

# Hang Gliding

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COVER: Mark Sawyer in his PacAir Formula "Julie Ann" thermaling over the Huachuca Mtns. of southeast Arizona. Launch is at end of road at right. Photo by Mark Sawyer.

CENTERSPREAD: Russ Douglas at 12,500' over Coldwater Canyon in the Owens Valley, CA. Photo by Russ Douglas.

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# Hang Gliding In Bolivia

*article and photos by Kurt Aronow*



The author high over Cochabamba, Bolivia.

**I**n June, 1991, I traveled to Bolivia with my hang glider and a mound of climbing gear. This was my third trip to the country.

The tourist traffic in Bolivia has risen dramatically in the last few years, especially among climbers. In fact, I was down in Bolivia to climb. But remembering some nice-looking spots to fly, I brought my glider down. Since the months of June, July and August are called the Andean summer—because of blue skies, 70° days and 25° nights—I thought the flying could be good. I knew of no hang glider pilots in Bolivia.

The first place I flew was Cochabamba, which is in a valley at 9,000 feet. A bad two-wheel-drive road into Tunari National Park climbs about 4,000 feet above town to a launch. The high point in the range above Cochabamba is Cerro Tunari at 16,519 feet.

I knew from my first trip to Bolivia that Cochabamba was probably a good place to fly. I knocked about town for half a day asking around for hang glider pilots. Eventually I was introduced to Pepe Villaroel, who has a few really old gliders in his attic. Pepe hadn't flown in five years, but he was still an enthusiast. We arranged to go out the next day on a tour of the landing areas in the valley.

Pepe's wife was dour about any hang gliding expeditions. She reminded Pepe that the last person to fly in Cochabamba five years ago was dead. Pepe told me that this Chilean, Carlos



# ia

Barbe, had circled too close to the hill; a sudden gust had killed him.

The next day as we drove around in Pepe's 1948 Willys Jeep, he showed me where a German couple had crashed-landed, flying tandem. The woman had broken her back. The spot was in a rocky flood basin that the road went through on the way up to launch. It was actually the primary LZ. The big problem with flying in Cochabamba is that you have to fly cross-country to get to a really decent landing area. Pepe suggested that I try Lake Alalay, across Cochabamba. We drove over there. On the south shore of Laguna Alalay is a large, spongy, grassy area—perfect.

The next day we loaded up the Jeep and headed up the hill. Launch was a steep grassy area. Pepe kept describing the cycles as being like freight trains rolling up the hillside. Actually the cycles were pretty light. I was already very weary from just carrying the glider down to launch at over 13,000 feet MSL. But I got off in a light cycle and circled for a while over some trees a few miles to the left of launch. The thermals were interesting. I would work one for 10 minutes and emerge about 20 feet higher, or lower.

Eventually I headed across town for Laguna Alalay. On the topo map it was an eight-to-one direct glide to the far side of the lake. I got to a Catholic school a kilometer from the near side of the lake with about 500' AGL and



The author flying the Cucoyo Valley in June of '91.

decided to land in the soccer field. I got bumped on final and ran out of field as I dove under a low telephone wire. Whack. Within 30 seconds I was surrounded by a hundred people, most of whom were talking about Carlos Barbe. Was I dead yet? I was fine except for a broken downtube. Eventually the hubbub quieted down and everyone went back to playing soccer.

The next day the Jeep was broken, so I hired a taxi to take me up the hill. The taxi driver, Walter, had never been up into the National Park. Walter had also never seen a hang glider before. In spite of my repeated explanations in Spanish, Walter convinced himself that this enormous thing on his roof was a tent.

Near the bottom the Datsun B210 negotiated the gravel road pretty well. Walter thought he'd sandbagged me pretty well to charge 80 Bolivianos (about \$23 US) for the fare. Should he come up the next day and get me and my big tent for another 80 B's? Farther up, though, where the road is pretty rutted, Walter swore up and down and kept insisting he wasn't going any further. Eventually we made it up to launch. Walter's eyes got wide indeed as I set my telltales on launch and unfolded my wings.

A little more relaxed about launching at 13,000 feet, I got off in a nice light cycle and circled for a while in front of launch. Then I turned right from launch, toward Cerro Tunari. I hooked a very light thermal which I stayed in for about 30 minutes, but never gained any

altitude in it, although I did drift in front of the range for about seven miles. Eventually I lost the thermal and picked out a nice fallow field. I landed perfectly, uphill, into the wind.

Within five minutes half the village of Tiquipaya showed up to check me out. One of the men in the village was really interested in the glider, so I let him run up and down the field with it, like you do on the first lesson. The other campesinos thought this was pretty hilarious. After I packed up the glider, one of the campesinos brought me a plate of food for lunch. (Though it was the best food I had while I was in Bolivia, my stomach was upset for the next couple of days.)

A couple of boys helped me carry my equipment to the highway. Within a few minutes, a minibus came by. After negotiating a price for the glider and myself (about a dollar), I loaded the glider on the steel racks and off we went. The minibus stopped for nuns, workmen and schoolgirls on its way into Cochabamba. I bet none of them knew that the big tent on the roof was a set of wings.

Walter drove for me twice more, but I never got any better thermals. Pepe asked what I expected flying in June. "Come back in December or January," he said. "It's a lot hotter. Some days you can't get down. The thermals sound like freight trains coming up the hill." Cochabamba's got a Mediterranean climate, so the rainy season's not too bad. I checked my





Author Kurt Aronow sets up on the altiplano above La Paz.

South American Handbook and discovered December, unlike January and February, has very little rain. I'd like to return in December.

Pepe showed me a few other sites around Cochabamba. Halfway down the highway to Sacaba is a ridge-soaring site along the river bottom, that catches the usually-strong catabatic afternoon winds from the Cordillera Tunari. You can fly along the low river cliffs all the way back to Cochabamba. There are many easy landing areas along the way. It's a great place to fly, most of the time, but not in June.

Pepe also mentioned that it was possible to take a road above Tiquipaya to another launch in the National Park. This launch isn't as high, but good landing fields are within easy gliding distance. Cochabamba obviously has good potential. Not only is it possible to get up over Cerro Tunari (in December), but I reckon it should be possible to fly X-C to Santa Cruz in the jungle along a highway. This could be an adventurous flight though, due to the plethora of coca fields between Cochabamba and Santa Cruz.

Pepe says that Cochabamba is the best place to fly in Bolivia. Though he thought that a few pilots might actually live in Oruru, he didn't think it was much of a place to fly. Next I tried flying from the altiplano above La Paz, but had a short, scary flight down to a large field and a waiting taxi. (Some travelers from my hotel helped me carry the glider up to launch.)

The other place I flew was a valley deep in the Cordillera Real that I had gone through the year before on the way to Ancahuma base camp. At one end of this valley lies a village named Cocoyo with 280 inhabitants. Cocoyo is at the end of a bad four-wheel-drive road, six hours from Sorata, the closest town with bus service or a market. The valley has steep walls on three sides reaching up about 1,700 feet. The ridge leading to Pico Norte and Illampu, with 20,000'+ peaks, rises from the south end of the valley. The most important feature of the valley is a large, flat grazing field a few miles long by a quarter mile wide at 11,400 feet. On a sunny day it's not too hard to spot Tres Marias (an eagle-sized black and white soaring bird), hawks,

and a condor or two.

The locals told me about some Argentines who had come to the valley in 1988. They stayed for a day or two, but only got very short flights. Last year, a paraglider pilot flew at Cocoyo, but didn't stay up long either. I decided to fly off the path to Ancohuma base camp, and hired a couple of local men to carry my glider up, while I carried up the bag of gear. Each porter got 15 B's or about four dollars. The path is quite steep, and the porters moved along at a half run. A few South African and European climbers accompanied us to launch, on their way to the base camp.

We were 1,500 feet above the valley floor at the spot from which I had chosen to launch. Unfortunately, the wind started blowing cross after I set up. I managed to get the glider down the slope somewhat so that I could get off more or less into the wind, which was wrapping around a corner. After a good deal of hesitation and trepidation, I pulled off a turbulent launch.

The air in the valley felt somewhat like a washing machine. As I came in to my intended LZ, I noticed about 80 kids running at me, screaming. They had let the school out. Fortunately I was circling over another field than the one I landed in.

I flew three more times in Cocoyo, from two other launches. The porters traded off with their cousins so they could get a chance at the easy money. Each dawn the sky would be completely clear. As the sun rose in the valley a high cloud would cover it. By noon the sky would be completely overcast. One afternoon for fun I did an exciting no-wind launch at 13,500'.

I didn't ever fly up that ridge to Pico Norte and get 2,000 feet over Illampu so that I could fly over the back to Lago Titicaca, 25 miles away. However, when I was in this valley last year, I witnessed a day when this could have been done, judging by the way the birds were soaring. Cocoyo just looks like a natural flying site on the right day.

Other places that might be good to fly in Bolivia are the valleys near Illimani base camp above the village of Uni. Flying here would be similar in character to flying in Cocoyo. Local men would have to carry the glider up. The attraction of flying near Illimani would be the possibility of getting up over this large 21,100' peak (which towers above La Paz). Several large fields below the mountain would make excellent landing areas. The tricky factor is the highly variable winds that blow through.





A campesino gets his first lesson, to the amusement of his friends.

## FLYING SITES IN BOLIVIA

*Parque Tunari above Cochabamba:* Flyable year-round; best in December. Contact Pepe Villaroel, Calle Sucre E-0466, Cochabamba, Bolivia. tel. 26399 or 48860. (Pepe speaks only a little English, but he was very enthusiastic and helpful.)

*Cucoyo Valley:* Probably best in June, July or September. (August is pretty windy.) Talk to Antonio Zonco or any of several men in the Angel Silva family about hiring porters to get up to launch. A walk to a launch 1,500 feet up takes two or three hours if you can keep up with

the porters. You can camp on the edge of the soccer field. Sometimes you can buy food in Cocoyo. Usually you can buy beer. It's best to bring most of what you need. All of the land in the Cucoyo is publicly owned. Cocoyo is probably a good place to paraglide in some conditions.

*Achachicala Valley in La Paz:* Probably best in September or October. La Paz has no hang glider or paraglider pilots. Take a taxi up the autopista toward the airport from the center of town. At a large turn in the highway is an archway on right that says "Urbanizacion Autopista." Go through this suburb and follow

a dirt road (two-wheel drive) up the valley. Don't go down to the river or climb out of the valley. Go through some low, rolling hills. You will come to some large fields at the end of the valley. To your right as you look toward the end of the valley are some grassy spines descending off the altiplano. Carry your glider up one of these spines. About a thousand feet up, you will reach the flat altiplano. Fly off wherever it's convenient. Have the taxi wait for you at the bottom. I paid the taxi \$17 US for the day.

Several factors make Bolivia adventurous and dangerous for hang gliding. Unpredictable gusts are normal. The launches I used were all above 13,000'. The lowest landing area I used was above 9,000'. Aside from Pepe I met no local pilots. I'd sure like to go back to Cochabamba in December. ■

The author may be contacted at: Kurt Aronow, 1118 13th St., #59B, Boulder, CO 80302 (303) 939-9308.—Ed.

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