



Pilots soar hundreds of feet above the ground, aided by wind currents and thermal pockets.

Flying High in Puntarenas


ARTICLE BY PETER MAJERLE

PHOTOS BY ANDRÉS MADRIGAL

People regularly throw themselves from the top of a cliff jutting over 400 feet above the ocean's foamy surface, protected only by their "wings." This is not a native self-sacrifice rite; nor is this the last stop for jilted lovers. In Puntarenas, land-bound man can do the unthinkable: he can fly.

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Right: Pilots catch air currents in their "wings," run towards the cliff, and fly. Below: The author gets strapped in by instructor Rubén Montoya. Bottom: A thirteen-year-old pilot makes her first successful flight.



Montoya is the founder and instructor of Paraflyt Costa Rica, the pioneering school of paragliding in Costa Rica. Trained in his native Colombia thirteen years ago, Montoya has amassed an incredible amount of experience and enough degrees and certifications to fill a wall. "I wanted to fly ever since I was a kid," Montoya remembers nostalgically. "And now I do it every day."

Getting a human to fly isn't as hard as one might think. With the proper equipment and training, getting a real birds-eye view of Costa Rica is unbelievably easy. "We can let anyone up if they're accompanied by an experienced pilot in a tandem situation, or solo with proper certification," Montoya said.

Certification is required to fly. Although these folks aren't maneuvering a 747, don't scoff. They are pilots. "We're another object in the air," said Fridrichs Martinez, another seasoned pilot among the dozen or so milling around the takeoff site. "We're subject to the same stringent regulations as everyone else, and we have to comply. We carry radios, GPS. We help each other out."

On top of the hill, overlooking the verdant Gulf of Nicoya, the pilots gathered under this sunny afternoon in camaraderie of a true community. The pilots meeting today were a diverse group: a neurosurgeon, an economist, a doctor, an entrepreneur, a local high school student and a 13-year-old girl. This disparate group had one thing in common: nobody seemed the slightest bit stressed. Calm, vibrant, happy, and eager to fly. "You won't find a more relaxed group than us," Montoya smiled. "When you do this, you tend to forget about the little bothers."

All pilots highly stress safety in flying. Equipment is inspected before every flight, and there is a strict list of regulations that each pilot must follow, ranging from takeoff instructions to how to signal turns in the air.

To prepare for flight, the pilots take out their "wings," which are a durable, lightweight marine porche nylon connected to a padded body harness with Kevlar cords. The pilot places the wings under the sun to ensure dryness. Then the pilot checks the cords, making sure that they all are in good shape and that none are twisted or tangled.

Once the equipment is ready, the climatic conditions are right, and the takeoff is clear, the pilot jerks the wings into the air, allowing them to fill. She'll walk towards the takeoff point, gaining speed, jump, and let the current carry her high above the surroundings, away from the rest of the world. She'll fly.





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The Mechanics

The takeoff at Nemaclys, the restaurant in Puntarenas that serves as the launch side, operates “dynamic flights.” Straight ocean breezes blow in from the open end of the Gulf of Nicoya, hitting the cliff in front of the restaurant. The wind rises along the cliff and acts much like fast-moving water striking a boulder: it rises up to overcome the obstacle, gaining force in the act. Pilots take advantage of this upward-moving current of air, allowing it to take them up in the air. From that point onward, the pilots read air currents and navigate long distances without so much a meter drop in altitude.

Thermal Pockets

Pilots look for rooftops, soccer fields, and barren stretches of land. “These places give off more heat than the ocean or forest. When you look up and see a flock of birds circling high in the air, they’ve found a thermal pocket. It’s an area of warm air that rises more rapidly than the cooler air around it. You can find that and cruise, or use it to gain elevation,” Montoya said.

Tandem Flying: Getting a Feel

Tandem flying is a great way to get a feel for solo paragliding. No experience is necessary. An experienced, certified pilot connects your harness to his and assists in getting up in the air. Sharing airspace with the birds, the pilot will allow the tandem rider a chance to steer the aircraft and get a feel for what it’s like to be a pilot.

The Tandem Tour is a half-hour of soaring above Costa Rica’s verdant Pacific coast and the picturesque Gulf of Nicoya. Participants don’t need any previous experience flying. “A profes-

sional pilot, certified with the FAI (International Aeronautical Federation) will take you on this magical experience with equipment specially designed to fly with two people,” states Montoya’s website. “We’ve had all kinds of people up here,” Montoya said. “We’ve flown kids as young as two [accompanied by a parent] and up to 101 years, and everyone’s loved it.”

Ruben invited me to fly with him. The takeoff was exciting: one second we stood on the ground, the forest and us staring at each other, eye level. Montoya pointed to a flock of buzzards circling high above the ground. “We’ll be there soon,” he said, squinting his tanned face towards the emerging sun. “The wind is perfect. Hang on.” And that was it. With the flick of a wrist Montoya had his wings in the air, and we were walking towards a cliff. “Jump, and then sit back!” was his only command, and within seconds the rising air currents lifted us high over the earth.

We were flying. I was exhaled. “This is like man’s dream!” I exclaimed. “Man’s dream made reality,” Montoya coolly responded. He was right.

As the initial adrenaline rush calmed, I noticed something strange. The sound. Other than an occasional wind gust, it was completely silent. Just gliding, peacefully, gracefully. I looked towards the port at Caldera, noticing all the huge freighters loading and unloading cargo. I thought about how hard all those people were working, and here I was effortlessly gliding through the air, flying high in Puntarenas.

The half-hour tandem tour costs \$50 and is well worth the price, in the opinion of this author. Classes and certification are also offered. For more information call (506) 634-4503, e-mail parapentecostarica@yahoo.com or visit their website at www.parafightcostarica.com