

AIR magazine

THE AIR OVER CHILE

PLUS:

- Lumby Air Races
- Learning to teach
- Event listings

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photo by Robert Green

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Cover

Launching, landing and flying at Palo Buque in Chile.

See story, page 16

Photo by Jeff Levack



all about being in the air
by jeff levack



I started paragliding in 2002.

Up until last November, I had logged about 100 flights in three different provinces and four different countries at 16 different sites. My total time in the air was 14 hours.

There are lots of reasons for the low airtime. Partly, it's laziness and a lack of ambition when it comes to flying. I mostly just like to be up in the air, cruising around while looking down at places I haven't seen before. Among the things I don't like are long drives to flying sites, small launches, crowded launches, tricky launches, busy airspace, narrow and short lift bands, really strong thermals, barely reachable LZs, small LZs and pizza with carrots on it.

Except for the pizza, Iquique, Chile, is an ideal place for pilots like me.



In November, I went to Iquique on an eight-day trip organized by Luis Rosenkjer of Atlanta Paragliding and Todd Weigand of Wallowa Paragliding. We flew at least twice a day, every day.

The general topography around Iquique is easy to describe. A two-kilometer-wide strip of sandy wasteland is bracketed by ocean and beach on the west and a 400-metre ridge on the east. Most mornings, we left our hotel in central Iquique around 9:30 a.m. for the 15-minute drive to the Punta Alto Hospicio launch. This expansive and uncomplicated launch is at the top of the ridge overlooking the town.

Sometime before noon, we would start getting enough friendly thermals and ridge lift to get in some nice flights. The

LZ was an uncrowded beach reached via a scenic flight over sand dunes and some built-up parts of the city. If there was enough wind at the beach, there was a small ridge where you could hang out for awhile before landing. While doing this one day, I had the thrill of watching from directly above while seagulls floating just beyond the surf were harassed from below by a seal.

This beach was not the only LZ. More ambitious pilots with enough starting altitude could fly out over the middle of town and land on the beach by our hotel. If neither beach was working out for you, there were infinite bail-out areas in the dunes.

Most afternoons at around 3:30 p.m., we drove about 20 km south of town to

a site called Palo Buque. We parked in the sandy wasteland at the base of the ridge, kited our wings uphill a short ways and launched into ridge lift. Most of the time, you could work this lift, and the abundant and gentle thermals, get high up on the ridge and enjoy long and pleasant flights. If you started to sink out, it was no big deal. Everywhere was an LZ. A little bit of uphill kiting and you were ready to try again. Some pilots used Palo Buque as a starting point for cross-country flights. Most of us preferred to explore up and down and along the ridge for an hour or two or three and then land back at the vans to drink beer and watch the sunset.

On my best day at Palo Buque, my first flight was about 50 minutes. I



chose to end it because I could not find anywhere where I was not going up. These conditions were great for most of the other pilots, but didn't really suit my propensity for aerial lollygagging. Besides, my vario was getting hoarse and needed a break.

I played around on the ground for awhile then launched again. While experimenting with how closely I could hug the ridge, I plowed into the side of the hill. With no big rocks, no trees and nothing but warm, soft sand, this is the place for this kind of practice.

Time aloft: four minutes. I launched one last time just as most other pilots were winding down their two-hour-plus long flights.

Eventually, I was the only one left in the air. The sun was setting over the Pacific. There were no other wings to watch out for. Lift was ample. My vario was making happy sounds. The LZ was always right below me. I cruised around for an hour, landed, and then had a beer. It wasn't the longest flight I've had or the most exciting or adventurous, but it was the best flight of my life.

Iquique was all about being in the air.



It wasn't about getting to the launch, jostling for space on launch or wondering which bush you were going to hit on landing. I enjoyed a total of eight hours in the air, about four years' worth for me. Pilots on the trip who had more normal tolerances for air traffic and for ubiqui-

tous lift got many more hours than that. There was a second part to the trip that I did not go on, which focused on cross-country flying around Iquique. I'm not the guy to tell you about that. I can tell you, if you're having pizza, don't order the vegetarian special.