

November 28th, 2008

Flight Report Below:

It's gonna be long... J

Wednesday morning we finally were able to put together a perfect team for our goals during our trip to Antofagasta with the purpose of doing some research for 2009 and try to fly some k's on our way back. Hernan, would be our driver and Sasha, who had been flying in Antofagasta only one month ago, and is a top Iquique pilot, would help us locate the different flying sites quicker and make our trip more efficient. He had also flown the 1200-Tocopilla part of the ridge already. All day on Friday, we flew 4 different sites and did some more research in town late in the day. At 10 PM we were invited for a barbeque at Mauricio's (one of the local pilots) house. I already knew I was not going to get the 8 hours of sleep I needed before a long flight. The Barbeque was great, but we left pretty late, and I had convinced myself to just fly along for a while and then land early the next day...

We got up at 7, started driving at 8 and got to the (1200) launch site at around 10:30 after having been lost for a short time. Almost zero wind with some very weak cycles was the condition as we arrived, but we were clearly above the inversion. Despite the situation at launch I thought the day was on, and got myself ready to launch. Todd and Sasha were pretty slow at that point and I decided to go on my own as soon as I was ready. My wing is slower and less performing than their hot comp wings anyways, and they should catch up quick. I was feeling pretty good for only 6 hours of sleep, but knew it was not going to last very long. Even if I got a long sled ride to the beach, I would be happy to let them know they needed to wait. Otherwise, I knew they would hurry up and launch.

Got my first thermal right were I expected it to be at the next ridge. I climbed as high as I could, almost launch level, and continued to the next one. 1 spine, 1 canyon, 2 spines, one canyon, 3 spines, 1 canyon and so on...

It took them longer than I thought to catch up, and they also were lower most of the time. It seems to be always the same. When you are relaxed, with low expectations, everything seems to work better. Anyway, after probably an hour, we were all 3 flying together and helping each other to build some altitude before every lee side area. The ridge was getting higher, steeper, rockier and more intimidating. At the same time the conditions were getting bumpier and bumpier. Again I thought I would not last in the air for too long, but Tocopilla was getting closer, and I already knew where at the beach I wanted to land. I decided to take some

more bumps and make it all the way to the city.

It had been almost a constant so far. Every time some of us chose a different route to get to the next point, mine worked better than who ever made a different choice. I like to say: "the old man can still beat the young guys", but most of the times it was probably just luck. I needed that luck though if I didn't want to be left behind, because of the difference on wings performance. As we got to the lift areas I did my best to climb up quick, and sometimes it took some tight turns towards the ridge in very turbulent air and strong lift in order to stay with them. Not something I would do constantly during a normal local flight, but I was getting more and more comfortable on my XC2, and was also still feeling very well physically and mentally. As soon as I was high enough, if I was the highest, I would leave, and most of the times they would follow. After all, I was taking some "good decisions" J.

As we got to Tocopilla we built as much altitude as we could right before the long glide above the city and left. Todd and Sasha took the shortest path and hit some sink. I chose my big wide path over the ocean that would leave me right at the beach (LZ) if I sunk out. Surprisingly, my path worked better than theirs, with very little sink, and as I was half way, Todd was almost getting to the next ridge (and launch site La Cruz) on the opposite side of Tocopilla. He was pretty low, and was starting to get some lift. I decided to continue, and had already visualized some other landing options. As I got there, I was only 150 feet below them. My long path had worked better, and I arrived higher to the ridge. J I had been constantly looking at my Ground LD ratio on my vario, and most of the time flying pretty slow, since I had a nice tail wind. Best glide in these conditions is always with some brake input. Apparently we were the first paraglider pilots to make it across Tocopilla...

Pretty soon, we were ready to leave to the next ridge. I was still feeling pretty good, had already "drained" twice and was ready to go on for a while. It was around 3 PM. While flying along the next couple of points we separated ourselves quite a bit and took some different routes.

I took one tactically risky decision going all the way to the very end of a canyon where I was forced to climb up pretty high in order to make it over the next spine that had a high saddle half way up to the top. If I could not do it, that was going to be the end of my flight again. If I had to fly back to the ocean and around the point, they were just going to be too far ahead, and I did not want to fly alone and have the retrieve car wait for me. BUT IT WORKED, and I was higher and leading again!!

At the last point right before the tunnel spine (another launch site) I got really high and left. It was a pretty long glide with no lift. They followed,

but were quite a bit lower. Todd didn't make it to the next lift band and landed before the tunnel. It took Sasha quite a while to build up some altitude and make it above the tunnel spine. I was probably around 2 k's ahead of him now. Again, my flight was very relaxed, despite the VERY STRONG conditions. I knew he would catch up...

We met again right before Punta Arenas, one of the difficult parts of the ridge, with a long (very long) lee side area. Todd (with Hernan now) drove ahead and radioed that there was no strong wind around the corner, but we needed to build as much altitude as we could in order to make it. We spent some 15 minutes trying to get above the ridge, but it just wasn't possible. At some point I decided to leave with what I had.

There was no long wide over the ocean possible path on this one. I stayed really close to the ridge and went around the corner. With light winds the turbulence couldn't be that bad. It was one of those situations where you are flying almost towards the mountain, but moving sideways and sinking hard waiting for that strong kick on your harness. Todd was encouraging me on the radio. He probably thought I needed some help, and he was right...

I lost probably 2/3 of my altitude in very little time, but finally got that wonderful thermal. It was turbulent but doable. In no time, I was higher than I was able to climb on the windward side of the ridge. I left that one before topping it out, and again sunk all the way down to only 1/3 of my previous level, but now I was already in some decent ridge/thermal lift again. I kept going, again waiting for Sasha, but later found out he had decided to land before Punta Arenas. I was very happy to be flying my EN "C" XC2.

So now I was on my own and desperately needed to make some altitude to make it around the next point. It wasn't working at all, and I was starting to get tired. Half a turn up, half a turn down, upwind up, downwind down, downwind up, upwind down. At some point, they called on the radio and let me know they would drive ahead all the way to Rio Loa and wait there. Now I was forced to make it at least for another 7 to 8 k's. Good move Todd!! J

I tried my best to climb another 300 feet, and left with what I had (less than 1/2 of the ridge), convinced I would have to call them in order to drive back and pick me up. Again, the lee side thermals were working better. I managed to climb all the way to the top of the ridge, and kept on going, now assured I would make it all the way to where they were waiting.

It was around 6:30 PM as I got to Rio Loa, but the conditions were getting better and better. I decided to continue. The last time I had flown that

part of the ridge, some 10 years ago, I remember eating some chocolate while I was on glide to the next lift band area. I had nothing this time. I wasn't supposed to be flying anymore buy now...L

The next 35 or 40 k's were almost just a straight flight, sometimes with big ears and speed bar to escape the clouds, in pretty gentle air. Windward side or lee side, it didn't matter. There was lift everywhere. It was just a race against sunset. Had to smile as I flew past Chipana... My vario was showing low battery and I started lowering the sound of it to finally shut it down all together in order to prevent it from stopping receiving satellite signal and with that stop my track log recording. I landed at Caleta San Marcos when the sun was just at the horizon, but I think I could have gone farther...

I landed next to the road and the jeep was right there. I was a little dizzy, hungry, but extremely happy!!! I went for a pee and as I turned around all my stuff was already inside the car. I guess we were in a hurry to get back to Iquique. I was still floating around..J

Before I lost radio contact with them and knowing they were in the restaurant at Rio Loa, I ordered a sandwich. It tasted great after 9 hours of bouncing around, and I enjoyed it as we were driving back to Iquique.

Thanks Hernan, Todd and Sasha for a wonderful flight that I would have never been able to do without all 3 of you!!

Luis