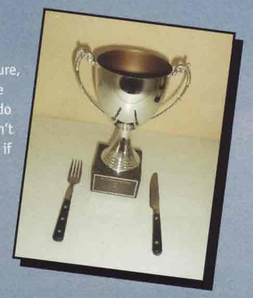
The Wild, Wild West

The saloon bar doors swung wide open, and shafts of light burst around the dark silhouette of a man, causing the astonished afternoon drinkers to blink and squint. 'Briefing' he bellowed in a strange west country accent, adding yet more mystery to this figure. Then his head turned, allowing his features to become visible in the warm sun; a pasty, freckled face with a ginger beard. The man, Steve Ham, the place, Piedrahita, the competition, his.

Piedrahita is a frontier town, civilisation's last outpost in the wild Spanish mid-west. Just travelling here is a feat in itself. Few dare brave the searing temperatures, sandstorms and marauding highwaymen that frequent the roads of the Madrid high plains, far from any cooling oceans. But once here, no-one finds it easy to leave. Classic textbook flying is contrasted by a wild town, where the beers are icy, the women temperamental and the nightlife hot.

For one Englishman, coming from a country where it rains 300 days a year, it was all too much. Steve Ham had heard the rumours of huge thermals and gliding over golden landscapes in endless convergence to land hundreds of kilometres away, and decided he had to discover it for himself. One drizzly mid-summer's morning in 1991, he packed his bags and left his home-town of Bristol, England. He arrived in Spain to indeed find paradise, and quickly set a new European record of 162 km from Piedrahita. Back in that day, few then used Pena Negra as a launch, just the seldom hang glider took off from the road, and most pilots still journeyed to Arcones for their XC epics. But that was just the beginning of Steve's experience of Spain, for soon after he was seduced by a local girl from Salamanca, Puri Almansa, and he has lived in the dusty village ever since.

THE TAPAS CUP



Flying, weather, architecture and culture, Spain has just about got it all. But the one place where the Spaniards really do not perform is in the kitchen. Food isn't Spain's strongest attribute, especially if you're a vegetarian. Your typical Spanish dish will contain more cholesterol and fat than an American chain-smoking hamburger loving alcoholic who's just died of blocked arteries. Fried eggs, steak, burgers and chips is the order of the day.

And be warned, asking for a vegetarian dish 'sin carne' ('without meat') will only leave the waiter totally baffled. The astonished man will wander away, shaking his head at the thought that someone doesn't want meat. He will then return, with bits of chicken and other white meat strewn liberally over your plate, in the hope that you will recognize the fact that without any red meat, the meal is, in fact, vegetarian.

Anyway, enough of the main course, which Spain isn't exactly top notch at producing. If it's a quick hunger-busting munch after flying that you're after, then Tapas dishes are tasty, cheap and go down very well with a San Miguel beer. But which is your favourite Tapas? The week we were in Piedrahita, so much debate raged over this subject that we thought we'd better have an 'it's-a-knockout-contest' to choose, finally, the crème-de-la-crème of Tapas.

ROUND 1 Ensalada a la Mora V Patatas Bravas
An oniony mix of mora with chewy bits against patatas bravas' mayonnaise based potato salad with bits of spice. The first showdown goes to patatas bravas, perhaps an unfair shootout but when you're hungry, potato wins.
Winner: Patatas Bravas

Alubias con Jamón V Paella.
Paella, in the case of this particular bar, means rice with lots of meat. A cheap version that doesn't carry very far, but still manages to beat the dullness of alubias' green beans.
Winner: Paella

Pimientos del Piquillo V Patatas a la Riojana
Pimientos is a neat red pepper with a spicy surprise: bets are on for a place in the final. Meanwhile, patatas a la riojana requires swift beer drinking post-match; the most eloquent description given to it is 'fatty yuck'.
Winner: Pimientos del Piquillo

Tortilla V Tortilla Especial
Putting anything other than its own kind against the hot favourite, tortilla, would be unfairer than a batallion of Russian soldiers in Chechnya. But we're traditionalists, and pick the original over the new fad especial. The panel's final decision isn't without controversy: Sol dismisses the tortilla as boring and tasteless. But we won't have it.
Winner: Traditional Tortilla

Mejillones al jerez V Ensalada a la Mejillone
Ensalada's potatoey mix is wholesome, but mejillone, with its onion and red peppers, is a delightful delicacy. Eventually ensalada is sent off, but to hearty applause from the judges.
Winner: Mejillones al jerez

Olives (Aceitunas) V Lamelle de Piquillo
Olives split the judges in half: some love its rich juiceness, others say it is just an olive. The same is said about the pepper only its spicy but not very interesting. In the end the traditionalists have it again.
Winner: olives

Boquerones en Vinagre(marinated anchovies) V Sardines de Escabeche
The fish fight it out. Bony sardines covered in tomato tastes like cat food, covered in tomato. Meanwhile, a lemony sauce takes out the 'yeuch' of the anchovy, giving it a lusty appeal to put it ahead.
Winner: Boquerones en Vinagre

Now Piedrahita is recognised the world over as a free flying mecca, and is truly the destination of choice for European distance flyers. Several major contests have been fought out in the skies above the Spanish plains, most notably several PWCs, the WHGS, the 1998 European paragliding championships, and several national paragliding and hang gliding contests.

Part of the reason why its so popular is the mystical, much hyped convergence which sets up over the town and transports flocks of pilots along its express lift highway to Segovia and beyond. The last two weeks in July are reputed to be most consistent for catching the convergence, but equally good days can be discovered from April through to September.

The Search. Most of us have this scene imprinted somewhere deep in our imaginations. Yet it's a very real one, and sets up day after day over the dry Avila plains. Convergence: you've just got to experience it. (ph: Xavier Murillo)

Ensalada Amiga V Ensalada Combinada
'What the hell is that?' cries Peter, inspecting ensalada combinada. Curiosity is piqued by the marinated rice and white rubbery thingy that is combinada. But ensalada amiga is a tuna taste sensation, reminiscent of salade nicoise with more 'gobbledy gook' added in.
Winner: Ensalada Amiga

QUARTER FINALS
Ensalada Amiga V Olive
'Mix up some rice, peppers and tuna and pile it on my plate if you like, but you won't sway me from my olive' says Jody, summing up all our feelings. The first upset of the contest as a major seed, ensalada amiga, is defeated.
Winner: olive

Mejillones al jerez V tortilla
For many, the taste of tortilla is Spain itself. A golden baked surface, and a smooth potatoey texture that sends shudders down your spine. But it's gone cold now and tastes horrible. The mejillones have it.
Winner: Mejillones al jerez

Papas locas V Paella
Papas locas fills your mouth with different spices to create a very controlled, well balanced and ungreasy flavour. It's possible that the paella would have given papas locas a run for its money had it not gone cold.
Winner: Papas Locas

Pimientos del Piquillo V Boquerones en Vinagre
More spice, more depth, and more character in the pimientos.
Winner: Pimientos del Piquillo

SEMI FINALS
Olives V Mejillones al jerez
Classic appeal of olive V souped-up mussels. Olives taste better, and the unassuming small vegetable is astonished to find itself in the final.
Winner: Olives

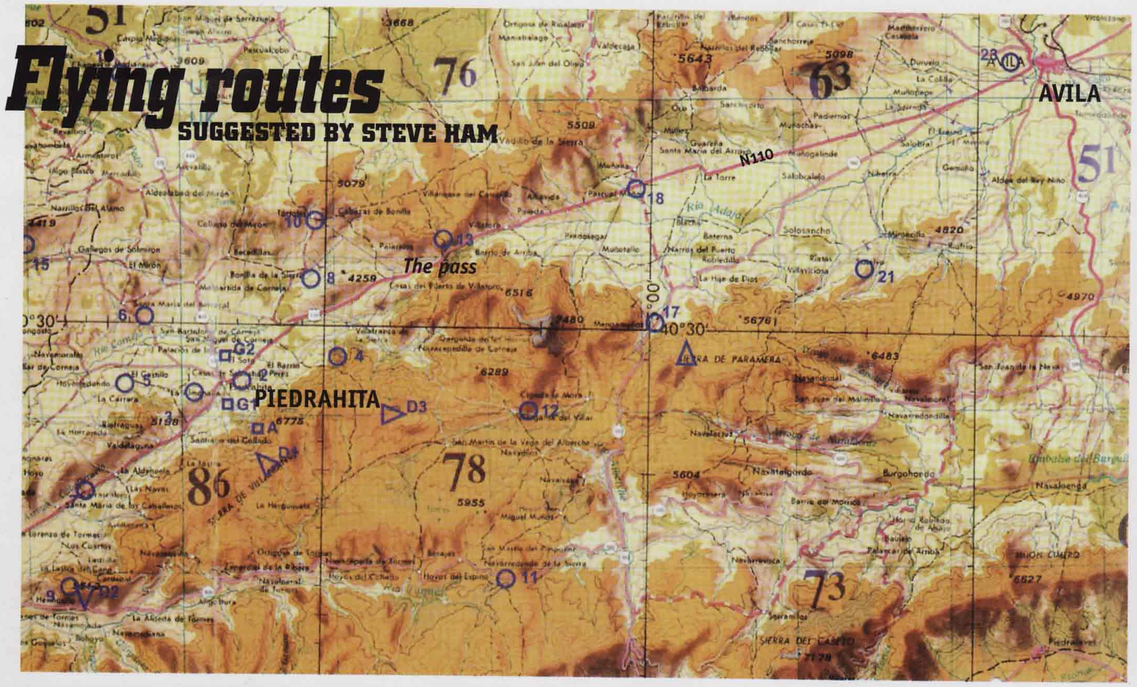
Papas Locas V Pimientos del Piquillo
It's a tough call, but after some deliberation the exotic colour of the pimientos wins through.
Winner: Pimientos del Piquillo

FINAL
Pimientos del Piquillo V Olives
It's a David against Goliath situation as tiny olive faces up to the mighty fuming red rage of Poivrons Piquillo.Pimientos del piquillo has a strong spicy aftertaste, but as an all rounder, olive outwits big P. The chef arrives to try and sway the vote towards his tidy creation, the pimientos, but olive is a natural wonder. A perfect body, and great original taste allows diminutive olive to outfox Pimientos del Piquillo. The chef walks away in disgust as pimiento bites the dust.
Winner of the Tapas Cup: Olives

Thanks to judges Sol Pistone, Peter Brinkeby and Jody Smith

Flying routes

SUGGESTED BY STEVE HAM



THE PILGRIMAGE TO THE PROMISED LAND: AVILA AND BEYOND

The classic Piedrahíta flight takes you out east along the N-110 highway to the ancient walled city of Avila, and then on to Segovia. With any good day with a westerly component this flight is relatively easy, but to do the big 200 km plus distances, there must be a little south in the wind too as the wind often veers to the north past Avila. With northwesterly winds, it is normally difficult to progress beyond Avila, and you will invariably find yourself on the hills south of town, preventing further progress. In light winds with a greater north than west component, it is worth trying to do an out and return and fly back to Piedrahíta, but with stronger winds, or a more westerly component, it is best to land short on the eastern side of the pass in the Ambles Valley.

Everyone who comes to Piedrahíta asks the question, ' how do I get over the pass?' There is no magic combination of rules that will guarantee your safe delivery over the pass and a climb on the other side, since the best route will vary depending upon the day's conditions. On most good days all routes will work, but some will put you in a better position to get up on the other side.

Many pilots find it such a mental obstacle that they consider the flatlands beyond as the promised land. It is true that once up on the other side you will generally go a long way if conditions are right, but also a good percentage bomb out on the other side because they rush over too soon, too low to find a climb on the other side.

I have been escorting low airtime pilots across the pass for many years and have sent hoardes of comp pilots over. Firstly, it's important to change your perception of the problem. It is no holy grail. The pass is no big deal, just a ripple on the landscape, landable in most areas, though potentially difficult in strong winds. Compare it to any high Alpine pass and it seems ridiculously small.

THE OPTIONS

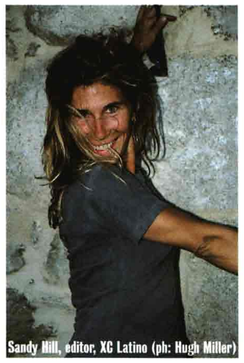
•When you come off the main ridge, it is important to set yourself up to get the climbs before the pass, after Villafranca. Normally you should take a good climb near the corrals at Tp 4 – there is usually a good thermal here. However, if you miss this climb, you will still get up if you are decisive in your next move.

• From Tp 4 you have a number of choices. The most popular is to fly to the quarry just northwest of Villafranca, run up the spur line, until you find over the quarry on the first pinnacle of the rising spur, where with luck you will be hoisted to the heavens. With more north in the wind it can sometimes be best to fly to the larger tree covered spine back to the west of Villafranca. Although this is soarable with the valley breeze, it is best to approach it from the valley side of Tp 4, rather than taking a short cut directly behind and directly from the main hill. Most of the good thermals will be coming out from between Villafranca and this spine back, on the rising ground to the latter. If you take the 'direct route' behind Tp 4, you will often arrive low on the spine back, have to soar up, then push out to the valley back towards Villafranca to get the decent climbs.

• If there is a strong northwesterly wind you must be careful not to fall out of the thermal if it is drifting you over the back of the tree lined spine-back, as falling out will leave you in the very turbulent lee side and a rough landing near Navacepaeldilla de Corneja. If this does happen, it is best to run downwind to connect with the rocky knob to the southwest of the village. A climb there will then lead you to the south face of Serrota (the highest peak to the southeast of the pass) and into the valley at Tp 12. If you can get high enough it is essential to cross to the Ambles (Avila) valley over Serrota, if you get flushed into the valley at Tp 12, you will find it near impossible to get through the Menga pass (17) into the strong northerly which sets up there.

• If you get a good climb at the quarry ridge, and there is little drift, you will have to glide back to the dead end valley at the top the of the quarry spur and to the north of the tree lined spine back. At the head of this little valley, just south of the pass you will normally get another good climb, putting you in a position to cross the pass. This is a good point to glide if you have climbed at either position previously; it is not a good idea to glide in below the level of the tops of the spurs since if you land there are no handy retrieve roads.

Late in the evening, swifts thermal over the walls of Avila. Days last forever in a Spanish summer (ph: Michel Ferrer)


Sandy Hill, editor, XC Latino (ph: Hugh Miller)

• With a northwesterly wind you can now cross to the promised land, keeping above the high ground to the south of the pass. Normally when you reach the end of the mountain, to a rocky spur jutting out to Villatoro village, you will get another decent climb to set you up for your glide into the flatlands.

• If you are running up the quarry spur and the wind is more southwest, you can choose to cross the the southwesterly facing hills on the north of the pass (at Tp 13). This will then set you up to run along the Sierra de Avila (the small line of hills to the north of the main N-110 road) where there will frequently be convergence somewhere between there and the road, even on blue days.

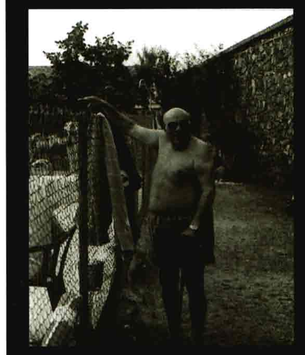
• Should you fail to get a climb on the quarry spur, and are nearing Casas del Puerto de Villatoro, glide off the spur and fly to the village cemetery, on a gentle coll before dropping into the village. This is a very consistent thermal area, which will generally drift you back to Tp 13, setting you up to cross the pass and run along the Sierra de Avila. If the valley wind is strong and your climb rate is poor, consider abandoning the climb and landing in the good fields near Casas del Puerto as you could easily be pinned in the pass. If you've crossed to the Antenna and find yourself in this position, you can generally land safely on the plateau between Tp 13 and Villanueva del Campillo.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

• Never go low over the pass over the road in a strong westerly. You won't get up on the other side, and will have to deal with a difficult landing.

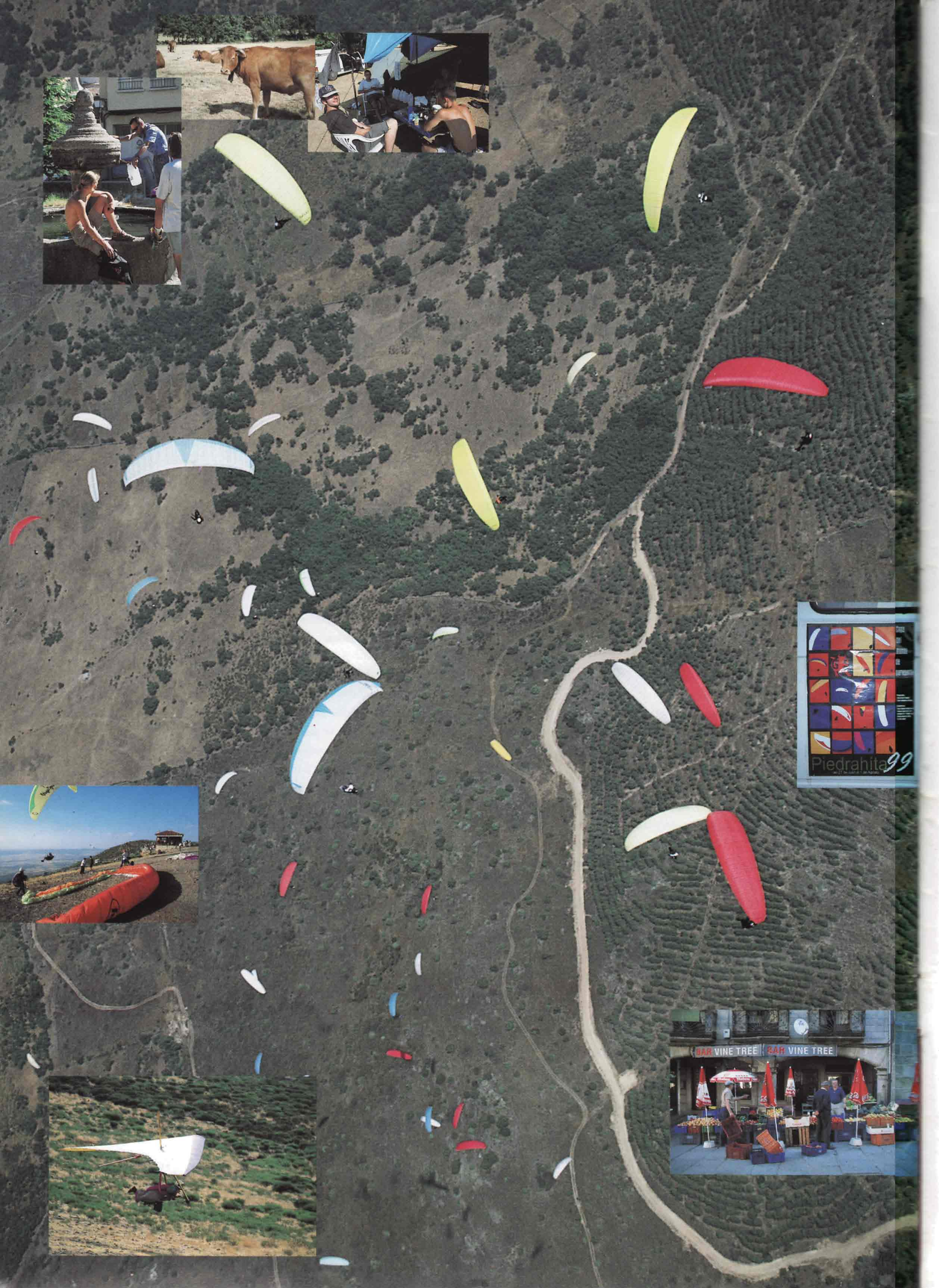
• Let the clouds' drift and postitions dictate the route you will take: you should make the decision when at the corrals (Tp 4). If there are no clouds, use your GPS to work out the exact wind direction. As a rough rule of thumb, with a westerly wind choose either route, when its northwest, use the tree lined ridge and the high ground south of the road. When southwesterly, go to the quarry and then cross to Tp13 and glide over on the north side of the road. With an easterly component, turn back before Tp13.

• Once in the flatlands of the Ambles valley the first climbs maybe poor, but once past Amavida, you will be past the subsidence effects of the lee of the pass, and will find easy climbs and will often be able to straightline in lift for long periods of time – on such days don't waste time circling in zeros. If there is no obvious cloud street or blue convergence, you will generally get up around Amavida, Tp 18, just past La Torre, around Muñogalindo, Padiernos, Tp 23. Now you are at Avila, which is generally taken best to the north then keep yourself around the road, away from the hills till you get to Segovia (117 kms). After Segovia, you can move back towards the mountains if necessary, where if late in the day you can soar in dynamic lift for almost 45 km, past the



Piedrahíta, home to the rich and famous. Whilst better known for its flying, the town is also an alternative holiday destination for celebrities wanting a break from the media. Just during our short holiday, we were star-struck by Woody Allen at the La Panera bar, and also came across General Pinochet in his hide-out by the municipal swimming pool. We were disappointed not to catch a glimpse of Jesus, who is believed to work part-time at his Dad's fruit shop opposite the Bar Nevada when taking a break from healing the sick and saving the world.

Hugh Miller



Tibor Berki, evening soaring at Pena Negra. Left: The XC camera ship with the lead gaggle at PWC Piedrahita, 1999 (ph: Ferrer/Miller)

Arcones take-off (150 km), with only one valley crossing at Somosierra. At Riaza, where the chain of mountains step back and run off-track, you will be forced to take a final glide if it is late in the day and have been relying on dynamic soaring for the last section of the flight, and will finish up with around 200 km. If you are lucky enogth to have a stronger south-westerly, and are there earlier in the day you can venture once again into the flatlands towards Allyon on the N-110 where 300 km is possible. And you still have a fast retrieve along the straight highway leading back to Piedrahíta!

TAILWIND TRIANGLE

Many of the flying days at Piedrahíta will give you exeptional soaring with classic skies, high cloud bases and light winds. On these days, rather than spending hours trying to get to Avila, spend the afternoon exploring around the valley and out to the flatlands towards Salamanca, and if the conditions permit, towards the Gredos mountains before flying home to Piedrahíta. With a light northeasterly forecast above 2500 m, you can use convergence and the changing wind direction at various altitudes to do large circuits. often with a tailwind all the way round a triangle.

The first turnpoint is the Parador Nacional Hotel (Tp11) way back 17.6 km over the back of take-off on the plateau. As you go back you will pick up the convergence, and early in the day Tp 11 will be on the limit of it and low down you will find a strengthening southerly wind. Those who get there late will find the convergence has already migrated northwards, and rather than having an easy ride with a tail wind, they will find themselves pushing into a blue hole with a southeasterly.

You then run back to Serrota, over Tp 12, which can be used as a turnpoint instead of Tp 11 if the base is lower than 3000m or if the convergence started further north. You can now run over Serrota, and along the spurs leading down to the western side of the pass, usually in good cloud streets with possible convergence from the westerly in the Piedrahíta valley, and the northeasterly in the Ambles valley. You run along to Tp 10 to the west of the low hills enclosing the northeast part of the Piedrahíta valley, and usually you will be over 3000m with the route marked by good clouds.

It is important to get a good climb before Tp 10, to ensure you exit the north of the valley high, since it will be more windy northwesterly low down. Now you are in the higher flatlands moving towards the main road to Salamanca, which you will generally meet around the large quarry just to the east of the road. If you get low, there is a good climb around the quarry, which will take you to Tp 16. Further north will be difficult with northerly forecasts, and the terrain below, although flat and friendly, contains bulls being bred for fighting. Rather than flying directly back along the main road, it is more interesting to stretch the circuit more to the west of Piedrahíta, taking in Tp 5, from which, if necessary, you can ridge soar back to Piedrahíta along the low line of hills, to land at home after a circuit of 90 kms. This flight will have taken you towards the high mountains of the Gredos and the dry flatlands of Castilla with views to the south of Province of Madrid, Toledo and Estremadura, and to the north, Salamanca and Segovia.

GETTING THERE

Getting to Piedrahíta is easy. The best way is to fly into Madrid, then take the bus to Piedrahíta. Getting between the airport and the town bus station is the trickiest bit: taxis recommended. If you're driving, follow the N110 to Avila and Piedrahíta. It's only a two hour drive.

STAYING THERE

Accommodation ranges from cheap and basic bunk rooms at La Residencia for 1500 Pts per night (about $10), through much more comfortable hotels like El Grand Duce for a little extra. Camping is also possible at the municipal site next to the hang gliding landing field. The lack of facilities is easily made up for by the beautiful sunsets and shady camping spots. XC