

WINTER IN VALLÉ DE BRAVO

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY ED BENNET

It seems like such a long time since I got on the Internet and found an instructor through the USHGA website, when in reality it was only two and a half frustrating years. Working every other Saturday night, it took 10 weeks to complete my five lessons. My job required that I be in Israel for four months, so I took more lessons there. I then took an internal transfer and lost most of the fall relocating to Massachusetts, where winter shuts down flying rather completely.

The next summer I found myself working five and six days per week, then spending six more weeks in Israel. In all this time I racked up an impressive five hours of airtime in 60 flights at nine different sites. It was a lot of fun to visit new sites and meet other pilots, but I also felt that maybe I was hindering my own progression

through the learning curve.

As my third winter as a pilot approached I decided to take a winter flying vacation with FlyMexico (<http://www.flymex.com/mexico/>) in Valle de Bravo, Mexico. At this point I hadn't found and worked a thermal yet. At a fun fly-in in Dry Canyon I watched 10 or 12 pilots turn in a house thermal and managed to do the same, but that's not the real thing. I figured at the worst I would have a nice, sunny vacation and accept the fact that I just didn't have what it takes, or figure out how to thermal and start skying out. Well, I figured it out. I got it. I got *high* in Valle!

Valle de Bravo is a small town west of Mexico City where time seems to move differently — time governed by what you are doing instead of what you are doing governed by time. If it's time for breakfast, then

eat. Who cares if it's 8:00 AM sharp or 8:30? Is everyone ready? Is the truck loaded? Then it's time to go. "Jeff Time" we called it.

Jeff Hunt maintains two houses in town, without televisions in either or a clock where I stayed. The roosters provided a wakeup call, and if that didn't work the sun would be your next clue. Cecilia cooked a great breakfast every day, and while we ate, Eman and Qique loaded the appropriate gear onto the truck. Jeff provided gliders, radios (if you didn't have one) and a cooler full of beers. Eman and Qique would help you set up your glider, drive to wherever you landed, and if you needed it help you break your glider down. While flying, Jeff would coach you on the radio or provide worthy information in flight if you needed it. Shawn, flying a paraglider, once asked, "I'm at cloud base, now what do I

do?” I guess you had to be there.

I spent a week in Valle, with six days of flying. My first flight was a simple eight-minute sled ride in rather bumpy air compared to what I was used to, but Jeff convinced me that this was smooth air for Valle. I wondered what he considered rough, but I had a good, strong launch and an acceptable landing so I was happy.

We lost Tuesday and Wednesday morning to weather — rain, which is apparently most unusual for Valle. Two more flights went the way of the first, although I started trying the turn-in-lift thing with Jeff’s radio coaching, and my third flight lasted 15 minutes. I never got above launch, but I was starting to go down a little more slowly. I should mention that launch is at 7,650’ MSL, 1,800’ over the LZ which is called the “Piano,” because that’s where you land if you fly like one. To the locals it’s a drag to land at the Piano, but to me landing there on my feet was something to be proud of, so I shrugged off the term.

By Thursday afternoon I was beginning to seriously wonder if I could do the mental mapping and tracking required to core a thermal. Would this turn out to be the end of my flying? I figured if I didn’t get it in the next couple of days, I never would. You see, when it’s on at Valle it’s really *on*. My vario had already produced a continuous beeeep with the *up* bars pegged, so I felt that if I couldn’t learn to thermal here, I never would.

There were light winds at launch and some nice cumulus clouds developing, but the only soaring I had ever done was in ridge lift. The cycles at launch weren’t getting over 15 mph and were dropping to zero. How was I supposed to get up in nothing? As it turned out, rather easily. I chose not to wear my sweater this time because it was hot in the Piano LZ, and if I did manage to get up, being cold at altitude seemed like a small price to pay for getting high.

I launched in an eight-mph breeze and set a line for the saddle and the point where the house thermals reside. I flew there on the slow side and blundered into lift that took its sweet time pegging the vario. Turn! It took me two full circles to stay in the lift for 360 degrees, but from 350 feet below launch I corrected and compensated, got rocked and bounced, and worked my way up to 1,500’ over launch. Too cool!

Either the lift ran out or I lost it, so I opened up my circle a bit, hoping to find something else. I found another ride up



Sarah Bradley, a really sexy redhead, on launch.

rather quickly, and was soon about 1,850’ over launch but starting to lose the thermal. I set a mental goal of 2,000’ over, and applied my brand-new skills to attaining it. I am proud to say that I made it to 2,024’ above launch, then headed out to the LZ.

It took a moment to locate what used to look like a pretty big field, due to how small it looked from up there, but I found it and headed toward it, intending to use big lazy circles to work my way down. However, half way through my first circle I found myself in a big fat piece of 800 fpm up. Turn dude! Sometimes the universe deals you a nice hand, and I cored the thermal right off. From 950’ above launch altitude I rode it to 2,500’ over, and plans of landing went out the window. I headed back out to where I first got high and found a ride that got me everything I had lost along the way.

From here, a tour of El Peñon seemed appropriate, and on the way there I got to 3,094’ above launch. In jeans and a T-shirt, with a knee-hanger harness and flying a Falcon, I was 10,700’ above sea level. I guess adrenaline is a pretty powerful thing, as I really wasn’t cold at all, but this would be the last time I would leave my sweater in the truck.

I flew over the edge of El Peñon but wasn’t finding anything else, so it was back to the Piano to make big lazy circles again and set up a landing. Poor judgment of my altitude, flying more slowly than high-elevation LZ’s require, and not reading the wind

streamers correctly resulted in drifting sideways while I flared into the edge of a corn field — not the best way to end my first thermaling flight, but no complaints. At 38 minutes this was not only my first thermal flight, but my highest and longest. No complaints at all!

I managed to get up on every flight after that. Sometimes it was only a couple of hundred over, but up is up, right? I want clean, strong launches (having blown one disastrously at Morningside Flight Park) and safe landings on my feet (having blown one disastrously at Dry Canyon), and see everything else as a gift. Friday and Saturday gave me focus again, as I started to make bad landings. I landed way short and on my belly twice, and on one landing found myself way high, high enough to clear the corn beyond the Piano (although I did find an open patch and flared into it), then I finally managed enough of a flare that I got my knees under me in the actual LZ.

I decided to add a few more days. Jeff’s next group was full, but Falcons were easily available and a paraglider pilot also wanted to stay longer, so Jeff found us a close place to stay. Five more flying days! I won’t bore you with every up-and-down adventure, but I will say that the flying was great, and one day I got to cloud base. It was sunny when I launched and I got to about 2,650’ over launch, so I put two and two together and pointed the wing toward where it was blue above me. It was very cool to climb be-



Heike, from Texas, landing. The children are running to be the one to get 10 pesos for breaking down the glider.

tween the clouds and see that they were “out” instead of “up.” Unfortunately, my landing after this flight was the first one on which the glider’s nose hit the ground, and although it hit very gently it was sad to blow it like that.

I also made my first X-C flight of four miles. From 2,500’ above launch I basically took a sledder to a big field, but four miles is four miles! To put the icing on the cake, my landing was textbook perfect. I also took a tandem flight in a paraglider with David “Cuervo” Prentiss. We got a couple of hundred over launch, I got to fly it a bit, and almost stalled it. For some reason I assumed that it would be like flying a hang glider — pull in to go fast, but those were brakes I was pulling on. Think! I must tell you, doing wingovers above the Piano LZ was an incredible experience. Never one to limit my own stupidity, when my feet hit the ground they stayed there (which is pretty good for a hang glider pilot) until Dave yelled, “RUN!” Oh yeah! I really enjoyed the paragliding flight, and can see going bi-wingal in the future. Hang gliding and paragliding are as different as apples and oranges, but both are good and I can’t see not enjoying both.

I’ve flown at 10 different sites now, and have repeatedly listened to pilots tell me what I need to do to improve my flying skills. I always listen, think about what I hear, and try to incorporate it into my flying because I really want to fly. Thus, it was the strangest thing in the world for me to

hear Jeff tell pilots during the second week to “follow Ed,” and then hear my fellow pilots compliment me on my flying. I’m not full of myself, and am generally the first one to diss my own abilities, but I spent a lot of time looking down on other pilots’ gliders. Make no mistake here, please. Most of the people I flew with were or are better pilots than I am — flying better gliders, working

so low that I would already have been in the trees, and consistently getting longer flights and going X-C — but it was way cool to look down and see where anyone else was starting to get up from.

Just to make the vacation a totally good time, my last flight was the best. I had gotten to 1,500’, then 2,000’ above takeoff a couple of times, but had always drifted back over launch in order to do it. This time I headed out over the point and caught the mother lode of up. I made 4,000’ over, so I figured that it was time to go. A straight line from launch to the Jovan (a cantina conveniently located next to a landable race track) took me over terrain that theoretically would be generating thermals, and it happened to have a rather large, gray cloud above it, so I flew that way. Since the cloud was somewhat wide and a bit gray (and Jeff had given me a warning over the radio) I felt that the downwind side of it would be my safest bet. That line put me over some big fields surrounded by forests and one nice mountain peak.

I encountered cloud suck at about 3,000’ over launch and found that I could control my altitude with bar position, so I settled for 3,800’ over launch. I figured that if I needed more bar pressure to hold this altitude I would turn right to get out from under the cloud, but I held that altitude

Ed Bennet’s 13 mile XC ground crew.





More children looking for income, and no sense waiting 'til Sean from Canada, finishes landing. El Penon in the background.

until I was in blue sky again. There was nothing else workable along the way, but I was plenty high!

I passed the Jovan, the next straight section of road, some developed areas and some forests, and figured from there I could make it back to the Jovan or forward to what appeared to be the last landable field outside of Valle. Although I really did want to land at the Jovan, I went for the distance. One small part of the back of my mind regrets not pulling out the camera for a shot of the lake, but no complaints. Getting off safely, enjoying the ride and landing on my feet is all I ask.

I reached my field with plenty of altitude but there was nothing to indicate the wind direction. I made a big circle to pinpoint it, decided on my approach, and got verification of the wind from the treetops. I was still fairly high at that point when I found another big pile of up, and thought about turning in it, but I felt that if I didn't hook it I would be too low to align with my chosen field. The lift went all the way to the ground, which really sucked when it came to setting up an approach in a skinny field surrounded by trees. Why does that happen? Why do they put lots of lift right where I want to turn onto final?

I was most concerned with flying it to the ground and keeping it out of the trees, and ended up flaring way too late. Effectively, it amounted to pushing myself back while I landed on the wheels and my belly. Life goes on, eh?

I radioed Jeff that I was on the ground and okay, and thought I would have to break it down myself when five kids came walking over to me. This is the coolest thing about flying Valle, the kids who will pack up a wing for a few pesos. In the Piano LZ some of the bigger kids really know how to pack up any glider that lands there, but that's not always the case if you land out. Of the five kids none was over seven years

old and none spoke any English, but we got it bagged up nicely and out to the road. I gave them five pesos each, and the bigger one who helped me get the gear to the corner store got an extra 10. Four bucks, and well worth it.

The flight lasted about an hour and 15 minutes and I made about nine miles. I don't have a GPS, but I think nine miles is pretty realistic (maybe a tad short).

My vario got weird on me so I can't check the barographs for accurate time stamps, but it looks like I got 8.5 hours in 15 flights. It took me more than two years to get five hours of airtime, but less than two weeks to get eight and a half more. Valle rocks! If you are curious (and haven't figured it out already), I'm definitely sticking with this sport of ours. I realize that what I've done amounts to setting my feet firmly on the beginning of a path, but it's a path that I look forward to following for the rest of my life. In fact, I have 16 weeks off this spring and early summer. I just ordered a new Eagle that should be ready at the start of my sabbatical, so I guess I'll see you at cloud base. Life is good!

The author has some photos of his trip on the Internet at <http://pointlessprocess.com>. Click on photos, then figure it out from there. — Ed.

The author, standing with the Wills Wing Falcon 195 which he flew in Vallé de Bravo.

