



After the first big climb out from Penken

A short flight through the Alpen Hauptkamm

Kelly Farina is challenged by warm air and inversions while exploring the backbone of the Alps

Sitting on the Penken, our house mountain, last August I watched pilot after pilot launch and go down. There was definitely something out there but the visitors' technique wasn't up to the job. I made a mental note of some of the mistakes being made: turning too wide, inefficiently diving the wing and simply flying too far away from the terrain.

At around 1300 I started to ready myself for cloudbase, which looked to be at around 4000m. I hoped it wouldn't be just an extended sled ride to the LZ in Mayrhofen. I was rugged up, as many a time I've found myself shivering at over 3500m in just shorts, T-shirt and lycra speed arms. But dressing for the cold can sometimes be the kiss of death, leaving you in the blistering LZ heat dressed for 4000m.

Today was looking a little stable. These were mid-summer conditions of prolonged high pressure, but I felt on form and had been one of the few pilots to get out in the past few days and



Searching for the next climb, this peak released a good one



High again and looking at the Kalkwand and its boulder field

make a small tour around the big mountains behind launch. This is the area we normally head for on more stable days; the relief is higher allowing thermals to roll up the mountain-sides through any lower inversions. This maintains or increases the thermal's energy, instead of it being slowed or halted by any warmer air it might meet on the way. However today was even warmer on launch, never a good sign.

I took off and centered on a small but consistent climb. It seemed that my fears had been unwarranted, and before long I was through the warm air and the climb grew stronger. The main ridge of the Alps was now just a few thermals away.

Although the distance I had planned was short, just a 50k sightseeing tour, it relied on some correct timing. Too fast and I'd have to come out the way I went in, which wasn't what I wanted. I needed the sun on the south-east faces going in, and on the south-west and west faces coming out. I'd given myself just over an hour for the first 25km, at which point I should be at the Hintertux glacier.



Lava plug from extinct volcano - a completely different rock formation

A few climbs later, working my way into the bigger mountains, I found myself at base at 3800m. There was very little wind at all levels, which is always important when entering the Tuxertal. The peaks that protect this valley climb to over 3400m. Even a 10 - 15km/h breeze blowing over the peaks is enough to disturb the day and rattle even the most experienced pilot's nerves.

I decided to take the straight line into the Tux valley and use its high south-easterly alpine spurs to tip-toe ever further into this barren landscape, following the clouds. As I climbed I noticed things I've never seen before, as this high alpine area is normally the last to see the snow recede.

A boulder the size of a large hotel grabbed my attention for a while as I tried to comprehend the sound it must have made before it finally came to rest, hundreds of metres below an



Gliding to the next high Alpine ridge

even more impressive layer-cake cliff. Mind-blowing terrain that normally I'm in a hurry to pass if I'm on a long-haul flight in springtime. Today, on an EN B wing, I had time to loiter, take photos and marvel at the beauty of the mountains that make up this playground in my back garden.

I connected with the next spur and surfed up it, slowly gaining height for around 1.5km until I connected with a 4m/s climb at the peak. It couldn't have been more text-book. In the bigger terrain the inversions seemed to have broken, as I had expected.

Once high again, I took a short detour to gawp at another seldom-seen feature. A huge lava plug of black and brown rock, completely different to the surrounding granite.

Once I'd shot some pictures I made the long crossing to the west-facing side of the valley. There I connected with great climbs and topped out at just over 4000m. The clouds pointed the way home. There's no need to explain the rest as the photos reveal more than I could ever put into words.



When the cloud street ended - and my hands were starting to feel the cold - I changed course and top-landed at the place that my short two-and-a-half-hour high-alpine odyssey had started. I recognised some of the same pilots there who had struggled earlier. No need to rub it in, I thought, as they checked my top landing.

At least they'll have a nice prolonged soaring flight on the Ahorn, our 'eternal lift' mountain. It was possible to get to the peak that day, but the saying 'Too much of a good thing' had me spiralling lazily through the valley breeze down to Mayrhofen, content that I'd got the most out of the day.

No sooner had I put the photos up on Facebook than my phone began to ring, and I had to repeat the flight the next day with some local friends. I didn't need too much encouragement!

Former British team member Kelly Farina has lived in Austria since 1995. His guiding operation there, Austrian Arena, celebrates its 10th year of guiding pilots safely around the Alps in 2011. For more pictures from this flight visit the gallery, and for more info on Austrian Arena services visit the brand-new website at www.austrianarena.com.



