

Paragliding over the mountains and oceans of Cape Town

An intensive two-day paragliding course in South Africa's Western Cape leaves Tarquin Cooper hungry for much, much more



The author and his instructor paraglide above the seaside town of Hermanus | Image: Tarquin Cooper

WHERE TO FIND



Tarquin Cooper travelled as a guest of Black Tomato (020-7426 9888; blacktomato.com), which offers a tailor-made weekend trip to Cape Town with a two-day introductory paragliding course with Wallend-Air Paragliding School, including flights, two nights at The Silo hotel and all transfers, from £2,940 per person.

MARCH 23 2018 / **TARQUIN COOPER**



Few cities in the world are as spectacularly situated as **Cape Town**. It's hammered on one side by the crashing Atlantic surf, lapped on the other by the warmer Indian Ocean and overlooked by the iconic Table Mountain. There is only one place that allows you to truly appreciate the landscape – and that's from the air.

Paragliding is the closest one can get to flying like a bird, soaring the sea breeze along **mountain crests**. It is flying at its simplest and purest; and the **Western Cape** is one of the best places to learn how to do it – even in a weekend crash course.



FRIDAY 18.10



Mastering the art of pull-ups | Image: Tarquin Cooper

Cape Town may seem an extreme choice for a weekend getaway, but thanks to direct overnight flights and just a two-hour time difference, it works. I'm in the air by 7pm and on the ground in Cape Town 11 hours later.

SATURDAY 09.00

I arrive at **The Silo**, one of Africa's most talked-about new hotels, but there's only enough time for a quick coffee and a change of clothes before I'm back outside and off with Pete Wallenda, one of **South Africa's** top paraglider pilots.

Paragliders spend a lot of time looking at the weather, particularly what the wind is doing, and nowhere more so than in a city like Cape Town, where a notorious southeaster sweeps hard across the city – making **flying** here impossible today, it turns out.

“We’re going to Hermanus,” Wallenda declares. The coastal town, about a two-hour drive east, is famous for the whales that visit in the autumn, but paragliders are more interested in its onshore wind. There’s another reason to head out: the regular tourist tandem flight in Cape Town is a short top to bottom trip from Signal Hill to the **beach**. “We call it a *foefie*,” says Wallenda. “At its best it’s only going to last between seven and 11 minutes, whereas in somewhere like Porterville you can fly for four hours.”

I perk up: that's the true flying experience I'm after. "Porterville is where we're going tomorrow," he affirms.

SATURDAY 11.30

Before any flying at all, however, I need to complete some training. At a take-off site in the hills above Hermanus, I find myself strapped into a harness with the wing laid out in front of me. "Time to do some pull-ups," says Wallenda. The idea is to haul up the wing to an overhead position to get a feeling for how it performs.

I wait for the wind to inflate the wing and then bring it up above my head. That's the easy part; the trick is to keep it there by toggling left and right with the brake lines – and not be dragged by the wind into the bushes. Unfortunately, that's exactly where I end up.

"Some people get it in a few hours," he says. "Others can take, well, a bit longer."

SATURDAY 12.00

Wallenda explains that to stay airborne, paragliders must hunt thermals, or warm pockets of air. The idea is, once they're located, to use them to spiral upwards. At the top of a thermal column one is then free to fly to the next point, gliding at a ratio of up to 12m of forward travel for every 1m lost in descent, depending on the wind.



The author practises ground-handling on the white sands of Betty's Bay | Image: Tarquin Cooper

“Paragliding is freedom; it’s exhilarating and fun,” Wallenda tells me. “It’s also frustrating. It requires all of your senses and brains to stay up. But it’s a surprisingly peaceful and amazing experience.”

He double checks the buckles on my harness – it’s time to show me what the sport’s all about. “When I say **run**, run!” he says. He inflates the wing and pulls it up overhead. “*Run!*”

We start galloping towards the edge. It gets closer. I wonder if we’re going to make it. I grip the straps hard and keep running – and then a huge invisible hand abruptly lifts us off the ground. My legs continue to pedal away beneath me, like a *Road Runner* character.

Wallenda instructs me to sit right back into the seat of the harness – it’s surprisingly comfortable – and settle in. I exhale deeply; everything’s OK. We didn’t plunge off the edge. I look around at the wide surf break on Hermanus’s beach and realise... I’m actually flying.

SATURDAY 12.30

For half an hour Wallenda navigates up and down the escarpment, using thermals and the sea breeze to maintain our height, showing me how to observe our ground speed, recognise the wind direction and work out likely places to find thermals. It isn’t just high adrenaline – it’s something far better.

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Baboons at Cape Peninsula | Image: Getty Images

He then demonstrates some acro moves, putting in a few “death spirals”. I feel the G-force ratchet up as we bank hard to the left – and something else, stirring in the depths of my stomach. Uh-oh. Fortunately we level out before the queasiness has a chance to progress.

SATURDAY 13.30

We break for fresh fish and chips and a cold beer at the Harbour Rock restaurant in town, but the day is far from over. The path to becoming a Jedi of the skies involves hours of ground-handling. Much of the full pilot's course, which lasts nine days, sees pupils playing in the dunes with a wing. That's where we're headed next.

SATURDAY 15.00

We drive further along the coast to Betty's Bay. Under the glare of a scorching African sun and on some of the whitest sand I've ever seen, I lift up the wing and attempt to control it. I scuttle left and right like a crab as I desperately fight for control, but the wind wins, dragging me across the sand. For 20, 30, 40 minutes the routine continues. But then, just once, and all at once, everything falls into place: I ease the wing up overhead, it pulls me to the left but I'm able to meet it, toggling the correct line to compensate. It stays overhead. I have control – momentarily.

SATURDAY 17.00



The author paraglides along the 100km escarpment of the Olifantsrivier mountains in Porterville | Image: Tarquin Cooper

The drive back to Cape Town follows the stunning scenic route along the coast; I spend most of it asleep. Just after 5pm, I'm deposited at The Silo, built into six floors of an old grain silo in the city's V&A Waterfront, above the **city's** new Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa.

SATURDAY 18.00

Cape Town's water shortage is well publicised. The **hotel's** bath plugs have been removed, and guests are asked to shower for less than 90 seconds. I'm in and out in under 40. Then it's a taxi to Umi's on the Camps Bay strip, for an evening of sushi and **chilled white** with an old friend.

SUNDAY 06.15

My suite faces east and I'm woken by an incredible sunrise over the harbour. Today's plan is to log some cross-country flying in Porterville, about 145km to the northeast. It's described in paragliding circles as "Africa's big distance **game park**" owing to a 100km west-facing escarpment that offers the potential for flying a long, long way.

SUNDAY 10.30



The Silo Hotel's Royal Suite

After a short walk we reach the launch site, the mercury nudging 33°C. Wallenda has the glider out in no time and I'm soon in my harness, **helmet** fastened. No chit-chat today; I know the drill. He gets the wing up and then we sprint for the edge, taking off into the southerly breeze. But

we struggle to gain altitude – a temperature inversion is limiting thermal development – and after 40 minutes in the air, fighting turbulent conditions, we're back on the ground.

"It was pretty bumpy out there," he says. I don't disagree.

SUNDAY 12.00

We're picked up by the driver and taken back to the launch site, where we wait. And wait. With a bit more warmth in the sun, it's possible we might have a better chance of staying high. We choose our moment and launch again. We're in luck: we hit a thermal, soaring to over 1,100m. It gives us a bit more room to play with – and, importantly, allows me the chance to take the reins. Wallenda instructs but I'm very much in the pilot's seat, toggling left and right to steer our course. With the wind behind us, we hit 50kph. Now, I really feel the exhilaration of flying. Ahead we spot two eagles gliding above the rock. "Aim for where they are," says Wallenda. Below we spot a troop of over 50 baboons scampering across the parched veld – there's no missing it's **Africa** down there.

After an hour in the air, covering over 20km, we turn around, but the headwind is too strong to make any distance, reducing our ground speed to just 5kph. The only option is to bail. As we come in to land, I hand the brake handles back to Wallenda, then watch our shadow as the ground comes up to meet us. With feet planted once again on terra firma, I vow not to keep them there for long.

SUNDAY 14.00

Time to drive back to the city. Another quick turnaround at the hotel, and I'm picked up at 5.30pm for the 8.20pm flight back to **Gatwick**.

Somewhere near the equator we hit a patch of turbulence; in my sleeping-waking state I'm transported back to the paraglider, feeling the wind on my face. We touch down at 6.15am. I head into town, but my head remains very much in the clouds.