

My First Flight

Taking to the Skies on a Tandem Paraglide

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I woke up early on Saturday, July 24 to see Bend's famous "lawn-chair balloon" aviator launch for his latest airborne journey. The morning offered clear blue skies, perfect for a flight. As the crowd counted down to the launch and Kent Couch gracefully lifted off, little did I know that by the end of the day, I would have had my own experience soaring high above the earth.

As I walked my dog on the Deschutes River Trail later that morning, I finally got the call I'd been anticipating for several months. It was Steve Roti, a member of the High Desert Air Riders, a group of Central Oregonians who've adopted paragliding as their hobby. He said



The author, left, with tandem paragliding pilot Steve Roti.



Lots of traffic in the sky.

the weather forecast was perfect for the evening, if I was still interested in taking a tandem flight. My answer? Absolutely.

True to its reputation as a haven for outdoor recreation of all kinds, Central Oregon has become a popular location for paragliding.

Unlike hang gliding, which utilizes a rigid-frame glider, paragliding uses a parachute-like structure that glides on rising air currents. The sport started as we know it today in

mountainous areas of the United States and Europe in the late 1970s, according to the U.S. Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association. Gliders climb to a high point of a mountain, strap themselves into their gliding harnesses and simply step off the slope, floating into the air and controlling themselves with lines that make the wing rise or descend.

Much more common in Europe, the sport is still catching on in the United States, but with its plentiful

launch sites and gorgeous scenery, Oregon has become a popular destination for paragliding.

So at last, it looked like I would finally take to the skies! I'd wanted to try paragliding ever since my husband got to take a tandem flight with Steve nearly a year ago. Steve was kind enough to offer to take me as well, but my first two attempts were grounded because of bad weather.

I was hoping the third time would be the charm as we drove out past

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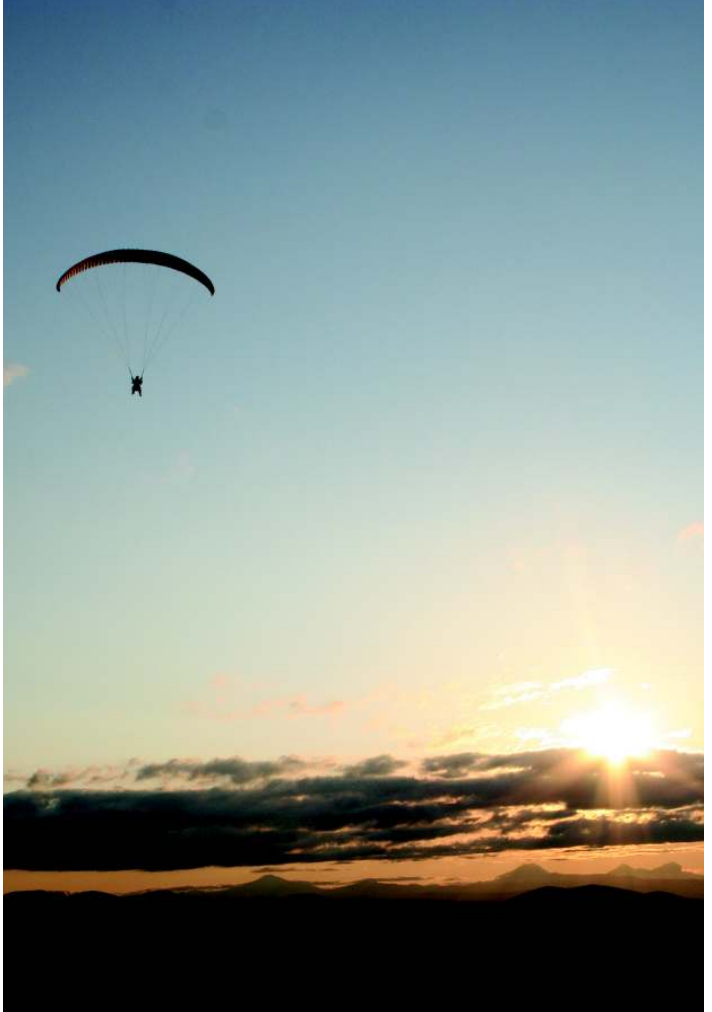
Millican to Pine Mountain, the launch site. Any nervousness I might have had about flying was abated by the fact that I'd actually tried to do it twice before, so I was familiar with much of the process. Plus, Steve's knowledge and experience definitely put me at ease.

The first step in the flight was to strap on my "flight gear" and hike about a third of the way up the mountain, where Steve then helped me put on my harness. Despite the July heat, I wore long pants, gloves and a jacket so that I would be comfortable in the cool air of the upper atmosphere.

In a tandem flight, the experienced pilot rides in the back while the "passenger" rides up front. Pilot and passenger must make sure they're synchronized as they prepare for takeoff, and Steve reviewed the commands with me as we prepared for launch.

The "ready" command signaled me to lean forward in a running stance; "pull" meant that the wing was going to start pulling us backwards, so we would need to run backwards with it a bit while leaning forward; and "run" meant that I was just a few steps away from experiencing the miracle of flight!

So there we were, standing on the



Flying off into the sunset.



View from the top of the world, taken mid-flight.

edge of Pine Mountain, ready for our flight. This was when I did start to get a little bit nervous. What if I stumble and fall during the lift-off? I'm not always known for my coordination, whether I'm falling off of a ski lift on my snowboard or I'm tripping over my own feet.

And sure enough, in our first attempt, the strong wind pulled the

wing to the side, and I tried to run backwards and sideways to keep up with the pull, but ended up falling down. But I blame that on the wind, not my clumsiness. Just seconds later, we made our second attempt and flawlessly drifted into the sky. It was an indescribable feeling as my feet effortlessly left the ground and we began to soar!



Left: A paraglider enjoys a peaceful ride. Right: View of the high desert landscape from above.



We drifted higher and higher on currents of air, making our way towards the summit of Pine Mountain. With a bird's eye view, it felt like I could see forever, from the old-growth pine trees below us to the surrounding scrub brush of Eastern Oregon to the Cascade Mountains in the distance. It was an unforgettable way to experience the High Desert landscape, and although I brought my camera, I didn't take many pictures, preferring instead to just "be in the moment" and take it all in.

Before I knew it, Steve and I had become the highest gliders in the sky, as several others swirled beneath us on bright orange or red wings. It was such a smooth ride, peaceful and serene; the purest form of flight that I can imagine.

One of the only bumps I felt came when another glider drifted past us, and Steve explained that it was a "wake" in the air just like boats create in water.

Though Steve was most definitely in control of the flight, he did let me take the reins for a few minutes. The wing can be turned with a simple tug on the lines on either side. It's a three-step process: look around to make sure no other gliders are near you, lean over to the side you want to turn to, and give a smooth, gentle pull on the line. It was incredible to feel how easily I could maneuver us with just a little effort.

After several moments spent floating high above Pine Mountain's summit watching the other gliders and admiring the beauty of the landscape as the sun drifted behind the Cascades, painting the sky with a beautiful sunset, Steve said it was time to head in for our landing.

Though I was treasuring every moment of the once-in-a-lifetime experience, I have to admit that my stomach was ready to be back on solid ground by that point, towards the end of our 40-minute flight. Ex-

pertly navigating the rising and sinking air currents, Steve began to guide us gently back down to earth. I was amazed at how I could suddenly feel the warmth of the air as we neared the ground, giving the invisible layers of the atmosphere a tangible feel.

I got ready to run again as we neared the ground, and our landing

was perfect. I was so grateful for such an incredible experience!

For more information about paragliding in Central Oregon, visit the Desert Air Riders' website at www.desertairriders.org. The club's 20th-annual Pine Mountain Fly-In, a gathering of flying friends, is set for Sept. 4-6.



A red paraglider contrasts against the green and brown of the earth below.