-morning lift was too weak to climb in but after our FMD lay-off but it was terrific to be in the air again. After half an hour we landed in a gentle breeze at Edenlehen, a huge grassy field under ten minutes walk back to the cable car. Very convenient!

Back on launch after a spot of lunch, Kelly briefed us on our next flight. Get high, regroup and cross behind, if possible, to the big granite peaks behind Penken, the highest being the Rastkogel at over 9,000ft. We relaxed a little and waited for the first locals to start climbing. Kelly launched first at around 13:00, scratching the hill until he found something he was confident we could all climb in. Over our radios came the cheery words, 'Ready when you are, boys!'

That was all the encouragement we needed. Richard started next, closely followed by myself. Flying next to the ridge I felt my wing wobble and pull to the left. As I turned my vario started singing and we climbed out together in a smooth 2-up. The air became cooler, the lift strengthened and view opened up. Amazingly, we were around 2,500ft above launch and still together. Kelly's kit looked pretty hi-tech compared to ours but we were able to stay with him in the climb. Over the radio he advised us when to tighten or open our turns. We left the now-weakening thermal and, in only light sink, headed off in search of more. We arrived high over the rocky outcrops and before long were climbing again under a wispy cloud and our guide's watchful eye!

For the next hour or so we followed Kelly around some of the most spectacular scenery I've ever seen. Conditions were smooth enough and nothing like I expected summer in the Alps to be. We made our way back to Penken and top landed at 15:00. The valley wind was now kicking in, and Kelly hoped that we had enough stamina to fly till sunset. What a first day this was turning out to be!

The windsock now showed about 7-10mph. Thermals apparently pull the wind in from the flatlands, usually peaking at 17:00. British pilots will feel right at home. Quickly we discussed what we'd attempt and how. Climbing on the Ahorn ridge and landing on the Filzen seemed a popular plan amongst the pilots on the hill. Then, if it looked good we'd make an attempt on the Ahorn Spitz. Everyone was friendly and never once did I feel intimidated by the local matadors.

Feeling fully motivated, the mission was on. After making sure other pilots were climbing we kitted-up, checked radios and launched. This time Kelly went last and caught us up on the glide. As we arrived about 500ft from the ridge I found myself



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Launching at the Edel Hutte with the Ahorn Spitz in the background



Richard launches on Penken in the afternoon

climbing at 2-up in smooth, dynamic lift that seemed to go on whatever direction we went in. After gaining some 500ft Kelly took us to the first house thermal over the cable-car pylon. We were at about 4,500ft (amsl) and climbing with several other pilots.

My Ozone Electron remained solid in this stronger 6-up climb, peaking at 8-up. Rounding us up at 6,500ft Kelly explained that it was time to switch ridges as the lift goes even higher. Constant ridge lift enabled us to gain 200ft on the 1.5km glide, and we climbed easily on the next west-facing ridge until we were high enough to land safely on the Filzen at 7,100ft.

This place looks like a site back home, but with a few exceptions. This soarable grassy bowl is 5,000ft above the valley floor, and the views from here are second to none as the whole Zillertal opens up in front of you. Here we were treated to an acro show by of the local cracks, as Kelly calls them.

Without unclipping we started again in perfect wind. Kelly reckoned it was possible to make the Ahorn Spitz where a cloud was forming over the top. Stepping up ridge by ridge and following radio instructions, we managed to get level with the sheer rock summit. Close enough to clearly see the cross which marks the 9,860ft peak. This is my personal best for height gain, and I've got to admit I'm addicted!

Over the radios came the strange words, 'Are you guys hungry?' We hadn't even thought about it, but yes we were! Below us at 7,600ft, surrounded by beautiful, soarable cliffs stands the Edel Hutte. This hundred-year-old mountain hut is the usual destination on a soarable day in Mayrhofen. Spiralling down, we landed in a big meadow next to the house in good wind. We were by now a little tired and very hungry, and we decided to eat on the terrace. Gliders spun up over the peaks and some soared in front of us; it was obvious that everyone was having a lot of fun. As the sun got a little lower the wind got lighter, and Kelly told us that now would be perfect to practice thermalling. So launching for the fifth time we cruised out and circled together in very gentle, wide 2-3ups. With the radios now quiet I just enjoyed the view, listening to only the wind. I turned my vario bleeps off and soared close to the sheer cliffs in silence. Looking behind, the last rays of a dying sun shone off the blue glacial ice. The surrounding peaks gradually turned pink and, as promised, we saw the sun go down over the Alps...

We landed together at the Bruggerstube, the club's local LZ, it was now 20:30. After a few beers with a slightly sunburnt Kelly, who was still all smiles, it was back to our guesthouse. The parting words from our guide that evening were: 'Same time tomorrow, boys!'

This first day we had clocked up 5.5hrs each of Alpine experience. Over the whole week we subjected our gliders to no less than 20hrs of UV exposure, and even though we lost the last two days to the Foehn winds.

Richard and I would like to thank the Golden Eagles for their superb Austrian hospitality, and of course Kelly for his patience and local knowledge. You haven't seen the last of us!

For more details about flying in Austria you can contact Kelly at xc_kelly@hotmail.com or visit www.austrianarena.com (it's worth a look if just for the gallery).