



Launch at the Crest

Join the Mile-High Club!

By John Cristof
Photos by Andrew Vanis

I wanted a vacation to see the beauty of New Mexico. The calendar section of *Hang Gliding & Paragliding* magazine offered the perfect opportunity as I read about the “Sandia Soar’n” at Sandia Mountain in Albuquerque. The ad described fun flying with the possibility of evening glass-offs up to 16,000 feet. I contacted the fly-in host, Andrew Vanis, who gave me great information and helped set me up for the trip.

Andrew met me at the airport holding a sign inscribed with my name and a drawing of a hang glider! Are all people in New Mexico this nice? I wondered. We wanted to go fly early the next morning, so that evening we checked out the church LZ and the Big Sky LZ, which is actually a county park designated specifically for hang glider use. Some early hang gliding pioneers had

the foresight to work with the county to design this park and bury the power lines around it. I slept lightly, my mind busy with thoughts of a new site and big mountains.

The next morning Andrew and John Nagyvary, another H-4 pilot, picked me up and we drove to the top – Sandia Crest. The wind was 15 mph or more, straight

in. The Crest is a steep, three-step slope launch at a radio tower site with numerous tall towers that vibrate as gusts blow through. Out front, big spires of granite stand like huge skyscrapers. It took some time for me to locate the church LZ far in the distance, almost a mile below us. I set up and carried my wing to the launch. John held my nose wires. When

I was ready to go I called, “Clear!” which at home means it is time to fly. With one man on your nose, “clear” means balance the glider on your own as the nose man runs out of the way. I ran the three steps and was airborne.

The air was sweet and smooth. I banked left and flew between the mountain and the first spine through the Saddle. I was pumped with energy and adrenaline. So beautiful! I took the scenic route past the Thumb, another huge



Radio towers near the set-up area at the Crest launch

stone monolith, and out toward Tower Two, a tower that rests on the end of a ridge and supports the tram cables leading to the Peak launch. Then I turned right toward the church LZ in the far distance. I tried to absorb it all, looking back at the mountain, wanting to maximize this precious experience. I flew over

got even better as we left the main road and went four-wheeling deep into the wild lands toward launch. Well into no man's land, we parked near an escarpment. A short walk through rock and cactus led to a steep, rocky launch. The wind was straight in at 15 to 20 mph. We helped Art launch – he was well prepared

and earned his H-2 credentials, all in one day!

I launched next and took Art's spot on the ridge. I found a good thermal and, as perfect as the scenery was standing on launch, it was magnified 100 times as I turned circles in 1600 fpm up to 4000' over launch. I soared and saw a huge dust devil dance like a tornado in the distance. Could life be this good anywhere else?

After more than an hour the wind began to cross and the lift began to get light. Andrew had launched and we both were struggling to stay up. Too low to go for the top landing, we flew out and found an open spot in the flat desert below to land. We laughed and recounted our flights as the desert wind blew.

The next morning we went back to Sandia Crest hoping to fly. The wind at launch was above 20 mph. I gave Andrew time to clear and ran hard. This morning Sandia was generous. She gave me immediate lift and soon I was 1000 feet over working small thermals above the huge granite spires. There were no fading backward glances today. I got to drink it all in with plenty of time to see, feel, and play in the Sandia playground. Andrew joined me and we explored each peak and worked the lift. As the day began to heat up, Andrew suggested heading out before the LZ got too turbulent.

I had been warned about flying Sandia midday, heard the war stories of a 2000 up and 1500 down keel-slapping rodeo ride. But Andrew likes midday and the potential for long XC flights so, since the clouds were setting up perfectly, we rushed back up hoping he could get a midday XC flight. The wind had picked up to over 30 mph on launch, and we tried to wait it out. The radio towers reverberated in the wind, sounding like semis on the interstate. Andrew recited Sandia's mantra: "When the towers are humming, the pilots are bumming." We abandoned our posts when winds increased to 50 mph. Andrew lamented, "It could have been the perfect XC day."

The next morning a big group of pilots took the fly-in to Farley's, a NW-facing ridge site outside of Grants and across the desert valley from La Jara. The wind at Farley's was 15 to 20 mph and coming in strong cycles. One by one pilots launched only to find rough air and no thermals.



Plenty of open desert for landing at La Jara



La Jara's steep, rocky launch

Albuquerque on a smooth sled run and made a good landing.

The next morning Andrew suggested we drive to their SW-facing ridge site outside of Grants – La Jara. Art, a H-1 pilot with no soaring experience, joined us. The drive was incredible! I was mesmerized by the 80- to 100-mile views across flat desert toward tall flat mesas. It

and ready for this new step in flying and had a clean, strong launch. He turned along the ridge and was soaring for his first time. We were all stoked! After 30 minutes aloft and 1500' over launch, Art decided to fly back for a top landing in a huge field with a windsock. He soon radioed that he was down OK – he'd had his first soaring flight, first top landing,



Getting ready to fly from the Peak



A pilot modeling the fly-in shirt while enjoying the view from the tram

We rested in the shade of our gliders and listened for dusties. Whether we flew or not, the scene was incredible. Yellow and purple cactus blooms spotted our set-up area. Time flew by, even while we could not. Finally, the cycles got lighter, with lulls interspersed. I was the last to launch – I ran hard and immediately was lifted up. I had launched into the glass-off! Andrew radioed up that I should enjoy it as long as I could – “You came a long way for this. Enjoy it!” After an hour and a half, I landed in sweet glassy air and we all went to Grants for Chinese. So funny to travel from Tennessee to New Mexico to eat Chinese. I love this country!

The last day of the fly-in found us enjoying another morning sled run from Sandia Crest. In the Big Sky LZ we planned an evening tram ride up to the

Peak launch with assurance of a glass-off flight. The tram took us up to a tourist site with a gift shop and restaurant. We were on a rush schedule. If we did not launch before 6:30 p.m., we couldn't fly. It seems restaurant guests are more interested in hang glider launches than eating, and if we were not airborne by 6:30 we'd be disrupting the restaurant operation.

The slope launch was steep and rocky, with wind gusting above 20 mph. Out front to the left hung the tram wires, to the right

were those skyscraper granite spires. I stepped up to launch in a relatively good cycle and cleared, and the glassy elevator took me up. I banked right to follow the ridge and within two passes found myself 1000 over. No stress, no worry, I get to explore and play. Flying over the Thumb I hit a thermal that carried me to 2800' over. Now, at over 13,000 feet MSL, we worked light lift above the heated granite spires. Our gliders swooped, circled, and streaked across the Sandia sky like a group of swifts chasing insects in the cool evening glass. A two-finger gap between the sun and the horizon signaled us to take the long glide out to the LZ. Buoyant air and bubbles of lift carried us on a lazy, reluctant final glide.



The view from the tram towards the Peak



Launching from the Peak's steep and rocky slope

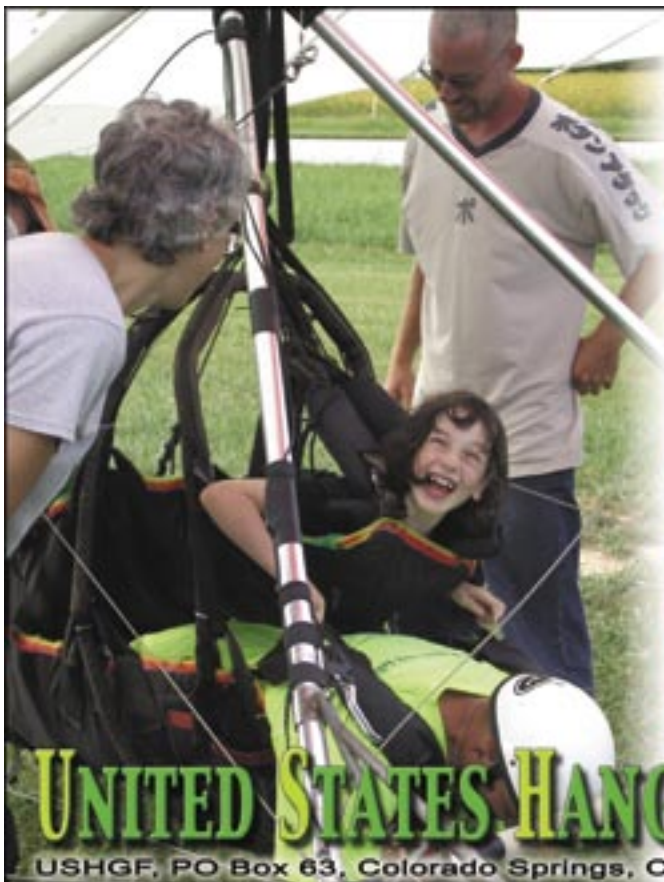


Loading gliders on the tram for an evening flight from the Peak

That evening, we barbequed at a pilot's home near Big Sky LZ with the city of Albuquerque sparkling in the valley below our mountainside party spot. Andrew's children, Mirek and Avalon, drew the raffle numbers and lots of flying gifts provided by event sponsors were given away. New Mexico – the Land of Enchantment! – and the great pilot community of Albuquerque had provided one of the best weeks of my life. We'd flown every day, visiting four different sites and soaring each one for at least an hour and a half. And yes, people in New Mexico really are that nice!

John Christof, USHGA #74068, is a H-4 with 407 hours. He lives in Monteagle, Tennessee, where he works as park manager of the beautiful South Cumberland Recreation Area. When he can't fly, he is an avid biker and kayaker.

The Sandia Soaring Association would like to thank all the event sponsors, with special thanks to Flytec, High Energy, Aeros, Wills Wing, Moyes, Attack Tubes, Hall Brothers, and of course the USHGA. For more information about flying Sandia and New Mexico, visit www.flysandia.org.



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Photo: Ralph Sickingner