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Camille Girault

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Aerial Wanderings and Mountain Territorialities: Geographical Reflections on Cross-Country Paragliding

Camille Girault

Translation : Paul Henderson

Introduction

- 1 “- Édith for Pierre. I’m at 1500 m, above St Eynard. Do you think I’m high enough to get to that peak over there? The Rachais, the Néron, whatever it’s called...
- Pierre to Édith. Yeah, no problem, but aim for the south ridge of the Néron – the jagged arête – and immediately try and connect with the slope breeze. It would be a shame to bomb out there, especially in the lee.
- OK, thanks! And then, to get to the Vercors, you have to go over the city above 1200 m, aiming for the power lines?
- Affirmative, otherwise your flight won’t be valid. You can usually start at around 1800, and today’s light bise should help us.”
- 2 This type of radio chatter between paraglider pilots (a fictional but realistic conversation) is likely to be impenetrable for the lay reader. However, it illustrates the type of jargon used in paragliding, a sport that, like many other activities, has its own language, customs and rules. By deciphering these customs and rules from a geographical perspective, it is possible to determine the factors that shape paraglider pilots’ usage of airspace and thereby examine the ways in which they appropriate the areas in which they fly. The above conversation includes the names of peaks around Grenoble, altitudes and advice about which route to follow, which is not a straight line but a complex course with minimum altitudes that must be reached before continuing. In fact, although paragliding temporarily frees pilots from contact with the Earth, they

are always linked to the ground through the topography and the nature of the terrain over which they fly. This conversation also reveals another paradox of paragliding: It is an individual sport in which each pilot has their own wing, but pilots often fly in the company of other pilots, with whom they converse by radio.

- 3 The present paper focuses on cross-country paragliding,¹ a sport in which pilots harness the energy of thermals and valley wind systems in order to travel tens, if not hundreds, of kilometres. Flights may be competitive, recreational, contemplative or adventurous. Laypeople might expect paraglider flights to be direct and without obstacles and therefore see paragliding as a symbol of almost total freedom. In reality, paraglider routes are transient, convoluted, contingent and uncertain, while remaining largely predictable, planned and regulated. Pilots set off with an objective and a route in mind, but are aware that they may have to make unforeseen detours, or even change their objective, during the flight.² Free-flying,³ especially cross-country paragliding, is an activity that seems to overturn people's usual relationships with territories. Social and solitary, recreational and competitive, unpredictable and controlled, it is a mixture of contrasting dimensions and paradoxes. However, cross-country paragliding is undoubtedly not unique in this respect, so the issues addressed are also likely to concern other types of *itinérance* in the mountains.
- 4 The following reflections are based on observations made since I began flying paragliders, in 2013, and my detailed knowledge of the associative and federal structure of free-flying, gained as secretary of a large paragliding club (more than 200 members) since 2016, as a member of the *départemental* free-flying committee, and from helping organise free-flying events. It also draws on the GPS tracks pilots upload onto the French Free-Flying Federation's (FFVL) website, pilots' accounts of their flights (provided spontaneously and informally, not via semi-structured interviews), and published stories and videos of paragliding adventures produced by pilots, all of whom, even the most experienced, are amateurs. Bringing together these different sources, each presented at the appropriate moment in the following discussion, provides a wide and varied perspective on this singular study object. The resulting qualitative analysis is necessarily subjective, personal and non-exhaustive (Guyot, 2008), but it is informed by considerable personal experience. It focuses primarily on the French Alps, in order to build a thesis that can be used to consider cross-country paragliding from the perspective provided by the notion of *itinérance*. Combining these different approaches and different types of material, enabled me to identify the different facets of aerial wandering.
- 5 Section 1 of this paper provides a detailed description of the principles and practices of cross-country paragliding in order to show how they shape the sport's intellectual and experiential dimensions. It analyses the paraglider pilot's unique relationship with airspace, which is shaped by the paradoxes inherent to cross-country flying and the need to accept uncertainty. Indeed, each flight involves following (or attempting to follow) a pre-planned but flexible itinerary through a given area. In cross-country paragliding, pilots have to constantly "readjust [their] position according to the terrain" (*ibid.*) by making unplanned detours, large and small. Section 2 examines the impact of various conflicting aspects of paragliding, a sport that is both contemplative and competitive and that appears to offer the freedom to roam within a seemingly boundless medium while being constrained by invisible factors such as the air conditions and the regulations governing airspace. Finally, Section 3 discusses the

territorialities produced by cross-country paragliding: appropriating the terrestrial space from the air is neither usual nor inconsequential. In this respect, the location and form of cross-country paraglider flights are often dictated by the topography and/or terrestrial features such as the presence of access roads, nature reserves, or urban areas. And each flight continues long after the pilot comes back to Earth, as pilots are always keen to share their experiences and start dreaming of flights to come.

Cross-country paragliding: when *itinérance* takes to the air

- 6 The different types of cross-country flight are dictated primarily by the characteristics of paragliders, which are light, flexible and slow. Beyond this, the cross-country paragliding experience must be understood in terms of a pilot's willingness to take risks and the fact that a long flight never seems truly complete until it has been related to peers back on the ground.

Go up to go forward: the importance of topography and air movement for the cross-country paraglider pilot

- 7 Without retracing the history of paragliding or free-flying (Givois, 2009), or its development since the 1990s, especially in the Alps (Jorand, Suchet 2017 and 2018), I would like to simply describe the characteristics of a paraglider. A relatively recent invention, paragliders have no rigid frame, which makes them easy to transport and much more manoeuvrable than other types of aircraft. This gives pilots a great deal of freedom when it comes to choosing take-off and landing sites, and often enables them to fly very close to the relief. For the layperson, and for many paraglider pilots, a paraglider is no more than a clever arrangement of fabric and string, below which the pilot is suspended to form a pendular system (Photograph 1).
- 8 Strictly speaking, a paraglider does not fly, it glides (Paillet, Pignier, 2011), and the only energy pilots of these non-motorised objects can call upon comes from their height above the ground. Therefore, in order to stay in the air and glide for longer than the few minutes it would take, in still air, to descend the few hundred, or few thousand, metres, back to the ground, pilots use thermals (columns of warmer air that rise within a cooler air mass) or dynamic lift (ascending air currents created when breezes are forced upwards by the relief) to gain height. To do so, pilots have to understand how these air systems form and behave, and how to use them to gain height. Without going into details,⁴ it is enough to know that rising air masses are the result of both large-scale and small-scale variations in topography and weather conditions. In theory, thermals tend to develop above east-facing slopes in the morning, above south-facing slopes in the middle of the day, and above west-facing slopes in the afternoon. Rising air masses also form along topographical barriers that block the horizontal flow of air masses. Figure 1 illustrates these basic principles, which are the main phenomena every paraglider pilot wishing to fly cross-country must understand.

Figure 1: Diagram showing where thermals and dynamic lift form and how paraglider pilots use them.

Source: FFVL

Cross-country flying: a physically and intellectually committing experience

- 9 Paragliding may involve less risk than “extreme” sports such as base-jumping, mountaineering, free-diving and caving (Soulé, Corneloup, 2007), but it is still a risky sport, and much more committing than many other outdoor activities, such as hiking and cycling. Taking off, especially for a cross-country flight, means flying for an unknown period of time and heading towards horizons that are, to a certain extent, unknown (Photograph 1). Therefore, before undertaking a flight, pilots must accept that there are parameters they cannot, or can only partly, control, such as air conditions, the altitudes they will be able to reach at different points along the route, and the ability to reach possible landing places. Although pilots try to reduce these uncertainties by carefully planning their flights, taking into account the weather forecast, studying maps, and incorporating their knowledge of the area, it is impossible to predict every parameter, especially the air conditions that will be encountered, so the resulting plan remains hypothetical. Consequently, pilots must be able to react appropriately to unforeseen circumstances in order to remain in control of their wing, manage their flight and land safely. Otherwise, they have to accept that they may get out of their depth, both psychologically and technically.
- 10 If a cross-country flight is considered to be any flight in which the pilot moves away from the landing area they could have reached by gravity from the take-off (Musto, 2014), then commitment is an intrinsic part of long-distance flying. Indeed, “commitment requires fully accepting the situation in play and taking responsibility for one’s actions” (Routier, Soulé, 2012). Thus, cross-country flying involves committing oneself totally to the surrounding airspace, so the spatial journey is preceded by an intellectual and sensory journey (see Figure 6 below). A cross-country flight literally takes the mind and body elsewhere. Indeed, cross-country paragliding is more than a simple recreational activity, it is an experience through which pilots give meaning to their explorations. It is not simply a way of moving from one place to another, as in a plane journey, but a contemporary and multi-dimensional (tangible and intangible, rational and emotional) form of recreational *itinérance* (Corneloup,

Bourdeau 2008) that undeniably has an existential aspect. But even though paragliding is a form of “free flying”, pilots are not free to go wherever they wish; their routes are constrained by topographical barriers, air conditions, competition rules and airspace regulations. As a result, every flight involves a series of detours.

Photograph 1: Setting-off for a long-distance flight means committing oneself to an uncertain aerial journey.

Dent des Portes (Bauges), July 2017.

Photo by C. Girault

- 11 The amount of risk involved in cross-country paragliding varies greatly. As in other activities (Galan, 2019), paragliding requires learning specific skills and managing the sport's inherent risks, and the way people do this depends on the complex factors that govern risk taking (Routier, Soulé, 2010). In fact, pilots can choose how committing a flight will be via the decisions they make (e.g., choice of equipment, whether to fly in potentially turbulent conditions, strategies for flying close to relief, whether to fly over areas where it would be difficult to land, etc.). This commitment directly influences how free each paraglider pilot feels and the way they appropriate the territories over which they fly (see Sections 2 and 3).
- 12 Moreover, a flight is not finished when the pilot lands, safe and sound, after covering several dozen kilometres; it is successful only when they have adequately assimilated the risks they took along the route. Sharing one's experience after landing is an initial way of validating the decisions one made.

Between air and Earth: the existential dimensions of cross-country paragliding

- 13 Paraglider pilots can validate a cross-country flight on at least two levels: personally and among their peers. Personal validation occurs when a flight compares favourably with the pre-flight plan: was it possible to follow the projected route, was the route extended, shortened or modified, were air conditions as expected, were the risks assessed accurately and responded to appropriately, etc. Asking these questions is not (only) an exercise in introspection, it also allows pilots to learn from their experiences. The spatial (detours from the planned route), sensory (was the flight more or less

committing than expected) and intellectual (decision to extend or shorten the flight) aspects of each flight give cross-country paragliding an initial existential dimension.

- 14 Flights can also be validated by discussing them with other pilots. Conversations between pilots at the end of a day's flying are a way for pilots to exteriorise and assess their choices, their feelings, their strategies, their routes. Although pilots tend to be focused and taciturn before take-off, they are much more voluble after they land. The phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), defined as a "philosophy of existence, that of experience as well as comparing one's experiences with those of others" (Sanguin, 1981), also throws light onto how each flight, no matter how individual it is, is first-and-foremost a personal experience that is magnified and enhanced by discussing it with peers. In short, peer-evaluation is not restricted to academia; paraglider pilots, like other sportspeople, use a similar approach to compare and validate their performances (Cyrulnik, Bouhours, 2019).
- 15 After evoking the principles of cross-country paragliding and how these principles impact the flights pilots undertake, the following section looks at the paradoxical relationship between paragliding and freedom, a notion that might appear to be inherent to the sport.

A constructed and supposed freedom to roam: the flock instinct, airspace regulations and competition rules

- 16 The meandering nature of cross-country paraglider flights is the result both of individual factors (e.g., ability to assess air conditions, technical and mental ability to fly in turbulent conditions, ability to make rational vs. impulsive decisions) and (primarily?) of group effects. Flying routes are also impacted by the regulations governing the use of airspace and the rules of paragliding competitions.

Solo or as a group: cross-country paragliding as a series of spatial detours

- 17 As noted above, cross-country paragliding relies on a pilot's ability to make use of ascending air masses. Because air masses are invisible and impalpable, pilots infer their behaviour by "reading" the topography, the shape of clouds and the layout of valleys, and combining this information with wind speed and direction and the position of the sun. To the casual observer, paraglider pilots appear to be alone in the sky and free to fly where they would like, taking into account only the aerology, but without being constrained by waymarked itineraries or terrestrial infrastructure (Photograph 2).

Photograph 2: Read the terrain, feel the sky but, above all, follow everyone else.

The Chartreuse syncline from Col de Bellefont to Mont Granier, a free-flying "motorway". March 2017
Photo by C. Girault

- 18 Nevertheless, paraglider pilots often play "follow-my-leader." The resulting individual-community dialectic is particularly prevalent in cross-country paragliding. As in mountaineering (Girault, Laslaz, 2019), the solitude of the cross-country pilot is relative, as pilots are well aware of the adage "if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." Consequently, even if cross-country pilots generally set off on their own, they will often complete at least parts of their flights in the company of other pilots, encountered along the route, and truly solitary, adventurous flights are relatively rare. The reason for this is simple: other paragliders are a very good indicator of surrounding air conditions. (The pilot in Photograph 2 is being followed by the pilot who took the photograph.) Moreover, many cross-country paraglider pilots are reassured by the presence of other pilots. Detours to join other wings seen in the distance may be, first and foremost, psychological – the presence of other pilots can be extremely reassuring.
- 19 Although every cross-country paraglider flight is unique, many flights follow similar tracks. Figure 2a, for example, shows a track for a circuit along the eastern edge of the Chartreuse Mountains that is very popular with pilots flying from St-Hilaire-du-Touvet, near Grenoble. More atypical routes tend to be the preserve of experienced pilots, who have the skills and imagination to devise original itineraries, and are usually done when flying conditions are particularly good. Hence, the differences between most flights are generally to be found in the subtle spatial, temporal, experiential and intellectual detours they involve.

Figure 2a: GPS track of a cross-country flight (in red) from St Hilaire-du-Touvet, out-and-back along the cliffs on the eastern edge of the Chartreuse Mountains, 8th September 2018.

The blue line shows the distance used for scoring under federation rules (see below).

Source: <https://parapente.ffvl.fr/cfd/liste/vol/20251984>

Figure 2b: Close up of the Combe de Manival - Dent de Crolles section of the track shown in Figure 2a

Source: *ibid.*

- 20 Despite appearances, a paraglider flight is rarely direct and must incorporate the notion of detours: completing a projected flight generally involves making detours and constantly adjusting one's flying route in order to make best use of the air conditions. Detours may be predictable (e.g., due to the presence of topographical features) or less

predictable (e.g., dictated by the positions of thermals and clouds) (Photograph 2). But these factors are not the only ones to be taken into account; detours may also be the result of a pilot's personal choices or be imposed by airspace restrictions (Figure 2b and below). In short, even in paragliding, the most effective strategy for completing a route is rarely to follow a straight line. Being able to adapt to spatial constraints (topography, regulations), to adjust one's route to the air conditions and to interpret what other pilots are doing are fundamental qualities for a paraglider pilot. Doing so often leads to detours from the route originally planned – if it was planned. Although these factors may appear to limit the pilot's freedom, it could also be argued that, as in political philosophy, freedom can be defined in terms of the constraints an individual voluntarily accepts: Mastering these factors and rules increases the pleasure derived from free-flying and aerial *itinérances*.

The paradoxes of free-flying: a freedom constrained by airspace regulations

- 21 Airspace, like land space and maritime space, has a multitude of users who appropriate the medium in various ways, as has been shown by numerous studies in social and political geography (Sanguin, 1977; Marc, 2014). Even though it is impossible to physically mark the regulatory demarcation lines within a volume of airspace, there are strict and extremely precise rules on who can use each area of the sky.⁵ Paraglider pilots are widely considered to be some of the least aware and least disciplined users of airspace.⁶ Indeed, most pilots just fly where they see other paragliders and follow the lead set by other pilots, rather than trying to learn and follow the rules applying to a particular area. Nevertheless, cross-country pilots are often more knowledgeable than other paraglider pilots, as flights that infringe airspace regulations are invalid from a competition perspective (see below). Paragliding, like most other sports, is following the global trend towards the technologization of society (Bourdeau *et al.*, 2011), so pilots now have accurate instruments that show their position with respect to no-flying areas (Figures 2b and 3, Photograph 3). This technology is making it easier to visualise regulated areas of the sky that would otherwise be invisible to the naked eye.

Figure 3: Diagram showing the temporary restricted flying area over Grenoble, introduced because of industrial activities, especially the presence of the synchrotron

Source: <http://www.lauravl.fr/zit-de-grenoble-2/>

Photograph 3: Paraglider instrument panel or airline cockpit?

Source: <https://paragliding.rocktheoutdoor.com/category/instruments/>

- 22 Airspace regulations have a direct impact on cross-country paragliding, for example, by designating temporary or permanent restricted flying areas (Figure 3) or by setting minimum or maximum flying altitudes. Thus, even in the sky, the freedom to roam is illusory. In fact, the invisible but precisely-defined spatial demarcation of airspace is not the only factor limiting this freedom; it is also circumscribed by the rules and regulations governing cross-country paragliding competitions.

The influence of competition rules on cross-country paragliding

- 23 Cross-country paraglider flights are greatly influenced by the competition rules set by the French Free-Flying Federation (FFVL), which runs a Federal Long-Distance Cup (CFD) every year. The CFD is open to all affiliated pilots, who can submit any flight longer than 15 kilometres by entering it on the competition's website, which is updated every day in the form of a league table. As well as providing pilots with a way to validate their performances in the eyes of the community,⁷ the CFD is a very useful tool for planning flights, as it allows pilots to study the GPS tracks entered by other pilots.
- 24 The CFD's rules have a direct effect on pilots' flying strategies and restrict pilots' freedom to fly where they want, and as only three types of flight are eligible for the competition—open distance, flat triangle and FAI triangle (Figure 4). Each type of flight represents a different approach to long-distance paragliding and is assigned a coefficient based on the difficulty of completing that type of route. Open distance flights involve flying as far as you can from your starting point, with no requirement to return to the point of departure; flat triangles are, by definition, out-and-back flights; and FAI triangles are out-and-back flights in which the return leg must be different from the outward leg. Because this final type of flight is a loop, it is much more of a race against the sun in order to make the best use of thermals. Pilots wishing to complete the best flight from a competition point of view use a variety of online tools to plan their flights and choose the optimum turning points.⁸

Figure 4: The types of cross-country flight recognised by the French Free-Flying Federation

Source: https://parapente.ffvl.fr/sites/parapente.ffvl.fr/files/CFD_reglement_2019_2020.pdf

- 25 Cross-country paragliding competitions not only influence the types of flights pilots do, they also call into question the sport's recreational dimension. Indeed, some pilots may consider a flight disappointing if they log onto the CFD website the next evening and see that it was shorter than other people's flights. Other pilots pointedly avoid any form of organised competition in favour of an approach to cross-country flying that is more aesthetic than performance-oriented. For example, the tour of a mountain range such as the Chartreuse or the Dévoluy is worth few CFD points and therefore has little competitive value (even when a competition is supposed to be purely "friendly"), but such flights are aesthetically and intellectually rewarding experiences.

- 26 In addition, most cross-country flights start from recognised take-offs that have great cultural and symbolical importance to the paragliding community because of the flying potential they provide. Some of these take-offs are popular with all pilots, not just those who are looking to fly long distances, whereas others (often accessible by road) are particularly prized by cross-country specialists as strategic start points for flights capable of achieving high scores under the rules described above. Serpaton (Gresse-en-Vercors, Isère), Saint Hilaire-du-Touvet (Isère), Meruz (Ugine, Savoie) and Saint André-les-Alpes (Alpes-de-Haute-Provence) are particularly well-known in this respect and have a special place in the imaginations of cross-country pilots. Their location (distance from a pilot's home) and their characteristics (parking, services, quality of the take-off) shape the way in which pilots appropriate these territories. Although these take-off sites offer vast potential for cross-country flights, they concentrate pilots in certain areas, thereby circumscribing, to a certain extent, their freedom to roam. Moreover, this interaction between the individual and group aspects of paragliding feeds into the process of territorialisation, both of the sport and by the sport.

The experiential appropriation of terrestrial spaces from the air: flight tracks and accounts of cross-country flights

- 27 Paraglider pilots, especially when flying cross-country in the mountains, do not merely fly over a territory, they appropriate it both collectively and individually. If one accepts the definition of a territory as “a reordering of space” or “the space informed by the semiosphere” (Raffestin, 1986), then free-flying and cross-country flights will, logically, produce their own territorialities.

A specific territorialisation of the Alps viewed from the sky

- 28 Both amateur and professional sportspeople in many sports now use digital tools to track their outings. This is the case for most (but not all) paraglider pilots (see below). The thousands of GPS tracks recorded by paraglider pilots in the Alps can be combined to produce heat maps (Mericskay, 2016) that show the most popular areas for cross-country paragliding. In the Alps, these areas include the Upper Rhone Valley in Switzerland, the Piedmont in Italy and the French Prealps (Figure 5). Although heat maps are two-dimensional and therefore do not show flying altitudes (a fundamental aspect of airspace regulations), they outline areas in which flying is not possible due to the presence of terrestrial infrastructures, such as major urban centres and large airports, or protected areas, such as national parks and nature reserves. An absence of logged flights may also indicate zones that are unfavourable for free-flying because they are too committing (high mountains, glaciers, large forests, very narrow valleys) or because they lack roads for getting to take-off sites or back to one's vehicle after an unplanned landing.

Figure 5: Heat map of paraglider flights within the Alps. The redder the track, the greater the number of flights.

The most popular flying routes can be seen clearly.

Source: <https://thermal.kk7.ch/>

- 29 As the above heat map of the Alps shows (Figure 5), airspace, particularly in the mountains, is used extensively by non-motorised recreational aircraft such as paragliders. If territorialisation is a way of using and considering a place, notably via the process of symbolic appropriation (Vanier, 2009), then cross-country paragliding creates its own territorialisation of the areas pilots fly over. On another, much smaller scale, surface features such as geometric forms (Figure 6) and prominent buildings or roads⁹ provide landmarks for negotiating the most complex sections of cross-country flights. More concretely, transitions between peaks or between mountain ranges generally involve aiming for precise landmarks that, therefore, gain particular significance.

Figure 6: Examining cross-country paraglider flights at different scales: follow the equals sign from Chignin (Savoie) to cross the valley from the Chartreuse to the Bauges.

This sequence of heat map, topographic map and aerial photograph shows how pilots use landmarks to navigate from one mountain range to another.

- 30 As in the planning of a cross-country flight and its validation, which occurs both before and after the flight itself (see above), the production of territorialities – that is, the development of affective attachments to an area (Vanier, *op. cit.*) – is based as much on sensorially appropriating the area flown over as on evaluating and accepting flying conditions. Furthermore, pilots' territorialities are also fed by published accounts of cross-country flights, whether written or filmed.

Published accounts of cross-country paraglider flights: another way of recounting and appropriating mountain areas

- 31 For a small number of pilots, cross-country paragliding involves much longer flights, some of which may take several days and combine flying and hiking, usually to get to a good place from which to take off. This type of flying can be highly competitive¹⁰ or, conversely, uniquely contemplative. In both cases, some pilots share their adventures with the paragliding community through articles, books and films.¹¹ Travel and mountaineering literature and films create a geo-poetry of space (Bouvet, Lévy, 2018) and forge collective representations of the mountains, mountain sports and mountaineers (Bozonnet 1992; Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2010). This is also the case for paragliding. Accounts of paragliding adventures, which are too numerous to cite in full, often portray journeys lasting several days or even several weeks. They have helped establish a new form of paragliding, called “*vol biv*”, which combines paragliding with hiking and bivouacking. For one proponent of this type of paragliding adventure, *vol biv* is “two words to say freedom, a radical immersion in nature, in close contact with the elements. The rules of the game are simple: a 100% self-contained paragliding journey. In the evening, you land at altitude; in the morning you take off for a new adventure. In your bags, everything you need for a long journey” (Nodet, 2013). Without going into the content of these narrative accounts in detail, suffice it to say that they have contributed greatly to generating an image of paragliding that is intimately linked to

the notions of exploration, roaming and freedom. Thus, in contrast to the CFD, which is associated with weak territorialities centred mostly round competitive values, *vol biv* generates stronger territorialities based on liberty and the existential dimension of such journeys. Long journeys are more unpredictable but more intense, place greater value on encounters with local people and are much more committing, both physically and mentally. At the beginning of one of his *vol biv* adventures in the Himalayas, Jean-Yves Fredriksen confides “I’m getting close to the take-off point I have been dreaming about for six months, but I don’t feel the same excitement as during my previous *vol-biv* crossings of the Himalayas. I feel terribly alone and very small” (Fredriksen, 2018). Such accounts appear to magnify the paradox of freedom: the space in which to roam is much wider, but the constraints pilots have to cope with are greater. By relating and sharing their experiences, these pilots produce territorialities and, in return, influence the practice and imagination of other paraglider pilots.

Conclusion

- 32 Paragliding is a recreational activity that is intimately associated with the idea of being as “free as a bird.” This is especially the case for cross-country paragliding, which harnesses the energy of ascending air currents and, most importantly, makes use of variations in the air mass to glide for long distances. Hence, it symbolises freedom from the literal and figurative constraints on Earth-bound movement. In reality, cross-country flights are shaped by topography and are highly regulated, codified and standardised. Analysing cross-country paragliding in the light of the notions of *itinérance*, commitment, detours and territorialisation provides a better understanding of the specificities of this outdoor sport and highlights the paradoxes underlying the paraglider pilot’s apparent freedom to roam. Although the competition rules and airspace regulations that impact paragliding are invisible, they anchor the sport within a larger social and territorial context. In addition, each pilot’s complex relationships with other pilots, on the ground and in the air, give cross-country paragliding a very strong social and cultural dimension. Finally, pilots’ connections with the airspace they fly in and the land they fly over are permanent. Pilots produce hybrid *itinérances* and specific territorialities by drawing inspiration from a powerful image of freedom that brings together variable factors such as air conditions, individual strategies, community dimensions, regulatory frameworks and a love of the mountains viewed from the air.

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NOTES

1. Often abbreviated to XC paragliding.
2. French has a term for this type of journey: *itinérance*, which is a combination of the word for “route” – *itinéraire* – and the word for “wandering” – *errance*). Kirschner (2020) defined *itinérance* as “a mobile spatial practice that involves a journey along a route chosen in advance but which may be modified in response to unforeseen events and desires”
3. Free-flying describes all forms of flying using ultralight and unpowered aircraft. “The term free-flying describes forms of flying that are not subject to the rules that apply to powered aircraft. This is the case for paragliding, for which there is no form of registration, no mandatory safety inspections and no pilot diploma. Nevertheless, paragliding is subject to general flying rules, especially those concerning airspace, visual flight and flying heights. [...] You lay out the wing, you take off when you want, and you travel, without paying any tolls, from one massif to another, from one town to a more distant place. Still free, the beauty of the landscape seen from the air and the emotions aroused by nature that animates the air and that allows our peregrinations. Don't forget to thank the people below for leaving us this freedom” (Paillet, Pignier, 2011, p. 123).
4. For those who would like to know more, see, for example, Ménégoz, Goueslain, 2013; Thillet, Schueller, 2009.
5. See France's Civil Aviation Code: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCode.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006074234> and the map published by the International Civil Aviation Organization: <https://www.geoportail.gouv.fr/donnees/carte-oaci-vfr>
6. See, for example: https://federation.ffvl.fr/sites/ffvl.fr/files/L_Espace_Aerien_pour_les_Nouilles.pdf
7. The XContest championship is a similar international competition (<https://www.xcontest.org/world/en/>).

8. Tools such as XCPlanner (<https://xcplanner.appspot.com/?l=fr>) can be used to plan a route and determine whether or not it is an FAI triangle.
 9. Power lines are both landmarks and dangers that pilots must identify, especially during cross-country flights.
 10. The best-known and most difficult of these competitions is undoubtedly the *XAlps*, a race across the Alps sponsored by a well-known energy drink brand.
 11. See, for example, example: Boisselier A., 2018, *J'irai atterrir chez vous* (URL for the film: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/jiraiatterrirchezvous>) ;
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ABSTRACTS

The present paper focuses on cross-country paragliding, a form of “aerial wandering” whose goal is to use the lift provided by rising air currents to accomplish long circuits or journeys. A detailed description of the sport is followed by an analysis of pilots’ singular relationship with airspace, which results from the paradoxes of cross-country paragliding and the fact that every flight inevitably includes detours: A straight line is never the most efficient or effective route, even in the air. Moreover, the conflict between the sport’s recreational and contemplative dimensions and its performance and competitive dimensions, combined with the intangible factors (air conditions, rules governing airspace) that constrain pilots’ liberty of movement, mean that paragliding is not quite as synonymous with freedom as one might think. Finally, the way in which pilots appropriate the areas over which they fly results in cross-country paragliding producing its own territorialities. These territorialities can be studied by analysing written and filmed accounts of long-distance flights, which express the experiential aspects of free-flying and of viewing the Earth from the sky.

INDEX

Keywords: aerial wanderings, free flying, paragliding, territoriality, mountains

AUTHORS

CAMILLE GIRAULT

Laboratoire EDYTEM - UMR 5204 (CNRS – Université Savoie Mont Blanc), camille.girault@univ-smb.fr