

## Empire's Own Takes to the Skies...V-e-r-y S-l-o-w-l-y

by Rich Stuart (COE)



If you were to ask any pilot what they like most about recreational flying the most likely answers will be “so I can feel like a bird in the sky” and “I like the feeling of freedom.” But, as all pilots can attest, the cost of flying is prohibitively expensive. When I was a CFII (Certified Flight Instructor—Instrument rated) years ago, I’d tell my student pilots that flying is as addictive as heroin, but much more expensive...and no, that’s not the voice of experience talking! A

fixed-wing, general aviation-type aircraft has its limitations: You need to take off from a designated runway or large field and once you’ve arrived at your destination your mode of travel is limited to walking, riding folding bicycles that you may have packed with you in the plane, or driving off in a waiting car. What if you could take your aircraft with you in your car and fly it nearly whenever and wherever you wanted all year around? Not only that, it wouldn’t cost many thousands of dollars to own and fly and it would be very easy to maintain. Now that’s the ticket! A few months ago, I decided to take my first vacation in 15 years. Not having flown for a nearly as long, I wanted to make it a flight-related one since I really, really, missed flying. It so happened that while in a nearby bookstore I spied a copy of *Ultraflight* magazine on a shelf and gave it a look-see; an ad caught my eye: “Learn to fly a powered paraglider (a “PPG”) in less than a week!” My wife, Grace, had never heard of a PPG before so I showed her a picture of one in the magazine and her eyes grew as big as teacups.



Envision sitting in a legless lawn chair, an engine and propeller strapped to your back, and a flexible, Frito chip-shaped parachute attached to your chair with strings that look like dental floss. I thought it’d be a blast so I searched the Internet for a reputable, United States Powered Paraglider Association approved, well-respected flight school where the winds would be light and steady and the weather cooperative enough for flying a PPG in the Spring. Because a PPG is an ultra-low speed aircraft (max. speed about 25 mph) it’s very sensitive to wind speed and thermals, much like a dandelion seed is when it takes to the air. I ended up picking South Florida Powered Paragliding ([www.fly2now.com](http://www.fly2now.com)) in Pompano Beach, Florida, and reserved my training time for the first few weeks of May. The day after I arrived in Florida I began PPG training with my instructors, Carlos Segnini and Oscar Aranguren—both are from Venezuela and have been training students and flying in PPGs for many years. The first week was spent on the beach learning how to “kite” and ground-handle the wing since taking-off and landing a PPG involves the Fred Flintstone approach to landing gear, i.e., running like crazy to attain the minimum 6 mph of forward speed needed to inflate the wing for flight, and for making controlled landings without “face-planting.” It was a trial by fire: I wasn’t used to 90°+ heat and 90%+ humidity...especially since I had just come from Idaho where it was still snowing.



Also, I never flew a kite so big that it actually lifted me off the ground and dragged me down the beach with it! After the first week of running myself ragged chasing and handling the wing, suffering a few mild cases of heatstroke and sunburn (I still have red-spotted feet from sunlight beating down through the holes in my Crocs), pained knees from existing knee problems (it’s not often you use your legs as landing gear and carrying 65 pounds on your back, too), I opted to learn how to fly a PPG trike, instead: a trike is a small, three-

wheeled contraption that attaches to the bottom of the PPG “cage.” The pilot sits on a mounted seat so no leg power is required except for using your feet to point the nosewheel while ground steering. In-flight steering is accomplished the same way as foot-launched PPG flying by pulling down on the right or left-hand brake straps that are connected to a brake line that, in turn, connects to the trailing edge of one side of the wing; when applied, the trailing edge is forced down—causing the brake-applied side of the wing to slow down—resulting in a banking turn in that direction. We would have to travel to another site for trike training: Belle Glade Airport, an uncontrolled field “way out in the sticks” near the south end of Lake Okeechobee—it has a single, paved runway used by crop dusters that spray that area’s agricultural products, mostly cane sugar. Because of its distance from Pompano Beach and limited availability for PPG training and flying, I only had one day to learn how to fly a trike; if the weather didn’t cooperate then I wouldn’t have enough time left in my vacation to try again a week later. At first I made ground runs without the wing attached so I could learn how to steer and control the trike on the ground. After that, it was learning how to ground handle the trike with the wing attached...which takes quite a bit of physical coordination since you have to hold both a

steering and brake line in each hand in addition to holding and operating a rudimentary throttle control strapped to one hand as well. (Admittedly, I have no sense of coordination whatsoever except for flying fixed-winged aircraft; it's so bad that Washington State issued a federal restraining order to keep me from attempting to dance or play a musical instrument again—something about “inciting riots.”) However, with each ground run my skills steadily improved. Just after lunch, Carlos thought I could attempt a solo flight but the wind suddenly picked up speed so I was grounded. We went into “parawaiting mode”, meaning we'd have to cool our heels and wait for conditions to improve before attempting a flight. So, like all pilots who are grounded because of weather, we traded flying stories, viewpoints on world affairs, and exchanged general “b.s.” (We came up with the idea that we should create a TV program similar to The View—but with a male cast, instead—and call it, “Whatever”, but we feared that the show would alienate every female viewer out there.) For the rest of the afternoon I anxiously waited for the wind to die down, only to watch the Sun inexorably sink toward the horizon. I looked at my watch for the umpteenth time: According to Part 103 of the FARs—the Part that applies to ultralight aircraft—I only had until thirty minutes after sundown before I wouldn't be legal to take to the air again until at thirty minutes before sunrise the next day...an option I didn't have. As if on command, the wind died down enough to allow a flight. I quickly pre-flighted the trike, attached its wing, donned my helmet, and fired up the engine. As I lurched forward under half-power the wing took off to one side so I immediately aborted the takeoff—the wind had suddenly shifted direction. (You have to takeoff and land directly into the wind when flying PPGs). After Carlos laid out the wing on the ground again I made a second attempt—I aborted again because I accidentally let the steering lines out of my right hand while on my takeoff run, causing the wing to tumble to the ground in a balled-up mess. Carlos hurriedly laid out the wing again since we only had time for one, last attempt at flying for the day. “The third time's a charm,” I thought to myself. I accelerated again for my takeoff run. The wing filled with air and then parked itself directly over my head...off to one side a little bit but still within limits. Carlos shouted into the radio “Go for it!” and I went to full power. With a slight bump, I faced skyward and glanced downward at the ground rapidly falling away beneath me. I was flying! I felt every single bump in the air, rocking back and forth like a pendulum as I climbed to 1,000 feet, but I didn't mind. It was a thrill to see just my feet and no instruments, fuselage, propeller...anything in the way ahead and below me. With the crimson and pink horizon giving way to the cloak of night, I knew it was time to land so I practiced few, basic flight maneuvers to get a feel for steering and altitude control before I would attempt to land. As Carlos guided me down on the radio, I shut down the engine as instructed and made a near picture-perfect touchdown. I couldn't have had a bigger smile on my face even with the help of Botox injections...though I think Grace was more thrilled about my flight than I was; she just kept chanting “Genius Rich! Genius Rich!” Would I fly a PPG again or buy one? You bet! The altitude record for a PPG is just over 13,000 feet, but I think I'll fly low for now.



Rich Stuart