

This is the first draft of an article by Maurice McBride which appeared in the March 2008 issue of Skywings

Bir, India.

Two November fly-guides to Bir in northern India were organised at the 11th hour by John Sylvester, Eddie Colfox, and Jim Mallinson. From the cold, damp climes of Belfast, myself and Dave Tweedie, elder statesman of the Ulster PG scene, decided to take a peek.

India is currently mooted as a mushrooming economic powerhouse so we were surprised at the rough and ready state of both Delhi airport (ok, mainly the toilets) and its surrounds. Our taxi driver was a local from Bir, dispatched by our guides to spare us from Delhi rip-offs. The interminable journey jangled the senses as we played chicken with unhelmeted families of four crammed onto a single motorbike. Carts, bicycles, goods tricycles, and the occasional cow – all without lights – emerged from the growing darkness. Twelve hours later we staggered, starry eyed, into our Tibetan run lodgings cursing ourselves for not taking the internal flight to nearby Kangra airport.

Bir is a scrappy little one-street town. It is a Tibetan dominated 'colony' - an offshoot of Bir-proper a mile or so away. India has embraced the Tibetans with a generosity of spirit matched only by the cold Chinese authoritarianism which has created these new Indian citizens. A mess of white taxis waits to ferry paraglider pilots to take-off. The butcher's fly-screened hovel lurks roadside like a Quentin Tarantino nightmare. Sleepy dogs litter the garbage-strewn street and occasionally, after 9.00pm when the town goes to sleep, your feet get soaked by diverted irrigation streams crossing the road. There is no McDonalds: Bir is good.

Next morning we wolfed down an impressive breakfast of porridge, honey, fruit, omelette (hold the chillies), toast, and tea at The Colonel's Resort, a sprawling guesthouse beyond the tended tea plantations on the edge of town. John and Eddie introduced us to Naresh, the knowledgeable local guide and driver. Flying permits, bottom landing options, maps, and Indian sim were quickly sorted and we began the 30-minute drive to take-off 1000m above.

At the short take-off (known as Billing) we squinted through the milky haze at Bir. The easily reachable bottom landing field helped dispel new-site nerves. Pull up, run like hell, yeehah!

Conditions were strongly thermic without being unpleasant. Hopping from spur to spur we soon found ourselves 13km from take-off under a low cloud base that obscured nearby peaks. Mistakes were made (write down 100 times: I will not cloud fly in the Himalayas), but we

thermalled well in the easy conditions and managed the tricky top landing when arriving back at take-off. We relaxed outside the cosy stone shop and sipped a glass or three of chai (sweet, milky tea). By 3.30pm the power of the low autumn sun was depleted and for 15 minutes we boated down to the terraced Sunset landing field on the edge of town. A great first day.

Day two brought us all together for the first time. Late arrival Mike, a hardy Scot, was already exhibiting signs of travel malaise. German client Phillipp worked in Mumbai. His skimpy 50hrs airtime was quickly explained by extensive parawaiting experience gained during a previous company posting to the Isle Of Man. He flew as well as any of us over the following 10 days.

Dharamsala town, home to the Dalai Lama (the pg permit specified his residence must not be overflowed), was the 45km goal. The map suggests the flight is an easy ridge run WNW, but the day was weak and an inversion ensured our early 400m height gain was our last. Take-off height (2400m amsl) quickly became our ceiling while the spurs towering above made us hungry for height. The guys implored us to push on, ignoring all but the strongest lift, but progress was still painfully slow. After 3 hours a final, eagle-filled climb provided enough height for the glide towards multi-tiered Dharamsala town. A beat-up cricket ground made a perfect landing zone where we fended off the excitable, but always polite, Indian children.

Our unbelievably high ratio of 3 guides to 4 clients was already proving useful. Mike, having succumbed to Dehli Belly in the air, had flown with dedication above and beyond the call of duty (nuff said) but was forced down short of goal. With a diligence typical of all three guides throughout the trip, Eddie Colfox picked and landed an appropriate area for the pair and effected a prompt retrieve. No pilot was abandoned at any stage, no matter what situation arose. This was no 'transport to take-off and you're on your own' job, this was the real deal.

Successful flying days, like the enormous spurs, just kept coming. We averaged 3hrs airtime daily. Sunny, windless conditions prevailed, with the group only being downed once due to cloud cover. Inversions varied both in altitude and in their affects upon the flying, but pilots penetrating them early in the day had greatest success.

Behind launch the south-looking take-off spine rises a further 550m to its summit, which forms part of the front ridge. This front ridge forms one southern edge of the Himalayas, running WNW past Dharamshala and SSE where it tapers out 40km away near Mandi town. At the latter we landed on a dried riverbed to keen interest from the press and local school children who forced us to sign autographs (I say forced, but Dave and Eddie seemed to warm to the task far too easily if you ask

me). Behind (north of) the front ridge, nearby peaks of 5000m+ are commonplace.

It is time for our first foray over the back. Four of us clear the front ridge and go on a glide. It is new territory for us and we arrive across the valley low. We handle the punchy lift bubbles there clumsily, and for a while we test John's shepherding skills. Once higher, the bubbles form a solid climb and our confidence returns. Vultures and eagles join us briefly in the strong lift, then simply melt away. We lose the lift a few times before picking our way to 4000m. Visibility is markedly better and fingers markedly colder despite twin gloves and heat pads. The balaclava is still pocketed due to the distracting warmth at T.O. The tree line falls away and we spiral up above brown, rocky peaks into a few high wisps of cloud. We glimpse the monster peaks that lie north. It is big territory and easy to forget the time of day if your urge to explore takes over, but we need the sun for the journey home and soon begin the long glide towards a magical, cloud-wisped col in the front ridge. The sun's rays penetrate the cloud's thinnest layers and paint its edges golden. Shadowed slopes take an age to near, gradually filling our vision and getting higher and higher as we approach. Will we make it? No way. But the scale is deceptive and eventually our wings curl around the side of the weak cloud into the welcome sunlight on the southern face of the front ridge. Huge, forested spurs jut towards us, providing enough lift to overfly a minor col and from this unfamiliar approach a few of us are temporarily lost until a familiar red temple comes into view. We follow John's lead, top landing the 'Golf Course', so named because of its smooth contours and closely grazed grass. Everyone is elated; our first venture over the back. Mental notes are taken – more troosers required next time, perhaps a string vest? What are those heat pad thingees? Let me try your heated gloves Jim.

A camp is arranged for the next night at '360', a location on top of the front ridge about 15km SE of T.O. The guides all say 360 is a great spot. They're right! We can see for miles in every direction. A slate ringed circle (the 'Helipad') forms the perfect landing spot. Jim Mallinson and myself arrive from over the back where we have flown to 4660m (15300ft). At that height the hazy air of the inversion is history. A crystal clear view of dozens of snow capped Himalayan peaks etches itself into my mind.

At 360 a strong thermal breeze blows up the slope to remind us of home. With a few open terraces in front, the elevated dirt circle also forms a perfect take-off. A few practice landings, watch the sun go down beside thick slate huts and we're ready for chai, a hot meal, a campfire

and a nip of whisky. Bruce, the local flying guru points out possible routes to Manali, a challenge we have yet to attempt. We see the Milky Way, Mars, some shooting stars and argue over whether that's The Plough at a weird angle or not. Ghost stories are old hat so Eddie tries a few bear stories as a porter lobs flash-bangs in every direction.

Vegetable curry for breakfast is not The Colonel's porters' finest hour; nevertheless camping will seldom feel so decadent again. Hot ginger chai wards off the morning chill and by T.O time the spacious tents, cotton filled blankets, sleeping bags, and all the rest of the paraphernalia of our luxury camp, are being pack-horsed down a trail. A hundred curious villagers gather to see us off, silently lining the Helipad's circumference (no I'm not making these names up, Eddie assures me they are authentic – he has them on the back of his fag packet). Colourfully dressed children hear various beeps and cameras click, then we're off, waving down from the air.

With the group gaining in experience and flying well, there was enthusiasm for an attempt on Manali, 50km over the back. On the penultimate day conditions allowed us to try. An initial 22km dogleg brought the frontrunners to a pivotal 3800m col. A lowering cloudbase began to limit height gains, but with most of the hard work behind us and a successful climb to 4000m in the bag it seemed an easy task to overfly this last significant barrier in our way. Twice we attempted to pass low over the wide, smooth col; twice our glide was trashed by a stiff valley breeze funnelling up the adjacent Kullu valley and, incredibly, we missed the col by a mere 50-100ft. Weakening sunlight prevented a successful return to Bir. The group was split but safely down beside two villages. My group landed in the front ridge's cold shadow beside a village located a mere 4km from Billing (as the crow flies). Despite the language barrier a cheery bus driver explained he wasn't putting his foot on the pedal until the next morning. He happily manoeuvred my mobile phone into the only square centimetre of coverage in the village, recognising our driver's name in the process. Naresh drove the 5 hour retrieve, meanwhile the others really lucked out. They hailed the only vehicle in the next valley at Polang village and using Jim's fluent Hindi easily beat us to the supper table. Another surreal day to bank in the memory.

I may return to distant Bir, but while we experienced quality flying every day, whispers suggested the last few years were not so consistent. 'No one got over the back last year', was a comment that might give one pause for thought. The short autumn days of November allowed flying between 11.30am to 4.00pm but group flying rarely began before noon and only weak lift is available after 3.00pm, so unsurprisingly 45km was the furthest distance flown. Mind you, as an ardent XC hound I can

honestly say that distance is irrelevant there due to the terrain, the remoteness, the scale – its the Himalayas for God's sake! Spring days are longer, so March/April sounded popular among the regulars, though flying conditions may be less predictable.

Our three guides proved themselves to be offering the highest quality of guidance. I cannot imagine a more diligent trio or a more complete service. Clients were given enough freedom to learn from their own mistakes, yet John, Eddie and Jim remained attentive throughout and left nothing to chance. We flew to many locations we were unlikely to have seen without their excellent guidance. The high guide/client ratio enabled two or three groups to progress independently, rather than becoming bogged down by the slowest flyer or route on any particular day.

Although sold as a guided vol-biv trip, few of the clients (all new to the area) really expected or had much enthusiasm for it. Indeed a true vol-biv adventure (rather than an arranged night out in safe territory) is perhaps mutually exclusive to a fly-guide unless every client has mountain experience and proper kit. Customers – even those with the requisite flying skills – cannot realistically expect to be molly-coddled over the Himalayas...but this came darned close! Some organisational fine tuning is necessary following this first attempt by the trio, collectively named Himalayan Free Flight, but anyone booking for next year can be assured of John, Eddie and Jim's utmost attention both in the air and on terra firma. The spectacular Himalayan foothills will kick your senses into overdrive.

Finally, a word to the wise: John Sylvester flew a DHV1-2 Nova Mambo. He hopped about on it like it was a comp wing. If its good enough for John it's good enough for most.