

How to fly the Zillertal out and return...

Michele Farina outlines one of Austria's most spectacular flights

By now most pilots would have heard about the Zillertal valley. My company Austrian Arena has been running trips out here for the last two seasons. We thought it would be a good idea to answer the question most frequently put to me each week. How do you fly to the mouth of the valley and back?

There is no easy or single answer. Different days and conditions allow pilots to use slightly different strategies. The following advice is how we would attempt to guide a group of pilots around our XC arena. The flight would ideally take place on a long, spring or summer day. We'd have little need to rush, and we can take in the breathtaking panoramas that the Austrian Alps has to offer...

I believe it's important to prepare for the day before it even starts. There have been many articles written about this recently so I'll be brief.

turnpoint co-ordinates

The GPS co-ordinates for the start, turn and landing points are as follows (set in UTM/UPS on the Navigation page):

Start	Penken launch	32 T 0713377, UTM 5228607 altitude 2000m
Turnpoint 1	Speiljoch cable-car station	32 T 0711262, UTM 5245874 altitude 1900m
Turnpoint 2	Steinerhof guest house	32 T 0717004, UTM 5251561 altitude 1080m
LZ	Bruggerstube	32 T 0717609, UTM 5229423 altitude 620m

train your brain!

I don't claim to be an XC guru, but I have made some hard six- and seven-hour flights in the past. To prevent yourself becoming mentally tired too early, it's necessary to train your brain. Make some longer flights the weeks before in stronger conditions. The best training for flying is flying itself. Making your next directional decision during the climb so you can relax on the glide helps greatly. Eating some kind of low-sugar muesli bar on a long glide also helps.

in-flight toilet problems

Sleeping good the night before and not drinking too much - one or two small beers is fine. On the day, drink only water and on launch resist the urge to go for as long as you can; this may help to stretch your bladder slightly. Go again just before you clip in. Before launch I avoid caffeine, sugary drinks like Red Bull and Coke, and I don't eat anything too salty. These act as diuretics and cause your body to flush out the toxins. Drinking or eating too many of the above and you could be bursting after only 15km and the day could be lost.

I try not to drink too much whilst on distance flights, although I don't recommend this (any doctors out there will probably blast me for saying it). Friends have used condoms with tubes attached to alleviate this problem.

the flying bit

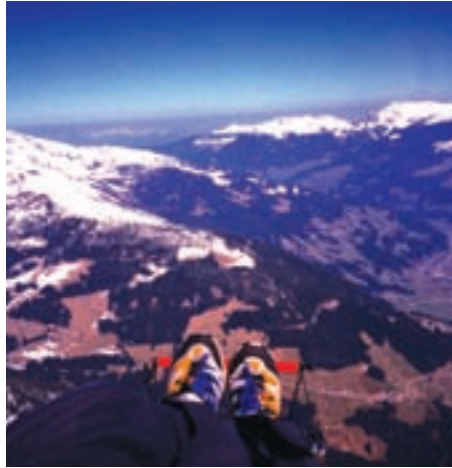
On an average, unstable day in spring, thermals start to work at 11am and can be usable from around 1,000m (amsl). Although small in the beginning, once they get established they can carry a patient pilot straight to a chilly base, normally around the 3,000m mark. With a cloudbase this high, most regular XC pilots should be able to negotiate this 50km task quite easily.

The best high-level wind direction for this task is a light west or north-westerly. We would normally choose our house launch site, Penken (2,000m amsl). Valley and thermic winds come straight up the north side of the mountain allowing an easy take-off. After launching at around 12.30pm, pilots will have to cross into the sunny south side, effectively the lee side but things start to mellow out once you've climbed above ridge height. Expect climbs here of 3 - 4m/s. Active piloting is required as the cores will be a slightly disturbed by the valley wind.



Penken launch

Once the group has climbed out to at least 2,500m, we'll go on the 5km glide to the Hohenstrasse. There are two possible lines to take here. The closest being into the leeward side again, but arriving there high and having light meteo winds means we can stay safe. The other line is to glide further on the east-facing ridge and find the thermal that comes off some avalanche barriers. This is not as strong as it is north-east facing, but generally smoother.



First glide: Penken to Hohenstrasse

The next transition, once high enough, is to cross the 7km towards the Kaltenbach ski area. There are heaps of fields in the sun below and pilots are normally rewarded with solid climbs to a rising base. If low here things can get a bit turbulent as you'll find yourself in the lee of the valley flow which runs north to south.

If too low there are heaps of landing fields. Please try to pick the official landing field behind the swimming pool in Zell am Ziller. Farmers in the whole valley can get angry if pilots land in their fields as they grow the grass for winter feed. Offering the offended farmer 5 euro and doing a lot of smiling will normally minimise the damage! Plus he'll be handy to ask how you get home (if you're on our guiding programme you'll be picked up by our radio-controlled retrieve, usually before you've finished packing up!).



Glide to Kaltenbach

So once high here, above the now quiet ski resort of Kaltenbach, our goal is clearly visible. The mountain cable car station of Speiljoch, 12km away. However when you are within a good climb's reach of the turnpoint it's very easy to become complacent. Arriving high for the next thermal is crucial, so if you connect with something small en route it's never a bad idea to

top up on altitude. It's very important to take the direct line to the smaller wooded hill in front, the Kupfnerberg.



High over Kaltenbach, gliding for Kupfnerberg

If low here you could have trouble climbing out. The valley exit is guarded by some power lines - not a major problem but something to be aware of. Aiming for the small dip or col on the hill usually delivers, but if not go to the small farm in the sun and await a cycle. This is usually the crux of the flight and has grounded me in the past. Once high here it's a straightforward glide to the turnpoint, connecting with the climb and/or cloud on the south-facing slopes.



Looking towards Speiljoch

As usual, you'll need to get as high as possible here as by now the sun would have moved around enough to make the west-facing sides of the valley work. Once at altitude again the views of the whole Zillertal and Inntal open up. Across the way to the north is the Achensee lake, testing ground of the DHV. To the west is Innsbruck and the white limestone Karwendel mountains, and to the east the flatlands of Germany are clearly visible.

The average time taken with groups from Penken to Speiljoch is around 2 - 2.5 hours, depending on conditions and pilots' skills of course. Although I've described the classic and safe way to reach the Speiljoch turnpoint, this is by no means the only route to reach the mouth of the Zillertal. There are more direct routes in the higher mountains to the west, and the route we decide depends entirely on the conditions of the day.

Now we're high over the turnpoint, it's time to change to the other side of the valley. I'll explain how to make it back, and the pitfalls to watch out, for next month...

If you want to know more you can join our guided groups. Contact info@austrianarena.com or visit www.austrianarena.com.