

Memories of & guide to

# The Spanish Sierra Classics

KEVIN RAMM



**7pm -12,000 ft somewhere over central Spain: Cloudstreets curve over a distant horizon 80 miles from La Hoya's hot, dusty take off, I circle into the chilly wisps of cloudbase in the mother of all thermals. Justin and Nick are with me, sharing this superb sky. Ahead is the enchanting outline of Segovia, ancient cathedral and castle watch over the rolling, chequered plains of central Spain. The world looks wonderful, I'm in love with everything and this is just a practice day!**

**O**ne rowdy, ear-popping stomach churning thermal later I'm suddenly not so smug. In fact I'm feeling sick. Another potential flight of a lifetime, longest distance, lowest-save, strongest-thermal, prettiest landing witness, etc. all lay before me. But my mind was preoccupied by an increasingly uneasy feeling.

I decide to wimp-out publicly and radio the other Brits. "Lads. Let's not overdo things today! We've got 5 competition days of long flights and late nights to come...". Your humble author remembered only too well the 1st Sierra Classic one year earlier: many, many late nights. Sometimes returning to base at 3 am, sometimes being left out all night! No rest days -- just fly, fly, fly (awful, isn't it?).

But my trusted colleagues were in an XC-frenzy. 80 miles was not enough for these poor thermal-starved Brits. One wet summer too many in the glorious homeland imbues a fly-till-you-drop mentality. The flying hunger that serves us so well in competitions and serves us so badly with loved ones...

*Nick Pain* - half man, half kingpost -

comes back over the radio with a passionate plea: "But Kev, I'm higher than I've ever been, and the view is superb, this is the best thermal I've ever been in, my vario sounds great, and I think I can see my house from here, and... (long silence). What was the question?"

"Nick, you're hypoxic! Spiral down and buy me a cold beer!", says Captain Sensible Kev, desperately trying to divert attention away from my own poorly disguised desire to land. I continue, "I'm going to land here in this village by the motorway and get back to the hotel at a sensible hour."

Ten minutes pass before trusty Alison in the retrieve vehicle enquires, "Kev, have you landed yet?"

"Not quite...."

"What's your position?"

"I'm at 12,000 ft over my landing field".

The problem was, dear reader, that those Spanish flatland thermals are outrageous. I had set up a landing approach and found myself overshooting by 6000 ft. A simple mistake -- could happen to anyone. And of course, when that vario begins to sing, I've just got to circle.

I share this thermal with a magnificent hawk, who so gracefully matched my comparatively floundering efforts. Presumably, the hawk's curiosity, or a desire for companionship, or possibly his incredulity at my shocking technique, meant that we climbed the 6000 ft together.

In the middle of all this inspiring stuff, I momentarily forgot my airsickness and agreed with my more robust flying chums to continue to *Segovia*, 90 miles from take-off.

Nick and I arrived at Segovia a few hundred yards apart and a little high. Selecting a landing field from 10,000 ft is fairly futile, which is why we let *Nev-the-Dependable-One* (an unexpected occupant of the retrieve vehicle) choose one for us from ground level. What a nice feeling: retrieve vehicle waiting below with cold drinks, a few thousand feet to wind off at leisure and a lovely safe landing area, chosen by an expert.

Screaming downslope, downwind to crash in an embarrassed cloud of dust, came as a bit of a surprise. Nev was quick to point out that the wind had only just switched and the field was actually upsloped a few miles further on, but not at this exact spot. Silly of me to try to land next to the car, really.

That was the practice day.

So, on with the purpose of this humble work!

A 3rd *Sierra Classic* is planned for 1993, hopefully closely coordinated with the *British League Final* which will also be in Spain, in July. Having taken part in the 1st and 2nd *Sierra Classics*, I wanted to broadcast to fellow pilots a hearty recommendation of both this specific competition, and the flying in central Spain in general. Read on for a description of the competition itself and some tips for those pilots considering a XC extravaganza in Spain!

### **The Competition**

#### ► *Philosophy*

The *Sierra Classic* aims to be a 'pilot's competition', with emphasis on XC flying and lots of it. Neither the tasks or scoring system could be accused of over-complexity: open distance every day with your final score being your total km flown during the 5-day competition. Simplicity itself! No photos. No complicated navigation around hidden turnpoints. No mind-wrestling with scoring formulae to decide a best strategy for the day!

#### ► *Location (1992)*

*La Hoya - Candelario*, Nr. Bejar, is in the Province of Avila, Central Spain. North coast 350 kms, south coast 400 km, west coast 250 km (Portugal), east coast 500 km. Not bad for distance potential, especially in a NE direction where after hopping the Pyrenees at 500 km and the Alps at 1000 km. there's still a large bit of Europe left to fly over.

#### ► *Site*

*Candelario* itself is a lovely, unspoiled village, nestled at the foot of an extensive range of hills. *La Hoya* is a grim hole. Do not, ever, consider flying at *La Hoya* of your own accord.

Disadvantages: 4 WD recommended for the route to take-off; shallow, boulder-strewn take-off run, thermals start at least an hour later than in the neighbouring hills (most mornings we sat and watched perfect cumuli develop over *Piedrahita*, 35 km away, while overhead was uninterrupted blue); bottom landing options were restricted and largely uninviting. *Piedrahita* is a much better site and close by.

Original plans were to base the competition at *Piedrahita*, in the province of Avila. These were scotched by avaricious

farmer/villagers who owned the proposed rigging/take-off area. A rather large sum of pesetas was requested for the use of the land. The organisers refused to comply and the situation festered. In true Spanish 'manana' fashion, the competition organisers were still negotiating the day before the competition actually started!

I understood that *Piedrahita* is likely to be next year's venue - a much more attractive proposition.

### **XC Flying in Central Spain**

#### ► *Conditions*

In the *1st Sierra Classic 1991*, I began to feel that Spain had it in for me. While most of the British team were having some of the best flights of their lives, many days one saw Kev bombing out to land in fits of frustration and in sweltering mid-afternoon temperatures.

'Bombing out' in this competition meant flying less than 100 km. It also meant, thanks to modern technology, being able to while away the 10-hour lonely wait for a retrieve by listening to pilot compadres exchanging gleeful descriptions of the view from 30,000 ft and the diabolically good lift in the last 27 thermals!

I feel much happier describing the flying conditions for the 2nd *Sierra Classic*.

The weather was predominantly high pressure, with light winds and soaring temperatures over a well-baked landscape giving strong thermals from mid-afternoon. Thermal activity continued until very late in the day-- last climbs between 7- 8pm, and lovely, long final glides.

Spanish thermals are generally large in size and power and, once in the flatlands, there are no bullet-type thermals-- just solid great lumps of lift. Call me old-fashioned, but I do enjoy parking my



glider on a wingtip and having time to think strategy or enjoy the view, as you leisurely wind your way up to a fluffy cumie.

Perhaps surprisingly, skies over central Spain are not uninterrupted blankets of blue, but instead commonly feature perfectly formed cumulus, often aligned into *amazing* cloudstreet, the sort you have damp dreams about.

The best measure of flying conditions was that we flew every day, and the longest flight was always over 100 miles.

### ► *Retrievals*

The road network in central Spain is excellent for pilot retrievals. While there are few dual carriageway or motorway roads, the low density of traffic (and traffic police) provide for high speed retrieves.

Due to the nature of open distance flight, with high mileages and freedom to choose your direction of travel, total retrieve distance can be enormous. I strongly recommended minimising the number of pilots sharing a retrieve vehicle -- 2 preferably or 3 at the most.

### ► *Radios*

Good radio communication is the key success factor in retrievals. It is essential to equip yourself and your retrieve driver with reliable, proven radios. Otherwise one is bound to have desperately late retrieves and even the discomfort and ignominy of being left out in the boonies for a whole night!

A quick word on radio discipline. Pilots must radio their position frequently if they want to reduce the risk of long retrieves. I know this is obvious, but it's something I often forget to do. In this sort of competition, you may become separated from your flying buddies and retrieve driver by more than 100 miles (especially on light wind days when there may not be an obvious direction for maximum distance).

Money spent on a good aerials, particularly for the retrieve vehicle, will also prove to be an investment. Our standard Yaseu 2m radios gave up to 100 miles air to air and about 50 miles air to ground. Terrain relief and atmospheric conditions in Spain seem to be very favourable for good radio performance.

### ► *Maps*

Good maps are essential - not your 'Spain on One Page' maps. Be careful to choose a map with the maximum number of villages marked, for a given scale (Firestone and Michelin offer reasonable maps of Spain. In both cases the village/town details are good but the relief shading is very poor.).

The victorious French team's *Gérard Thevenot* realised, after the first day, that

his map was sadly lacking in this area. As did his retrieve driver, who scoured every inch of the radioed landing village only to phone in later and learn that the pesky GT was elsewhere.

### ► *Phone-in Point*

Retrieve phone-in is a vital fall-back measure for retrieves after mega-distance was flying - to confirm that you survived the onslaught of nature's elements and to give accurate landing details if radio communication is lost.

Telephones generally aren't abundant, however most villages have a bar and most bars have a telephone - and cold beer.

### ► *The Natives*

Mention must be made of the people in rural Spain. In my experience the Spanish villagers are consistently warm-hearted and generous. Make an impressive landing in site of the village and offers of food and drink will be forthcoming.

On one particularly desperate evening during the 1st Sierra Classic, having been abandoned by my retrieve crew due to a bemusing episode of 'Chinese Whispers' with the competition retrieve organisers, I was actually taken-in by sympathetic people and given a meal and a bed for the evening.

In many cases, your arrival in a far flung pueblo will be the first time the villagers see a hang glider. Only a minority of the villages that I have landed in had English-speaking residents, therefore a good phrasebook and a degree in sign language is essential.

### ► *Landing Out*

There is a common sequence of events to landing out in rural Spain. You fly over a sleepy, dusty hamlet. Aside from the obligatory dog sleeping peacefully in the main street, not a soul stirs in the golden evening glow. Shadows are long, shutters are drawn. As you make your final approach you're convinced that this is going to be a lonely wait.

Landing unnoticed in a nearby field, your heart sinks with the settling dust. And then it happens... From nowhere appears a colourful and vibrant throng of people stampeding towards you in a hubbub of excitement. Before you can zip yourself away into the safety of your XC bag, they're on you! All gripping hands, and rapid-fire Spanish.

It is normal to find yourself trying to wrestle your glider off an enthusiastic army of helpers who insist on transporting the rigged glider back to the village... such well-meaning and loveable folk!

*Ole!*