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January 15, 2006

Paragliding: The real way to hit the ground running

Shauna Farnell

July 28, 2003

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When I fly on a plane, I am one of those people who have a death grip on the arm rests and a teeth-grinding headache. So, the idea of being suspended by a nylon canopy in a canvas chair 500 feet above the tree tops at 13,000 feet above sea level bothered me a little bit.

Then again, I couldn't really pass up an opportunity to go paragliding.

Summit Paragliding conducts tandem rides, tours and lessons at Copper Mountain throughout the year. It is one of only three outfitters of its kind in Colorado (similar operations can be found in Aspen and Telluride.)

When I arrived for my trip, I was relieved to see that Bree Smith, 26, of Frisco, and Bruce Riggs, 73, of Walnut Creek, Calif., were also heading up the mountain as first-timers. I was also relieved when the two launched before me. Neither screamed in terror as they took flight and circled higher and higher over Upper Enchanted Forest, so I figured I better follow suit.

It was comforting to know my pilot would be Greg Kelley, who has been paragliding for 14 years. Like the other Summit Paragliding pilots, he had to undergo several advanced certification procedures in order to perform commercial tandem flights. He was clearly a guy who knew what he was doing.

Leland Turner was also among the entourage at the top of Storm King lift, which served as the launch

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site. He was procuring a novice flying certification, which Summit Paragliding offers for \$1,500 after at least 25 flight lessons. He hadn't been up in the air yet, which, to my comfort, detracted credence from his tales of pilot friends flying over the Ten Mile Range, only to be sucked into clouds at 18,000 feet.

I found out later that Smith also had a few reservations about flying, which were quelled after she took flight.

"I didn't want to have a free-fall sensation," she said. "It was definitely more of a smooth, gliding sensation. The only time it really caught my breath was when we made a sharp turn and caught a thermal (a rising current of warm air) and rose up at the same time. The views of Copper and the surrounding mountains were the best part about it."

As my turn rolled around, Kelley helped me rig the pack attached to the glider, which was lying behind us on the expert skiing terrain we were to run down for the launch. After I yanked on the leg and shoulder straps about 19 times to ensure their security, I was ready to go.

Kelley and I leaned forward and took about six running steps down the hillside before the ground dropped and I was pedaling in the air. Before I knew it, I was sitting armchair-style in the canvas chair as Kelley steered the glider in figure-8s over the heads of the remaining crew, which became a smattering of inch-sized figures on the hillside.

As my imagination played out involuntary film reels of imminent disasters, I could not help but be exhilarated by the feeling of wind pulling and lifting the glider. It's as close a sensation as you could probably ever get to feeling you have wings.

Kelley said the average flight speed is about 20 mph. We sailed over Copper for about 20 minutes before we watched Riggs and his pilot, Dave Champajn, start their landing. They spiraled rapidly to the ground, swirling over Interstate 70, before landing in a dirt lot.

Riggs later said the downward spiral landing was part of "the full treatment" Champajn gave him on their flight, which satisfied all of his months of longing to paraglide.

"I've seen these guys out flying before, and I thought, "Geez, if I ever get the chance, I'd like to do that," Riggs said. "Then I came up here (to Copper) and said, "Hell, this is my chance.' It's one of those experiences where you just have to do it. If you haven't done it, you can't describe it."

Although hitting the ground running is somewhat of a way of life for me, the prospect of literally doing it in order to land made me tentative. But, as Kelley and I circled toward the ground, he walked me through the steps of getting out of the chair, putting my arms through the straps and running into the landing.

Despite the five pages of liability waivers I had to sign before flying, the experience went off without a hitch and was like none other.

While I can't promise I'll ever do it again (the one experience in my history book is sufficient), flying in a plane again should be a piece of cake.

Shauna Farnell can be reached at (970) 668-3998, ext. 236, or at

sfarnell@summitdaily.com.

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