by Thayer Walker

DROPPING IN

First Draft

Paragliding trips in the Indian Himalayas are deadly, unpredictable ... and one of the greatest thrills on earth

McClurg above camp 360

PARAGLIDING IS A TRICKY LITTLE SPORT. You've got your wind, you've got your mountains, you've got your gravity, and then, in instances like this, you've got your stubborn Indian bureaucrats whose sole purpose on an otherwise quiet Sunday morning is to ensure that you don't go paragliding.

"This license does not have a stamp," a bespectacled official informs one member of our group of 15 as we pack into his windowless concrete office. "We cannot allow you to go paragliding without a stamp."

Things have not gone smoothly over the past two weeks in Bir, a paragliding haven on the front range of the Indian Himalayas. Hang gliders discovered this place in the early eighties, and paragliders caught on a decade later. The sport began as a way for climbers to descend quickly from peaks and has overtaken hang gliding in popularity due to its ease and lower risk factor. Between the end of September and late November, calm weather, steady thermals, and ideal topography make Bir one of the best places to fly long distances, and today it draws hundreds of international paragliders.

But this year, paragliders, harnessed to a thin nylon wing and powered only by the wind, have been falling from the sky like bricks. One pilot survived a crash, but during the two-day extraction a rescuer fell to his death. Another pilot flew too deep into the mountains and simply vanished. And just yesterday, the day I arrived, someone broke his back during a botched landing. Fearing more accidents, the government has suddenly demanded that every pilot have a copy of his paragliding license and insurance, a 180-degree departure from the normal laissez-faire protocol. It's hard logic to argue with, but we're arguing anyway.

"We are the best team on the mountain," howls Eddie Colfox, co-founder of Himalayan Sky Safaris, steamrolling over the fact that some of his clients don't have all the requisite paperwork copied in triplicate and buried under a mountain of stamps and passport photos. Colfox, 41, is a bear of a man, with fiery red hair and a thick beard. He's one of the best long-distance pilots in the world, and has reached heights of 24,600 feet in Pakistan. Before he started flying, in 1993, he built and crewed sailboats; now, when he's not guiding paragliders around the world, he teaches geography to middle- and high-schoolers in Beaminster, England.

For the past three years, Himalayan Sky Safaris—composed of Englishmen Colfox; John Silvester, 50, considered the sport's Babe Ruth for his 93-mile solo flight deep into the Karakoram; and 40-year-old Oxford Sanskrit scholar Jim Mallinson—has safely led experienced pilots on trips around the Himalayas, and none of the recent carnage involved their clients. In fact, Colfox was the first on the scene in yet another recent rescue, an all-night affair that required getting a man with a compound leg fracture off an exposed face at 10,000 feet.

All this talk of broken bodies has made me reassess my purpose here. I've come along with the group of 15 experienced clients to be a guinea pig for Himalayan Sky Safaris' new tandem trips, in which the guides take nonfliers leapfrogging from peak to peak, camping in remote locales. The prospect seems to be getting dimmer by the moment.

The office soon fills with a United Nations of fliers—Russians, Swiss, Ukrainians, Brits, Indians, Americans—many of whom are suffering from similar paperwork inconsistencies. Tempers boil over, and four-letter pleasantries flutter about in three different languages. No stamps, no flying. Finally, Colfox, our team diplomat, ends the discussion with a coarse sprachgefühl. "You're all f!@#$%^!" he roars and storms out.

On the road, our team has a confab. Those with their paperwork in order, like me, will head up the mountain; the rest will stay below to sort it out. I hop into a jeep and make my way to the launch, where the real circus is unfolding.

THOUGH EVIDENCE suggests the contrary, Bir is usually a quiet little town. For decades this community of tea plantations and rice paddies in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, 250 miles north of Delhi, was little more than an afterthought on the road

Photograph by Jody MacDonald

between McLeod Ganj, seat of the exiled Tibetan government, and Manali, a bustling Himalayan tourist town.

During peak paragliding season, however, there are around five operators and several hundred fliers. The carnage level this year is pretty typical, but it has been increasing as the sport becomes more popular. While only three people have died here over the past seven years, injuries are routine—with twisted ankles and broken arms comparable to rock climbing's.

The Colonel's Resort, a tented camp and guesthouse owned by a retired Indian colonel, serves as our headquarters. We drive up the mountain every morning at 9:30, launch around noon, and touch down about three hours later. We plan to launch from Billing—just up the road from Bir—most days, and will take one overnight trip. (Future trips will include multiple nights out.)

My first morning at the launch downshifts to the languid pace one might expect from people who spend their free time talking about the weather. Fliers stand around drinking tea and staring toward the heavens, but when the first raptor swings into a thermal—meaning the ground has heated up enough to generate rising columns of hot air—the lollygagging turns to chaos.

More than 100 people crowd the launch, a cleared hilltop that drops steeply into rhododendron and pine forest. A local TV crew conducts interviews, rubbernecking Indian soldiers chat up female pilots, an amputee with a hook for a hand spreads out her gear, and a Russian guy flits about wearing a T-shirt that reads, YOU'RE NOT CRAZY ENOUGH FOR ME.

Pilots clothesline each other with rigging lines in their rush to take off; someone manages to tear a wind sock out of the ground during an adventurous launch; and those are the success stories. Aborted launch after aborted launch, wings go down like pheasants during hunting season, and everyone seems more interested in snatching the vacated patch of grass than checking to see if their comrades are OK.

Colfox, Silvester, and Mallinson have stayed below, so I'm flying with former Indian national champion Debu Choudhury.

OO

To watch videos from Himalayan Sky Safaris and view a photo gallery from Jody MacDonald, go to **outsideonline.com/paragliding himalayas**. For more Dropping In articles, go to **outsideonline.com/droppingin**.

Half Italian and half Bengali, Choudhury, 30, began flying when he was 14, running off of small hills in his hometown of Manali. Today he splits his time between India, Nepal, and Austria, working as an instructor and tandem guide. He speaks six languages, though he's not much of a talker. "It looks like a good day to go out the back," he offers, fixated on the cloudless sky.

Above the landing zone, Choudhury swings the glider back and forth like a pendulum. "Why do we do that?" I inquire. "For fun," Choudhury chuckles. "Right. Fun. Well, that scares me. Just so you know."

Bir sits at roughly 4,700 feet in the Kangra Valley and owes its superlative flying conditions in part to the 15,000-foot Dhauladhar Range, which slams abruptly through the ground like a giant granite sucker punch. No foothills or other geologic foreplay stands between the Kangra and these "White Mountains," so the thermals are steady and well groomed. Most fliers stick to the first ridgeline, overlooking the wide valley; only the best pilots venture "out the back," into the heart of the Himalayas, where the weather can change instantaneously.

I earned my novice license months ago in the San Francisco Bay Area but have never flown in a setting like this. We find a launch spot and cinch into our respective harnesses. To ease my apprehensions about flying straight into the largest mountain range on the planet with nothing but a wing made from nylon, I'll be hitched to the crotch of a man I met just three hours ago. On Choudhury's command we start running, and the next thing I know I'm spinning my feet in the air like Wile E. Coyote. We're flying.

I lean back in the harness and swing my legs forward, as if I'm reclining in an easy chair, and Choudhury does the same. Warm rising air fills the wing, and Choudhury works the ridgeline with mathematical precision. We launch at 7,800 feet, bounce to 10,000 feet so we have enough altitude to glide over to the next ridge, hit a thermal elevator up to 11,500 feet, and turn out the back.

A wide valley stretches beneath us, framed by a skyline of rock and ice stacked to the horizon. Our snow-frosted destination stands in the foreground, just another 14,000-foot peak no one has bothered to name.

In most sports, giving a novice this kind of experience is purely theoretical. But flying with Choudhury, I am reaching places accessible to only the most skilled pilots, and the scale is difficult to comprehend. Giant riverbeds look like pebbled footpaths and 80-foot trees like blades of grass, but the mountains rise unrelentingly, bigger and bigger and bigger.

We buzz the nameless peak one thousand feet below the summit when clouds move in—our cue to move out. Clouds are the equivalent of a black hole, and fliers who get sucked into them can freeze to death, crash into a mountain, or take a violent ride through the upper troposphere.

Perhaps the most infamous example came in 2007, when champion paraglider Ewa Wisnierska was sucked into a storm cloud in Australia and pulled from 2,500 feet to more than 32,000 feet in about 15 minutes. She passed out for half an hour while her wing continued flying, until she finally regained consciousness and safely landed. She was incomprehensibly lucky; another flier was killed in the same storm, his body recovered 47 miles from his launch site.

We turn around and head toward Bir. Once we're above the landing zone, a fallow rice paddy behind a Tibetan monastery, Choudhury swings the glider back and forth like a pendulum with a trick called "wingovers."

"Why do we do that?" I inquire nervously.

"For fun," Choudhury chuckles.

"Right. Fun. Well, that scares me. Just so you know." He promptly straightens the wing out and we resume a gradual—and suddenly very boring—descent.

"Debu," I ask, "can we do that again?"

THE REST OF OUR CREW has its paperwork sorted out by my third day, so we take to the skies for an overnight trip to 360, an aptly named campground of terraced rice paddies 12 miles away, with stunning and unobstructed views of the Himalayas. Today I'm girdled to Colfox, while dozens of pilots soar in the launch thermal, circling like fish in an aquarium roundabout—only not so organized. We climb quickly to avoid the traffic

and glide to the next ridge.

Each guide keeps an eye on two or three of the solo flying clients, and one of Colfox's charges, an Icelander named Thorr, is having problems staying up. He's only a few hundred feet above the trees when a voice over the radio crackles, "Thorr, you might want to think about landing."

"I got him," Colfox replies. He pulls the right brake, increasing drag on the right side of the canopy, which causes us to corkscrew downward, turning the earth into a green-and-brown vertigo spiral until we're about 100 feet above the struggling pilot. Colfox—part Sherlock Holmes, part Orville Wright—sniffs out a thermal above a flat patch of sunbaked ground and yells, "Follow me!" Thorr happily obliges, and soon we're all back among the birds.

We bimble along the knuckled ridgeline for two hours, but it's taxing work for Colfox, because the thermals aren't strong enough that we can punch through the inversion layer to get high. Created when warmer air sits atop cooler air, an inversion layer is like a piece of plastic wrap across the sky. In strong thermals, you can pop right through; anything less and you end up getting bounced back like a kernel in a popcorn cooker.

What paragliding lacks in physical requirements it compensates for with its demand for mental acuity. Pilots chase an invisible and dynamic medium through a three-dimensional playing field and are required to understand both weather and topography. It helps to keep in mind that air moves in currents, just like water. When water hits a rock, it creates a disturbance in the form of a ripple or wave or rapid. When an air current hits a ridgeline or a mountain or even just a thermal gradient, it does the same thing. The difference is, the kayaker can see his hazards, while the paraglider has to visualize and anticipate them. This can be extremely difficult even for skilled pilots. Anyone can get into trouble.

We all land at 360 to find our ground support from the Colonel's Resort already setting up camp. Gavin McClurg, an American catamaran captain who's been paragliding for five years, takes off for one last ridge soar. He launches effortlessly while Colfox and photographer Jody MacDonald gear up for a tandem flight to take aerial shots. A band of thin lens-shaped clouds called lenticulars has spread across the sky, signaling incoming weather, and the wind is picking up uncharacteristically for this late in the day. "I'm not sure about this," Colfox tells MacDonald. "The conditions are looking pretty weird."

As if on cue, a dreadful fluttering fills the air. McClurg's wing stalls 300 feet above the ground and he's spinning, spinning, spinning down. He disappears below the ridgeline with a muffled thud, followed by silence. Colfox, MacDonald, and I sprint toward him and come to an unexpected sight: McClurg calmly packing up his paraglider. A few feet from impact, the wing miraculously found purchase and McClurg landed gently on his feet.

Over whiskey, dinner, **continued on page 107**

DROPPING IN **continued from page 59**

and a roaring campfire, the fliers parse the incident. How did the wing stall? Was it turbulence? How did McClurg recover? They press to understand what happened in order to assess the risk for themselves. Concrete answers, however, are elusive. Sometimes these things just happen.

WHEN THINGS DO HAPPEN, Suresh Thakur is usually one of the first to know. A former paraglider himself, the 32-year-old local co-founded the Bir search-and-rescue team six years ago. The volunteer team tracks all search-and-rescue accidents and is involved in many of the rescue and recovery missions. It's been a busy season, so after four days of paragliding, which ended with a smooth return trip from 360 to Bir, I visit Thakur at his modest Internet café, which doubles as team headquarters.

It's 4:30 P.M. and a call has just come in. A Ukrainian pilot named Igor went down an hour ago. We don't have any GPS coordinates and know only that before losing radio communication, Igor said he could see a bridge. It's not the most helpful description, considering the multitude of rivers draining these peaks, but if we don't look, no one will. Five Indian searchers, two Ukrainians, and I pile into a jeep and drive into the evening.

We try to move quickly, a goal often at odds with reality in India. The roads, tight and treacherous, are peppered with spooked donkeys and broken-down buses. It's getting darker, so we pin the tail on a random hill and begin to climb. We should at least break a sweat before sentencing this man to a night alone in the mountains. "Igor!" we yell. It's a symbolic effort.

We return to Bir at midnight and leave at eight the next morning with little more information than yesterday. We share no lingua franca with the Ukrainians, a barrier that has already proven problematic. Since it's too cold and early for paragliders to fly, and the government isn't getting involved, our best plan involves driving around, hoping to pick up Igor's radio signal. Every 20 minutes someone bleats out a call, always answered by silence. "I hope his battery is not dead," Thakur says.

By noon, paragliders are in the sky and we pull out at an overlook. Igor's voice briefly crackles over the radio. Thakur pantomimes to one of the Ukrainians to tell Igor to make a fire, but without a common language we can't exchange any more information. A paraglider flies overhead, tells us he sees something, and then gives us erroneous coordinates—that we ignore—pointing to a location 50 miles away. We sit around the car waiting for the injured man to make a fire that we may or may not be able to see.

"It's like looking for fish in urine," Thakur says, scanning the mountainside, arms folded behind his back. "It's impossible."

Still, we drive up a side canyon to the confluence of two idyllic rivers that suffer the unfortunate fate of being in a fine location for a new dam. The workers haven't seen any paragliders, but we park, hopscotch through their blast field anyway—over sticks of dynamite set to detonate in a few hours—and scramble into the mountains.

We climb to a plateau around 9,000 feet, where our signal fire and radio calls yield nothing but melancholy. It's too dark to climb down now, so seven of us cram into an abandoned shepherd's mud hut and bed down on straw for the cold, long night.

The next morning, half the team stays in the mountains; the rest of us return to Bir, and I head to the airport to catch a flight to Delhi. Several days later, news will filter through that Igor's family hired a helicopter team that found him alive, with spinal injuries, after six days in the snowy mountains. But as my plane takes off, that stroke of miraculous luck is still unthinkable. I stare out the window to watch the world's tallest mountain range sweep by in miniature. Suddenly the view doesn't feel so novel. **o**

CORRESPONDENT THAYER WALKER WROTE ABOUT DEEP SUBMERSIBLES IN MAY.