

Work In Progress

Photo: Olivier La

A decade is a long time in a young sport like ours. If you were a pilot back in 1997, just think back to the wings we were flying at the time. The leap had just been made in terms of intermediate paraglider performance with wings like the Nova Xyon and Edel Saber paving the way – suddenly we had intermediates that would carry you on big XC's! As Keith Simpson, the new incumbent of our Ten Years Ago column, reminds us: hang gliders were just in the process of finally removing their kingposts. The world records were still only 284 km (176.5 miles) for paragliders and 485 km (301 miles) for hang gliders, compared to the respective 423 km (263 miles) and 700 km (435 miles) they are today. People are flying faster, further, and for longer than ever before, and the limits of what's possible get reset every year.

Ten years ago I set off on a journey that was to change my life. I'd hatched a cunning plan – to fly across the Himalayas with my friend John Silvester. The journey took me into situations that challenged me in so many ways. It redefined flying for me, turning my paraglider from a piece of sports equipment to a vehicle that could take me on the finest of journeys.

We had our six weeks of excitement, total immersion in a non stop adventure, and it all ended at a police post on the Nepalese border when we were refused entry into Nepal. As we walked away, I knew we'd only just nibbled at the intoxicating business of vol bivouacking in the Himalayas. It felt like we'd had the entrée, but had been denied the main course.

A decade later someone has finally stepped up to the table and greedily devoured the entire three course meal. Luc Armant, a quiet, self-effacing cross-country pilot from the south of France, 'nipped over' to the Himalayas and, without any experience of the countries and cultures he'd travel through – completely alone – launched from Bir in the western Indian Himalaya and flew the entire 1,000 km (625 mile) route to Kathmandu! As far as I know, it's the longest vol bivouac journey ever made. He had no ground support, no helpers in cars following him, and no one on the end of the phone reading him the weather report. Luc just turned up and did it, in the cleanest, rawest way. If you aspire to the true spirit of vol bivouac turn to 'Freedom at Midnight' on page 70 for a candid account of one of the most inspirational flying adventures I've read for a long time.

As Luc talks openly about the emotions he feels as he fights his way east, most of us find ourselves pondering how we'd deal with such situations. To many, just the idea of being alone and so deeply committed in the Himalayas would make them baulk – even standing on a launch would leave them feeling like a condemned prisoner at the gallows. Yet for others the thought is intoxicatingly exciting. Just how we deal with the stress of flying in such a potentially dangerous environments depends largely on our experience and whether we consider ourselves to be under threat or not. Do we fear the situation ahead? If so, how will that fear manifest itself? Will it arouse us and increase our capabilities as a pilot, or will the arousal turn to anxiety,

destroying our confidence and causing us to under-perform, perhaps dangerously so? Fear, and how we manage it as pilots, is a huge and difficult subject to tackle, so we've dedicated eight pages to it, and we've brought together several voices from around the world. Dr Sandy Britain, a flying psychologist, explains how the mind works and how we can condition ourselves to operate well, even when we're scared; Jaco Wolmarans and Keith Simpson offer hands-on tips to help fight fear when it strikes, and how to get back on the horse after a big event has knocked you out the saddle.

Effectively dealing with fear is crucial if we are to maximise the level of enjoyment we get from our sport. It makes or breaks us as pilots and determines how far and where we take our flying. Where will you be in ten years time? What adventures will you have lived out in skies around the world? Will you be thermal-hunting with your own eagles like Scott Mason in 'The Birdman'? Will you have the grit to be solo bivouacking across the Himalayas? Imagine how much more you'll know about both flying and yourself, or perhaps in a decade you'll be sticking to golf, with only the vaguest memories of that silly flying phase you went through. Whichever route you take, the path ahead is an exciting one for sure. In the meantime, enjoy this issue of Cross Country.

Bob Drury, Editor



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"It doesn't matter about the conditions, the secret is simply to leave; to get the adventure under way"
Phillipe Nodet, French Adventure Pilot



Freedom at Midnight

A 1,000-kilometre (621 mile) solo vol bivouac adventure across the Himalayas.
Words, pictures and flying by Luc Armant

My project was simple: a grand traverse of the massive swathe of mountains that forms the southern flanks of the Himalayas - flying and walking, day after day, through unknown terrain; to find the equilibrium of the airborne nomad, and to hold on to it as long as possible; to simply be free and alive, immersed in a massive adventure.

In early March I left France and headed alone to Bir in India. There, I set up my base camp under the Dhauladhar massif, and spent my days flying and getting fit. Each day I'd hike to take-off with all my kit to try and condition my body against the physical hardships, diseases and loneliness that lay ahead.

Each day I flew with all my bivouac equipment, but each day I returned with it unused. Too snowy, too windy, too cold, too stable, too wet, too sick, too sore, too many excuses. I procrastinated over my departure, day after day.

Then one day I received an email from Philippe Nodet, my friend who vol bivouacked from Bir to the Nepalese border in 2001, and made those incredible bivouac flights in Pakistan last year.

"It doesn't matter about the conditions," he wrote, "the secret is simply to leave; to get the adventure under way."

Philippe himself was to 'leave' ten days later from the Nepalese border for his own solo bivouac adventure. I thought of the probabilities of us crossing paths in the vastness of the Himalayas; searching the skies, the villages and mountainsides for each other, then eventually being reunited again.

Philippe's words encouraged me and broke me free from my growing attraction to the simple but easy life in the beautiful world of Bir.

MARCH 22 - A JOURNEY BEGINS WITH A SINGLE FLIGHT 76 KM (47 MILES)

For the first time in my life flying was no longer a pastime, an exploration or a training session, but an instrument of freedom; a migration to the east, towards the mountains I'd scrutinised and dreamed about for so long.

After an hour's easy progress towards the southeast, I definitively cut the cord and dived into a valley to the north. Now the adventure was really beginning. I was already in a

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Freedom Midnight



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land where people had never seen paragliders, where folk yelled and whistled when they saw me, and where there was a collective hysteria when I landed and took off again.

I felt no pressure as I had already covered enough distance to be excited at the idea of landing and unpacking the little package that was to be my home in a new place.

My route seemed to be following a good convergence line between the valley breeze and the prevailing wind. There were few climbs, although those I found were very strong. Later I bagged an easy run above a highly cultivated mountain. I took the time to mull things over and to revel in the euphoric effect of being able to cast my shadow over the people below. The sun was low in the sky when I arrived above a magnificent, high village. Enthusiastic cries came from the welcoming houses, and I hesitated about carrying on, but the southwest faces ahead were too tempting not to continue and make the most of it.

Ten km (six miles) further on, I came across an equally beautiful village perched on the mountainside, and enjoyed soaring for as long as possible above the cries with a gaggle of vultures. After a delicate landing on top of the narrow ridge, I allowed myself to be cradled by the warm welcome of the beautiful, proud and courageous mountain people of this area.

MARCH 25 – SNOW SURFING - 91 KM (56.5 MILES)

After enduring two days of bad weather I was grateful to be greeted on the third day by the first rays of sun of a promising day. The beginning of the flight went very smoothly. I covered around 40 km (25 miles) to the east along generous south-facing slopes. But when it came to leaving this massif I hit a terrible inversion layer hanging over a large valley. Pushed along by a northwesterly, I closely snuck over the first ridge without finding anything worthy of a single turn, finding myself in a terrible low layer of cloud where I battled for an hour before finally gaining some altitude again in the dynamic flow of a strong northwesterly wind. After several thermals all slowed just below 4,800 m (15,748 feet), I finally found one to take me to 5,100 m (16,732 feet); euphoria finally erased the depression of the



previous days.

The rest of the flight was joyful; no great errors, regularly regaining 4,500m (14,764 feet) and ending up with me travelling along a high slope covered with a thick layer of unblemished white powder. My whole body was tensed like a bow as I surfed the snow desperate not to waste even a centimetre of altitude.

When the intoxicating roundness of the col appeared in front of me I realised that if I missed, if I got too close to this attractive softness and allowed my harness to touch, I was at great risk of having to spend my last night in its icy company. I finally passed the point of no return at less than a metre (three feet) above the ground, floods of adrenaline coursing victoriously through my veins. A long, gentle glide followed, along beautiful slopes to finish by crossing a valley, lost in the setting sun.

I landed vertically amongst trees shaken by a strong katabatic breeze and made a friendly sign to the three solid mountain-dwellers who contemplated me from afar with a careful air. They approached me and invited me to sleep in a rustic chalet, which one of them had built with his brother's family, cutting the heavy pine trunks by hand.

MARCH 26 – ANGER AND FRUSTRATION – 67 KM (41.6 MILES)

The next day, after three hours blindly walking through the forest, I popped out above a gigantic southwest-facing cliff. The forest literally stopped at its edge. With my saw I managed to clear a square, just big enough to lay out my wing and to run one or two steps before throwing myself off.

The cliff intermittently exhaled a light breeze. I occasionally felt the lingering southeast wind and couldn't risk waiting any longer. I launched and glided straight across the valley to a forested slope facing more into the sun and valley breeze. Arriving low, I maintained for around an hour, thwarted by the inversion layer, and eventually ended up in the bottom of the valley. At the sight of the first burgeoning cumulus reaching staggering heights my anger carried me through my fatigue. I left behind the curious crowd that had gathered and ran back up the forested hill. Two hours later, running out of energy and totally dehydrated, I arrived not far from the point



where the forest stopped at the foot of a cliff. Angrily, I decided to launch from between the trees.

My heart bursting, I threw myself off. Surprisingly calmly and precisely I manoeuvred through the branches, my feet treading on the treetops. Once out into clear air I was picked up by a good thermal, comfortably cradled in the heart of it amongst a kaleidoscope of butterflies, and the mountains grew distant from my cries of joy.

The valley winds blew at 40km/h (25 mph), blowing away the thermals. I eased my way, little by little, towards the back of the valley then, having been through some uncomfortably rough air, I finally made my way into a cul-de-sac where the valley winds slowly transformed themselves into an enormous thermal which propelled me up to nearly 5,000 m (16,404 feet). The last 50 or so kilometres (30 miles) of the flight were a cruise along high ground at more than 4,000 m (13,123 feet), split into four by big, exhilarating thermals, one of which took me to 5,200m (17,060 feet). My day ended with a long evening glide in buoyant air to the square of a large village, which was flooded by hundreds of villagers bringing contagious joy and laughter.

MARCH 27 – SAVAGE SKIES LEAD TO PARADISE – 80 KM (50 MILES)

Next morning, the wind blew a storm between the houses, clattering the corrugated iron roofs and sending the dust flying. The mountain tops appeared to be smoking as plumes of ice were blown from them. I still decided to go and find a take-off, and spend the day there if necessary until the wind calmed.

My patience was rewarded three hours later when the wind finally abated and a strong thermal propelled me to 4,000 m (13,123 feet). Four hours of easy and exciting flying followed with cloudbase at a comfortable 4,500 m (14,764 feet). At the end of the day, the Himalaya gave me one final challenge: a magnificent, high mountain landscape prevented my reaching a high col. I crossed it an hour later, after an hour of awesome flying, a hair's breadth from the cliffs and snow slopes. My wing was finally grateful to be able to rest on a long, buoyant, evening glide. Floating to the end of the valley I was able to prolong the flight for a good dozen

kilometres (seven miles) or so. A wonderful deserted clearing overlooking a cliff, ideally exposed to the valley winds and the morning sun, was a perfect high altitude solitary bivouac spot.

Beneath the last rays of the sun, an intense happiness spread over me and my equipment in the cool, fresh grass. No preparation necessary, I set up camp on the perfect lawn, exactly where I landed, and where I'd take off from the next morning. I felt like the lucky owner of a paradise that I'd proudly journeyed through. Close by there was a lucky pool of unblemished water and a majestic forest whose floor was filled with dry branches for fuel.

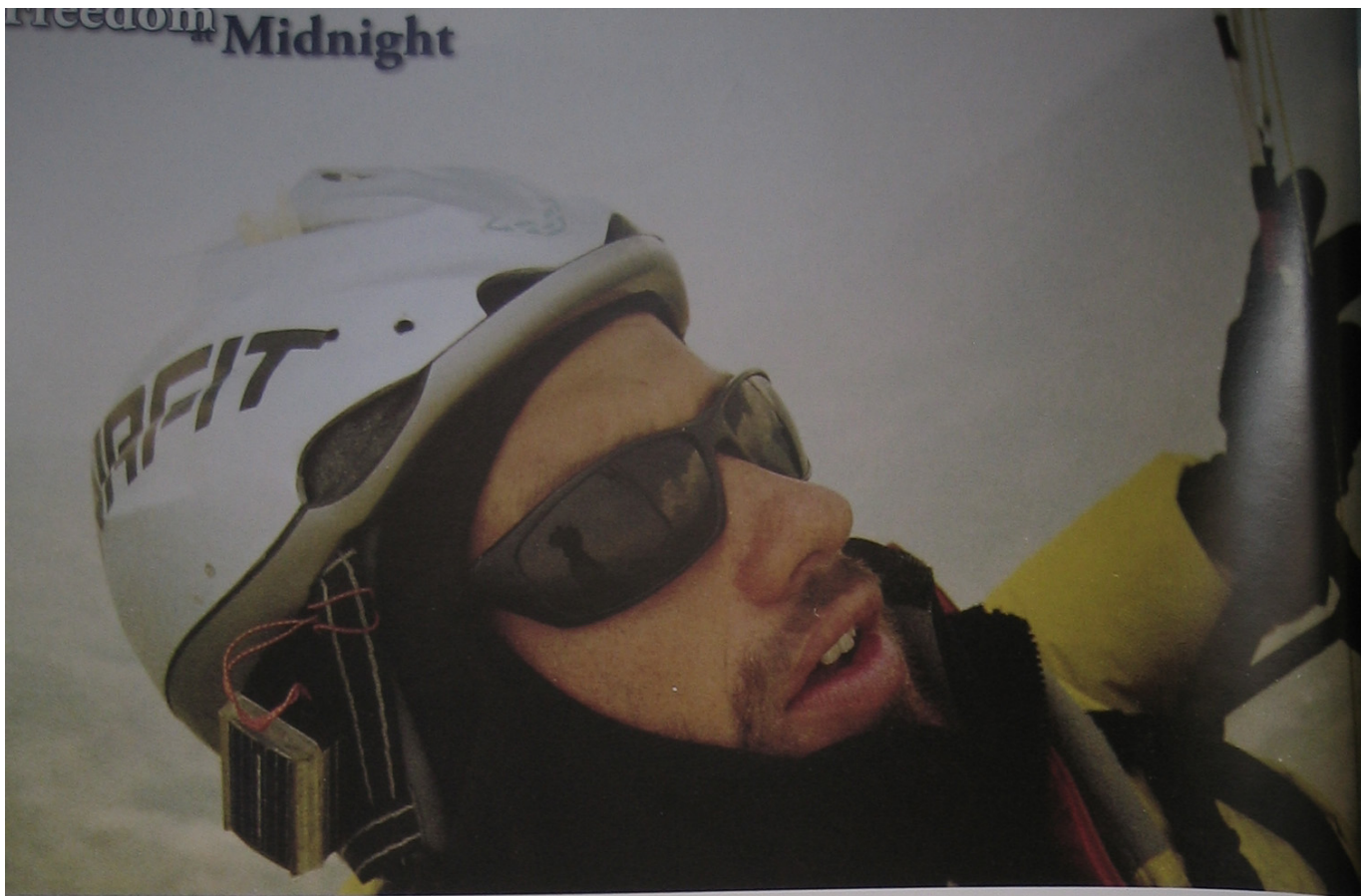
MARCH 28 – PASSING NANDA DEVI – 73 KM (45 MILES)

The following day brought a difficult, dry, windy air mass that gave way to more humid air. The flying was difficult with a lowering cloudbase, and once past Nanda Devi, the highest point in the Indian Himalayas, I was forced south, down lower and lower spines. I soared in dynamic winds and jumped low cols until I eventually ground to a frustrated halt, lost in a maze of mountains and low cumulus. Once I was down, the amiable clamour of the villagers calmed my frustration.

MARCH 29 – HALT! FRONTIER! – 65 KM (40 MILES)

The following day was marvellous, yet dreadful. It began well and amazingly easily, following a route slightly further south than planned because of the low cloudbase. There were no difficult cols to pass, no giddy, wind-blown cliffs and no wild expanses of snow. Instead I found round, half-wooded, half-cultivated hills well orientated into the valley winds, paved by nice gentle cumulus. It reminded me of the atmosphere in the back country of my home in Nice, in the south of France, in wintertime. In such conditions gliding, thermalling and climbing are natural enough skills in me to leave a large part of my thoughts free to enjoy the meditation of the trekker, day dreaming. I almost pity the vultures and birds of prey whose thoughts must be disturbed by the endless search for food. Flying is my bubble of serene solitude, my escape from

"We slipped away in his car to the start of the footpaths that lead in to the hills. I walked higher till I found a place to launch from and zip across the dreaded frontier at full speed. With the border behind me I hit cloudbase, let out a whoop and threw myself into the high, wild mountains of Western Nepal"



"Suddenly, I lost the feeling in my extremities. I set about shaking and clapping them frantically, trying to restore the blood circulation, but in vain. My hands had become nothing more than heavy, inert lumps"

everyday life in a materialistic world.

I was enjoying the flight so much that I was almost disappointed to discover I'd already arrived at the Nepalese border. I'd decided to land there to get my Nepalese visa stamped, but the police and military were onto me as soon as I landed, and detained me for longer than I could ever have feared.

I'd landed in a forbidden military zone and, to the twitchy border guards, appeared to be a probable spy who'd jumped from a plane in order to take pictures of their installations. In any case, with no license to fly, I was definitely committing an offence.

They explained to me that it was an offence for foreigners to cross the border at that point; that I had to take a bus two days away through the jungle to find a post that was open to foreigners; that the west of Nepal is totally devoid of roads; that the people live there in misery and in terror of the Maoist rebels; that it is forbidden for a foreigner to travel there alone and that in any case it is too dangerous.

The police detained me for three days. They developed my photos in a crappy little studio that scratched and dirtied all the negatives. Once they saw my pictures they were reassured, and ordered me to take a bus to Babansa, the nearest immigration post out in the plains. I let them think that the idea pleased me.

APRIL 2 – EXHAUSTED AND EXALTED – 85 KM (53 MILES)

During my time in custody I'd got to know a young Indian engineer. He was passionate about my adventure and decided to help me. When he told the police that he'd invited me to stay the night at his place they didn't bat an eyelid. He took me to the local black market where I bought Nepalese rupees then, before dawn, we slipped away in his car to the start of the footpaths that lead in to the hills. I walked higher till I found a place to launch from and zip across the dreaded frontier at full speed. With the border behind me I hit cloudbase, let out a whoop and threw myself into the high, wild mountains of Western Nepal.

I'd done a lot of walking without drinking or eating enough, and was feeling weak, plus I was sick with an

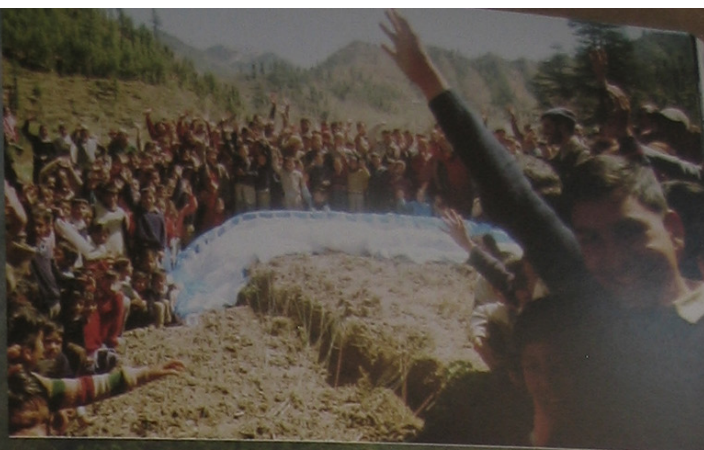
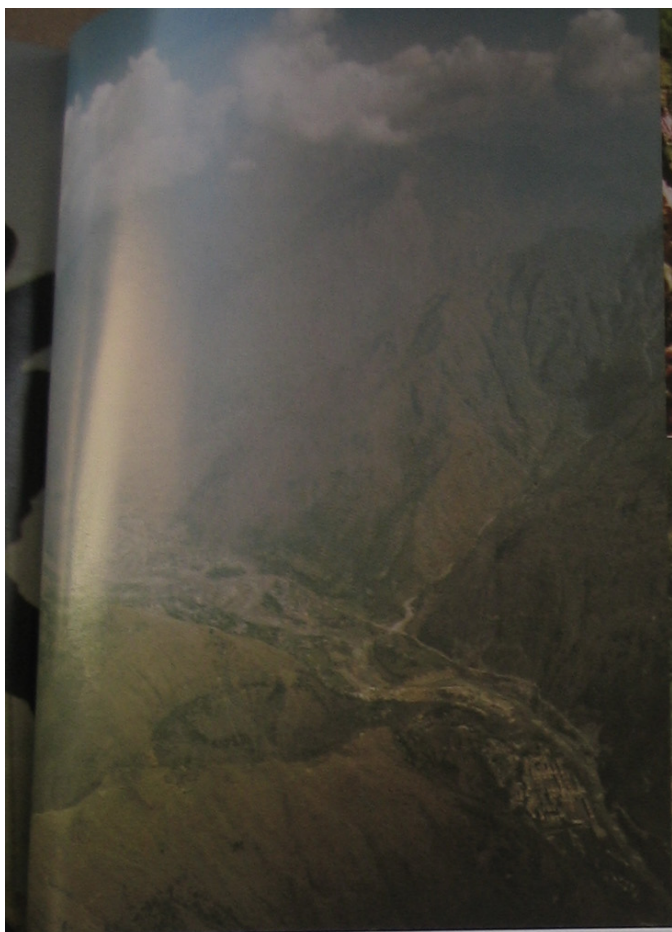
intestinal infection. In the frenzy of the escape I'd felt no tiredness and had had no conscience of the danger that lay in wait for me. I quickly passed 4,000 m (13,123 feet) and encountered a very strong thermal on the ridge that propelled me to 5,000 m (16,404 feet). I ascended towards the 7,000 m (22,966 feet) peaks of the main snow-covered Himalayan chain. Before I knew it I was in front of them at 6,000 m (19,685 feet) under a tremendous cloud street.

Suddenly, I lost the feeling in my extremities. I set about shaking and clapping them frantically, trying to restore the blood circulation, but in vain. My hands had become nothing more than heavy, inert lumps. My lungs were burning and my breath came in short, rapid gasps. In a second, all the joy and excitement was replaced by terror. I was afraid of frostbite, and imagined my death should I land in the very high, wild mountains that surrounded me. In a foetal position, arms tight against my torso, I endeavoured to keep my wing beneath the cloud street that was leading me to a col to the east, behind which I caught a glimpse of an exit towards a valley.

At the end of 25 km (15.5 miles) I arrived at a mountainside that had been cleared. I was back down to 2,600 m (8,530 feet) and desperate to warm up, so I put the glider down in the clearing. My hands were trembling with cold and fatigue. I couldn't even use my hands to feed myself dry raisins. I stared deep into the active sky around me and wondered if Philippe Nodet was somewhere close.

I was to learn later that Philippe had left the border having travelled in from Kathmandu; our tracks had passed within an hour of each other. Every day of my adventure, when the clouds were growing huge, or the wind blowing hard, I'd think of Philippe and wonder just where he was and what kind of adventure he was engrossed in.

Once I'd refuelled and warmed up I took off again, flying on till I managed to crash land in a little village in a strong breeze. A strange militarily dressed man, who spoke only a few words of English, barked questions and suspicious accusations at me. He started talking about taking me down to the commissioner at the end of the valley, but eventually, under the growing enthusiasm of the rest of the village, he accepted I was nothing more than a flying tourist popping in



on a sightseeing tour.

APRIL 3 – JOURNEY SOUTH – 74 KM (46 MILES)

The journey that followed was a lot better, with a light westerly wind and cloudbase approaching 6,000 m (19,685 feet). My enthusiasm was dampened by the experience of the previous day, and feeling the after-effects more and more, I decided to make the most of the day and try to head south to get on the front ridge of the main Himalayan massif that leads to the south faces of Dhaulagiri and Annapurna, and on to Pokhara and Kathmandu.

My aim achieved, I landed after a long, peaceful glide in the company of vultures, with just enough altitude to make a downwind crash onto a high plateau in front of two families that were gathered around a fragile water source collecting the heavily clouded liquid drop by drop.

APRIL 4 – THE TRAP – 73 KM (45 MILES)

The next day's flight began at top speed for more than 70 km (43.5 miles), but finished brutally by falling into a foul aerological trap, which threw me rapidly earthwards into the furnace at the bottom of a valley. I finished the day with a long ascent on foot, which took until nightfall.

APRIL 5 – BASE JUMP – 54 KM (33.5 MILES)

My southwest-facing take-off wasn't working first thing, but keen to keep moving I launched, and was rewarded with a sledge-ride to the bottom. In my haste to get back up again and find another take-off I almost snubbed the few locals of a little hamlet who were running up to meet me. Miming the motion of a bird taking off, one of them made a sign for me to follow him on another track so I did. Barefooted, he skipped up the stony slope with far more ease than I could muster. When we arrived above a very steep slope he gave me the sign to jump into the void.

Preparing the wing and lines on this vertiginous slope was difficult. The wing kept slipping under its own weight, so I showed my helper how to hold the central cells for me. When I was finally ready, standing in my harness with my feet

on the edge of the void, I suddenly had doubts. Perhaps it was the disappointment on my guide's face that finally made me decide to give it a go. Throwing myself into the void, I yelled a big 'GO!' as if to encourage my wing to open and carry me off. I made it.

The rest of the flight was a 50-kilometre (31 mile) race against the clock. The ever-darkening sky grew more and more threatening until the first roll of thunder spurred me to an urgent landing. After a hazardous approach, a final gust threw me onto the slope straight into a spiny bush. It took a local shepherd and I almost an hour to extract my wing. He offered me a night at his place, but preferring a long walk across the grassy ridges I'd seen from the air, I set off walking, eventually sleeping the night under my wing.

I studied the maps and thought I could be in Pokhara the next day. I was wrong.

APRIL 6 – OCEAN OF CLOUDS – 48 KM (29.8 MILES)

The day started with difficulty. Two hours of effort to launch from a stony take-off in a cross wind. Drenched with sweat I finally got airborne only to realise I'd not clipped my waist belt and the controls at the same time. Eventually I managed to fasten the harness together with my front-mounted rescue parachute. At least the day was saved.

The wind was strong though, 40 km/h (25 mph) or more, and blasting me up a big northwest-facing slope. I didn't dare think about what lay ahead for me. Then I hit vicious air and spent a few minutes boxing hard with turbulence. I was being really thrown around and having to work hard to keep the wing open, when suddenly I was hoovered into the most violent thermal of my career. It dragged me away from the landscape like a puppet on a string. I was relieved and almost amused to watch the ground fall away beneath me.

At around 5,000 m (16,404 feet) I moved on. Ahead, a moist airmass was forming a blanket of cloud as far as the eye could see. I plunged in on a compass bearing taking the best line I could. When I finally popped out 20 km (12.4 miles) later into the moist, hazy airmass I didn't recognise the landscape at all. I managed to land in a beautiful perched

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"My final flight was under a dark black sky and ended with a long walk out from some lost valley in the battering rain"

village. Excited to meet me, the village erupted in to parties, dances and singing till late in the evening. They named me 'balloon man'. I was exhausted from days on the move, my shoulder was in pain, I was covered in infections, burns, cuts, aches, my knee was swollen, and I absolutely stunk!

APRIL 7 – FOG – 23 KM (14.29 MILES)

After a long walk with at least 50 villagers who wanted to see me fly I finally found a launch and got going. The air was hot, humid and murky. The visibility was down to around five km (3 miles). I managed to fly for two hours, banging against the murky inversion and gliding between hillsides I could barely see. I ended up in the Mustang valley in a strong breeze fuelled by the storms that thundered around me.

I was back in civilisation, the first since the border, and quickly checked into a hotel and hid from anyone in a uniform.

APRIL 8 – POKHARA, AT LAST – 42 KM (26 MILES)

On April 8, seventeen days after setting off from Bir on the west side of the Indian Himalaya, I arrived in Pokhara. The joy of flying quickly gave way to the joy of arriving. On my last transition, as if to mark the occasion, my accelerator line broke, but I continued pulling the lines by hand to speed me to my goal. After a tour of the Sarankot bowl in the company of some blasé tandems I landed incognito on the lakeside beach a few metres from the paragliding schools, hotels, bistros and tourist shops. Concealing my emotion, I slunk off silently to a café and slumped at a table sipping fruit juice. I think that I was already bored with having arrived.

In Pokhara the stomach problems came back. I experienced deep lethargy, dragging my feet between hammock, restaurant and toilet. I didn't have the energy or desire to fly in a sky that was becoming increasingly opaque. After six days of this sickly cycle my health and the sky improved a little. The desire to pick up the adventure and wander again was very strong.

APRIL 21 – 28 – ON THE MOVE AGAIN – 210 KM (130.5 MILES) IN SEVEN DAYS

The excitement of being back in the air galvanized me. I was no longer just an ailing and annoying tourist; I was again a migratory bird, free to travel the Himalayas again.

Cloudbase was just high enough to reach the first foothills of the Annapurna massif. The sky filled in very quickly, but I

threw all the energy of my newly-found health into the flight. I jumped between patches of sunlight, engulfing myself in the cloudy masses, and throwing myself low over cols. When I finally landed under a milky sky, I'd covered 70 km (43.5 miles).

The warm welcomes from the villagers began again. Once again I'd become someone of great importance; once again I was surrounded by smiles; I no longer felt either ill or tired.

Each of the six flying days that followed challenged me with cloudy morning skies, low cloudbases and storms in the afternoons. I didn't give a damn about the final destination, provided that the flying was good and the non flying time rich in events and surprises. The situation was deteriorating irrevocably with the approach of the monsoon season.

The mountains were so highly populated, and I flew so low, that I constantly heard the clamour of the people. My only moments of calm were in the clouds, where no one could see me. All together there were probably tens of thousands of admirers who cheered, whistled, clapped and booed me on my journey. Sometimes, on turning a corner close to the ground, it was I who surprised them. I'd mischievously join my hands to greet them with the Nepalese greeting of 'Namaste' as I brushed past them.

My final flight was under a dark black sky and ended with a long walk out from some lost valley in the battering rain, followed by a bus ride to Kathmandu. I had to accept the arrival of the rainy season and quash my increasing desire for adventure and flight. In flying over a thousand kilometres across the Himalayas I'd already largely exceeded my vague initial objectives.

Rolling into town I peered through the rain-streamed window of the bus and witnessed the joy of the peasants being finally rewarded for their months of hard toil as the pre monsoon downpour brought life to their parched fields. I watched as the fields turned to buildings and shops, and candlelight turned to electricity as we entered the suburbs of Kathmandu. In my technology-starved state our bus, and the tarmac road it slithered down, were like some wild sci-fi scene from a movie. I sat transfixed by the sights and sounds of civilisation that had been missing from my life for so long, and realised that for the first time in more than a month I could watch the countryside pass by without worrying about the sun, the rain, the winds, the valleys and where and how I could fly. The adventure was over. **11**