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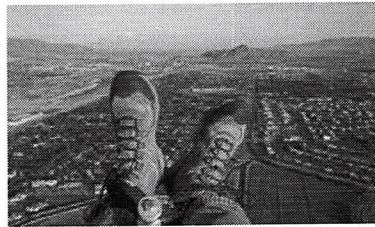
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Learning to Fly
El Paso Paragliding

By Cheri Pearson



You sling a 40-pound pack on your back at Franklin Mountain State Park and hike two hours. You reach the ridge and within 10 minutes you're soaring with hawks over the largest urban park in the nation - 500 feet above one of the highest peaks in Texas.

On another late afternoon, you fly a "glass off," where hot air close to the ground suddenly pops up in one huge movement and the air rises everywhere, sending you up effortlessly on a gigantic thermal blast.

Later, you coast 60 feet above the Rio Grande just as the coolness of dusk descends.

Improbable? Not anymore, thanks to Hadley Robinson, a systems engineer and certified pilot through the United States Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association (USHPA). This summer he started El Paso Paragliding, a business that offers courses on paragliding and powered paragliding. He also has pioneered several take-off and landing sites in and around El Paso for those who wish to follow.

"It is the closest thing to being a bird," Robinson says. "Your hands are an extension of the wing and you can feel what's going on in the air. It is quiet and peaceful. I have taken live video of Big Sur, (Calif.), with the flowers blooming and everything so green. Its beauty was indescribable. Flight there is like floating on pillows."

California is where Robinson started flying, after his 92-year-old mother prodded him to check out the paragliders soaring over the beaches.

"I'm not a particularly brave person, and I am miserable in airplanes," he says. "But it was fun to overcome the fear with training. I was hooked."

He has since flown in Utah, Colorado and New Mexico. Three years and 700 flights later, Robinson is in El Paso teaching it. The goal of his courses is to teach students how to be safe and confident flyers - and he considers fear healthy.

"The more chicken you are, the better," he says, adding that attention to survival equates to safety.

El Paso Paragliding offers courses on paragliding, which involves taking off from a ridge and landing on lower ground, and powered paragliding, which involves a motor that launches you from the ground instead of a ridge. The fairly noisy motor maintains thrust throughout flight and can be shut off when you find a thermal, or a column of rising hot air.

Robinson teaches both, but he prefers the un-powered kind because it doesn't consume fossil fuels and is serenely silent.

"There is nothing more fun than what I did this morning flying over Anapra," he says. "It was hours of pure fun just breathing air."

Learning requires an investment of time and money, and the fall season is a good time to start due to calmer air, Robinson says.

Costs are all upfront. A P2 novice certification course lasts 8-12 days and costs \$1,750. Robinson provides equipment during training and, afterward, will help students find their own.

Roughly \$5,000 will get you a full set of new paragliding equipment, including a paraglider, harness, reserve parachute, radio and helmet. You can buy used equipment at nearly half the price.

Like skiing, students begin slowly with "bunny hills" or can be hooked up to a hydraulic-payout winch that tows a pilot from a few feet to a mile off the ground. A pilot can eventually learn to land gently within the radius of a three-foot circle. As with

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any extreme sport, paragliding is not without its risks.

"Safety is based on how well trained you are and how well you follow the rules," says Robinson, who encourages flying within your limits. "Knowing when to fly and when not to fly is very important."

Pilot attitude, competent instruction and safe equipment are all important factors in staying safe. Pilots have a reserve parachute, and wing technology is always evolving and improving.

Robinson says he's enthusiastic about exploring El Paso. He has done pioneering work scouting out new sites, including Franklin Park, Anapra, Mt. Riley and the Rio Grande; he's even landed at the bottom of Kilbourne's Hole. The spots are already circulating through the flying associations.

"So many sites, so little time," he says with a sigh.

Doak Hoover, an El Paso real estate broker and vice president of the Rio Grande Soaring Association, says El Paso was once considered a premier flying area for hang gliders because of its year-round warm weather and fabulous ridges in Franklin Mountain Park. The association has permission from the state to use the park for flying.

"It's a freedom that becomes a passion," says Hoover, who picked up the sport as something to do with his son.

Flyers from around the nation and globe contact the association to find out local spots to fly.

It is like being part of a family, he says; no matter where you go, the people take you in and show you around. Members protect each other by sharing the hazards and quirks of flying sites.

"It is truly an international sport," says Hoover, who has helped pilots from as far away as Croatia and South Africa.

He says he's excited that El Paso now has a local instructor to teach paragliding and powered paragliding.

"It was like it was supposed to happen," he says. "When Hadley decided to do it and was licensed, people just started calling before he even had a chance to officially advertise."

"I literally dreamt of flying most of my life," Robinson says. "When I started paragliding, the dreams ended."

Now he wants to share the reality. Eager El Pasoans are already lining up.

El Paso Paragliding
Paragliding
and Powered Paragliding Classes
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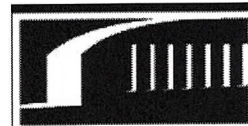
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