

Baja Thermal Clinic 2001

Text by Rich Parry

Photos by Quinn McLaughlin and Rich Parry

The eighth annual Baja Thermal Clinic held October 26-28th in La Salina, Mexico was a huge success. Three great days of ridge and thermal soaring overlooking the Pacific Ocean made for a memorable event.

If you want to catch some great thermals, soar over a ridge several miles long, learn from some of paragliding's best instructors, have fun, relax in beautiful Baja Mexico, and spend a few days eating, drinking, and sleeping paragliding, then the annual Baja Thermal clinic is the place to be. For the past eighth years, the clinic has been sponsored by Air California Adventure, Inc. and Torrey Pines Gliderport, and is open to pilots of all levels. It is an experience hard to duplicate anywhere else.

PRE-CLINIC WARMUP

Several pilots arrived at Torrey Pines Gliderport in San Diego, California, a few days before the clinic began to take advantage of the excellent flying conditions and refresh their skills before heading south of the border. The clinic was held in La Salina, Mexico, located 60 miles south of the Gliderport. Pilots from as far away as Germany joined others from Michigan, New York, Wyoming, and California. We had two doctors and a satellite phone for emergencies, but neither was needed. It was a fun filled weekend with opportunities to fly from sunup to sundown.

For those who wanted to get an early start, a small group of pilots left the day before the formal first day of the clinic. Everyone was anxious to spread their wings and fly in Mexico. We piled into several vehicles and were off. The 90-minute ride from San Diego to La Salina included a stop on the US side of the border to get automobile insurance. Most US insurance carriers limit their liability to the US. Considering the minimal cost, it's a prudent purchase.

Considering our suspicious looking vehicles filled with a dozen or more paragliders and harnesses, not to mention the scruffy occupants, we felt assured of being stopped at the border. We didn't look forward to unpacking and packing our paragliders and explaining what paragliding is to a border patrol agent. But our fears were unfounded as we were waved through the border without hitting the brakes.

The 45-minute trip from the border to La Salina was informative, and entertaining. David Jebb, the driving force behind the clinic, turned into a tour guide, telling us stories for each of the many places he had flown at as we passed them. We learned that David flew many sites in Baja before selecting La Salina as the ideal place to fly in Mexico. In addition, David's fluent Spanish and familiarity with the local customs served us well. His first name basis with the local constable and resort owner gave us confidence that we were in good hands and would have a great time.

We arrived at the Baja Seasons Resort in La Salina before noon. Some of the pilots pitched tents in the camping area. Other pilots requiring creature comforts opted for a motel room. Large suites with a terrace opening to the ocean and beach are also available for those that want to go first class.

We literally threw our street clothes into our accommodations and headed for the launch site a mile away. Over the next few days, six pilots would attempt to fly from the launch site and land on the beach, within feet of their rooms. Half of the beach attempts were successful, I found myself among the unsuccessful half, but just trying was a thrill. One of the pilots that did succeed said, "When I finally made it to the beach, I couldn't stop smiling".

Although the clinic would provide a shuttle service to carry equipment to the launch site several times each day, the clinic hadn't started, so we were on our own. You have to be in good shape to make it up the

650' vertical trail that zig-zags up the ridge, but we were happy to be there and weren't going to let this slow us down.

It was just after noon when we found ourselves on top. After a short introduction to the site for those who had not flown there, we started unpacking. The conditions at the top required high wind launch skills (13-16 mph). This is where those hours of kiting pays off. During the clinic, one of the pilots boasted that he didn't have any difficulty launching. I thought this was a pretty cocky statement, but during the clinic I watched carefully and he backed up his boast with action. He later told me that he spends many hours kiting in a local park. You can't paraglide there he said, the park is for kiting practice only and he had certainly nailed that skill. During the clinic I would learn many skills through formal discussions with instructors, but I also learned a great deal just being around other pilots.

Our first flights were short, but our goal was to become familiar with the site rather than break records. At the LZ, we packed our gear and headed topside for a second flight. Conditions for the second flight were smoother and launches easier. Flights were longer this time, so we could explore and have fun. Most pilots were happy with two great flights but a few with tree-stumps for legs, managed a third flight before the day ended.

As the sunset, we headed back to the resort, but the day was far from over. After cleaning up, it was off to Happy Hour where a lively discussion of the day's events mixed with Mexican margaritas, beer, and other libations ensued. By this time more clinic attendees had arrived. We shared more stories and renewed old friendships. When Happy Hour ended, we headed for the dining room. The Baja Seasons Resort offers a family style menu with plenty of good food. I recommend the Baja Shrimp.

It was 9 PM when the group moved from the dining room to the outdoor spa where once again, paragliding and related stories continued late into the night. David mentioned that at every clinic, without fail, someone falls into the swimming pool on their way back to their room. Since I wasn't drinking (alcohol), I thought I was safe from such clumsiness. However, as I said good night to everyone, I missed the pool by inches. I learned the next morning that someone did fall in. Considering the pool was empty this time of the year, the vertical drop into the pool may suggest the need for a reserve.

It was late by the time everyone headed for bed. As I laid in bed thinking about the day's events, I couldn't help but think the trip was already a success and the clinic hadn't even started. I eagerly anticipated the first formal day of the clinic.

DAY 1 - THERMALLING 101

We meet in the main conference room at 8 AM for a welcome and check-in. A huge breakfast, included with the clinic fee, all but assured we would have enough energy for the first day of flying. After breakfast, it was down to work and school was in session. The first seminar discussed safety. For most clinic participants, La Salina was a new site, so an understanding of thermalling etiquette was important. It was especially important since we had a wide diversity of paragliding expertise among us, attendees ranged from new P2 pilots to advanced P4 pilots.

Gabe Jebb led the discussion using the Socratic method of instruction, asking questions of each of the participants and then expanding on it before moving to the next question. Knowing that the first person entering a thermal sets the direction and the lowest person in the thermal has the right of way are important to emphasize. When these and dozens of other rules were promulgated, we set off to the launch site for our first day of flying.

Our equipment was transported to the launch site, while the pilots were driven to the landing zone to hike up the ridge. The launch site was covered by a moderate fog and relatively high winds (12-17 mph). This gave David Jebb an opportunity to demonstrate techniques for high wind launch. Watching David is like watching an Olympic athlete perform. He performs maneuvers so effortlessly you are convinced it is easy until you try it yourself. While waiting for the sky to clear, Gabe Jebb took the opportunity to do a "site analysis" which consisted of discussions on: weather, physical topology, bail-out zones, and other factors.

A firm grasp of weather conditions is essential for safety reasons, but it also helps assure a better flight. We discussed: ambient temperature, puddle temperature, average wind speed, instantaneous wind speed, differential wind speed, wind direction, barometric pressure, dew point, humidity, thermal gradient, thermal rise rate, and how they relate to flying in thermals.

The physical topology portion of the discussion addressed geographical features of the terrain such as where we might find thermals and ridge lift. A short description of ridge compression and lift-band was also provided. Locations to avoid due to rotors and venturis were also pointed out.

Alternate bail-out spots are more than just the spot you pick at the launch site where you will stop (bail-out) if your canopy is not centered and fully inflated above when you are ready to launch. Bail-out areas are also places to land in case you can't reach the LZ. These spots are constantly changing and should be re-evaluated during the flight so that in the event you must land, you already know where you are heading. At La Salina, if you land outside the LZ, your major concern is avoiding the cacti. Fortunately, the LZ is huge and hitting it is not difficult. Barbwire fences, a highway, and power lines are present, but these are sufficiently far from the LZ that they are just things to be aware of rather than be overly concerned with. There are also plenty of large flat fields in the event you totally miss the LZ. I had an opportunity to use one of them on my failed attempt at a trip to the beach.

Other-factors for a site analysis include everything not mentioned in the previous categories. Watching birds soar is an excellent way to find lift or visualize wind direction. The Pacific Ocean is easily visible from the launch site, so "white caps" give additional clues into understanding the myriad variables that a pilot should understand before flying.

By noon the fog had cleared and pilots started launching. High wind speed conditions were in affect, but launching was not overly difficult. I launched and was rewarded with a 90 minute flight that could easily have been longer. However, there were periods of a few seconds where I was in white-out, unable to see in any direction. I used a whistle as a fog horn to warn others that I was in the air and moved toward the ocean to loose altitude and regain visibility. This method for avoiding a mid-air collision was discussed earlier in the day. Little did I realize how soon I would have an opportunity to put to good use what I had learned. After moving in and out of good visibility, I decided I had tempted fate enough and headed for the LZ.

As the sun set, we set off for the hotel and Happy Hour, where once again paragliding was the topic of discussion. Gabe Jebb asked each pilot to name two things they did right during the day, two things they learned, and two things they intended to work on the following day. It was these kinds of discussions that underscored the very positive atmosphere that permeated the clinic, the desire to make everyone a better pilot and make flying more enjoyable. This exercise was entertaining and educational. One pilot said, "Sharing our achievements and mistakes at the end of the day was a lot of fun and a valuable learning tool". We each had the opportunity to share our successes and learn from our failures, all with the goal of becoming better pilots. With this final formal learning exercise of the day completed, we adjourned for dinner, for more stories, margaritas, and beer.

After dinner, some headed back to their hotel rooms, while others headed for the spa and more paragliding discussions. It was a great first day and we all looked forward to more.

DAY 2 - ADVANCED THERMALLING

The second day started similar to the first, but the enthusiasm level had definitely increased. Pilots of all level had a great first day and were pumped for a repeat. But before we took to the skies, it was time for breakfast followed by discussions.

Thermal shapes (e.g., column, bubble, etc.), sizes, rise rates, and how to "core" a thermal were addressed. The dynamic nature of thermalling and the need to always be actively piloting were stressed. When you find a thermal, how do you stay in it. If you feel lift, how do you know if it is from a thermal or from the ridge. All of these were discussed in a lively relaxed surrounding.

Additional thermal topics ranged from simple rules of thumb like always keep "hanging pressure" on the brakes and sitting back in your harness to more esoteric thermalling topics such as wind shear and thermal compression.

With the breakfast and thermal discussion complete, it was back to the ridge to put into practice what we had learned. The plan for the day was to break the clinic participants into three groups. Those that wanted to work on general flying skills worked with one instructor. Others that wanted to learn how to top land worked with another instructor, and ground handling students learned from a third instructor. To expedite the learning experience, each group used a separate radio frequency allowing each of the instructors to provide personalized attention.

High wind conditions (13-16 mph) similar to the previous day greeted us again at the launch site. Some postponed launching, while others launched perfectly under the watchful eye of a nearby instructor who provided help ranging from adjusting the wing and aiding the pilot to no help at all if that is what the pilot wanted. During this second day of the clinic, we learned a lot and everyone had a least two flights; many had more. A few clinic participants brought their non-pilot wives and they were treated to tandem rides during the day.

Happy Hour started later than the previous night, since most pilots were flying until nearly sundown. Debriefing started as it did the previous night, each pilot was asked to relate things they did right, things they learned, and things they wanted to work on the next day. We all shared our experiences, but one clinic student provided an account that brought him, and us, close to tears. A hush fell over the room as he related the joy he had flying and everything he learned that day. He then went over and hugged the instructor to thank him. The moment ended in applause, which broke the silence and saved us a few tears.

Dinner followed with more discussions and then off to the spa again. I heard comments such as, "This was my best day of flying", "3 days, 6 hours of airtime, and dozens of excellent flying moments", "David Jebb and all the instructors made the trip an excellent learning experience for all levels of pilots", and "It's a great day to be alive".

DAY 3 - GRADUATION

If it rained on the last day making flying impossible, I don't think anyone would have been too disappointed since we had two great days of flying and learning. But the weather gods smiled on us and the last day was the best day of the clinic. The sun was out early and we anticipated another great day.

Breakfast started the day followed by a short lecture with emphasis on thermalling and landing techniques. It was hard to concentrate since we could look out the window and see the sun breaking through the early morning cloud cover knowing it was going to be perfect for flying. With the discussion completed we headed for the launch site for the last time.

We were on top by 10 AM and it wasn't much later than we were in the air. At this point, everyone was comfortable with the site and the early morning light wind conditions made launches a pleasure. Several pilots had to catch flights to return home early, but most stayed until the very end. It doesn't get much better than this so no one wanted to leave.

I'LL BE BACK

If you are looking to learn more about paragliding in general and specifically about thermalling, you can't beat the Baja Thermal Clinic. You learn from expert instructors and then have a chance to put into practice what you learned. I didn't meet anyone that didn't have a great time. In fact, many of the pilots made their longest, or highest flight ever.

As we said goodbye, we thanked each other for sharing the weekend and making the clinic a success. We promised each other that we would be back for the 9th annual Baja Thermal Clinic to be held in October, 2002. I hope you will join us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND RESOURCES

Clinic instructors included David Jebb, Gabe Jebb, Wes Royal, and Armin Perham. David is a Master pilot and the Director of the Torrey Pines Gliderport in San Diego. He is the kind of person that can kite in high winds for hours while reading a book. He will then tell you humbly that he is not a good pilot. Gabe walks in his father's footsteps, an excellent Advanced pilot and instructor. Wes is a natural, a soft spoken instructor willing to share his experiences to help you become a better pilot. I met Armin, a former Torrey Pines flying instructor and currently a medical student, for the first time at the clinic, but it wasn't long before I knew that he too had the experience and skills to help make the clinic a great learning experience.

For an event of this magnitude to be a success, it requires more than expert instructors. Maya Jebb, Michele Jebb, and Nick Greece took care of the many logistical and administrative tasks including transporting pilots and equipment to and from the sites.

Thanks to the instructors and support staff for making the clinic a success. Thanks also to the attendees, from whom I also learned. For sharing photos, I am indebted to Quinn McLaughlin. To my wife, Sharon Parry, a P3 pilot who introduced me to paragliding, you are the wind beneath my wing. As for me, I am a new P3 pilot learning as much as I can about the sport. To support my paragliding habit, I work as a software engineer for Qualcomm, Inc. in San Diego, CA. You may contact me at rparry@qualcomm.com.

Additional photos from the 2001 Baja Thermal Clinic can be found at:

<http://w9if.net/cgi-bin/ImageFolioPro/imageFolio.cgi?direct=Paragliding>

<http://www.kaffeine.com/paraglide/baja2001>

A great resource for information is the Paragliding Talk Show hosted by David and Gabe Jebb. This show can be heard weekly on Internet radio at <http://www.wsradio.ws>. You can call-in to get answers to your paragliding questions, and talk with the pros.

If you are interested in joining the fun at the 2002 Baja Thermal Clinic, or paragliding information in general, visit the Torrey Pines Gliderport web site at <http://www.flytorrey.com>