

'Rewarding . . . but a bit more difficult.'

JULIAN TODD EXPLORES AUSTRIA'S LOSER PLATEAU

All photos: Julian Todd

View from the Loser take-off



IN 1976 MEMBERS OF THE CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY CAVING CLUB WERE LOOKING FOR PASTURES NEW. They wrote in their report⁽¹⁾: 'Why Austria? Basically for a change after several successive years in the Pyrenees, but we had been told that Austrian Limestone is relatively unexplored - something of an understatement as it turned out. We contacted Walter Klappacher (area organiser for caving in the Salzburg region) and he put us in touch with Karl Gaisberger who lives in Altaussee. Karl was invaluable; he knew the area, told us what was worth doing, got us up toll roads free, fixed up a trip in Mammuthöhle, caved with us and drank with us. Jont was essential as Karl had no English and the rest of us no German unless it was Vic talking canoeing. The area is excellent - beer, caving, climbing, walking, canoeing, sailing, even hang-gliding if you have a lunatic urge, so a caving expedition can have plenty of sidelines.'

As of 2014, the Schwarzmooskogel-Höhlensystem within the Loser Plateau has been explored to the length of 104km, making it the second longest cave in Austria. I have been on most of the CUCC summer expeditions since 1987.

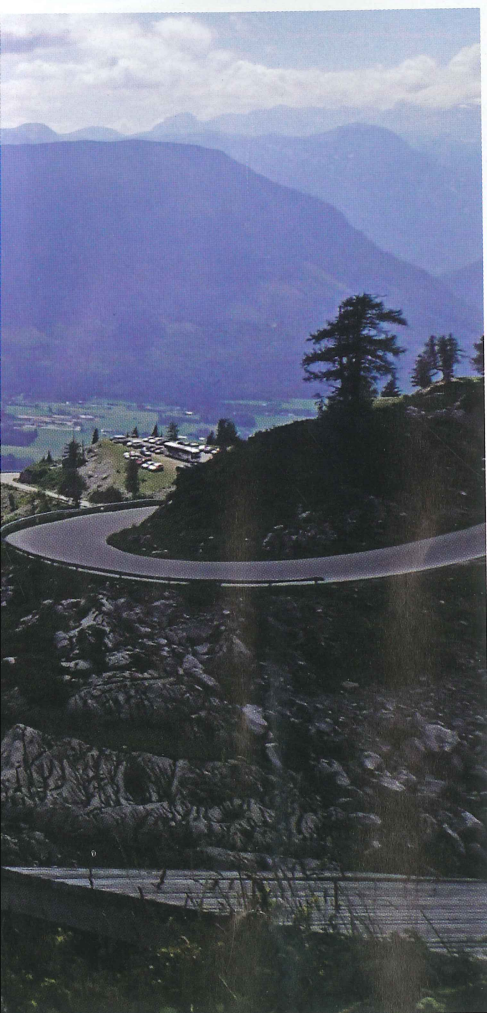
I learnt to hang-glide in 1989 and gave it up in 1997. Then, in 2012, I bought new Sport 2 from Wills Wing with the letters 'HSMWorks' stitched to the underside and began flying it off this dang hill instead of caving in it.

Loser is certainly intimidating. There are scary limestone cliffs on all sides of take-off that probably to generate rotor no matter what the wind state is; you face into a huge blue lake that looks like the bottom of a volcanic crater with no way out; and the landing field, in the village of Altaussee, is surrounded on all sides by buildings and cars. In his *Best Flying Sites of the Alps* book Oliver Guenay writes that Loser is '... rewarding but a bit more difficult.'

If you're feeling faint-hearted, there are always the play slopes of Greifenburg a short three-hour drive south, where the weather is often better. Austria has a justified reputation for terrible weather. When it goes bad it can be shockingly bad for weeks with no respite. You have to go with the flow, particularly if it's 15mm of overnight rain creating a river in the campsite and filling your tent with slugs. There are worse places to be, like in a cave.



Looking towards Loser from the Trisselwand



The CUCC Austrian expedition has a Base Camp, known as Hilde's after the proprietor of the Gasthof Staud'n Wirt. Hilde's used to be full of cavers most evenings, drinking beer and planning their next 12-hour pushing trip to the edge of the known universe. But, since the discovery of Steinbrückenhöhle (the Stone Bridge) on the plateau in 1999, they've taken to living up there most of the time, occasionally coming down for a shower or to fetch another 100m coil of rope and some sacks

of indescribable food substances from the supply tent. They have not proven to be a pool of reliable retrieve drivers.

I've had a lonely couple of summers flying from the Loser. The local hang gliders don't come out unless conditions are absolutely perfect (which rarely happens, in which case everyone is going to go XC and land somewhere else and not meet up again), so I've had to work things out on my own.

One thing I have learnt (several times!) is that if you mess about with the zip on your harness for too long after take-off you will lose that critical hundred metres in altitude at the start of the flight and drop below the lift zone, from which it is practically impossible to recover. You must stay above higher ground, even if it is just 50m above it. And also, never descend on the wrong side of the cliff above the lake, looking for lift that isn't there. That's a bad place to be.

Last year I befriended a young novice paraglider who was spending his summer



Flashback to 1990: Julian and the Cambridge University Club's Atlas

working the night shift at a hotel. I'd get him out of bed at around midday and drive him straight up the hill. He was keen enough to walk back to the top and drive my car down if I was still in the air. This year I've had to do that job for myself. It takes about an hour and a half to hike 800m straight up the forest tracks to reach the car park. It's no big deal after the third or fourth time you do it.

Paragliders have the option of several other quality sites in the neighbourhood, such as taking the cable car up Krippenstein on the near side of the Dachstein, or flying from Schladming on the far side of this 2995m high mountain which dominates the horizon. I like the paragliders. When you're on your own in the Loser car park, rigging your glider and fending off cars and motorbikes who keep wanting to park in front of the ramp, you begin to doubt whether you're doing the right thing. Then the paragliders take off from a mound further up the track and waft past the take-off ramp like fairies heading for the Loserhutte restaurant, where they either soar or go down on the guaranteed thermal that always works if anything works. When they're up, you know it's a good day.

On Sunday August 17th last year there was nobody else on the hill. No hang gliders. No paragliders at all. The site's information sheet explains in big red letters⁽²⁾: 'Be especially careful when the wind is from the west. Westerly winds produce wind rotors, which simulate updrafts near the launching sites! Warning! Warning! Warning! The lake poses a great danger when the wind is from the west!'

You can guess what the wind forecast was. But this was the first sunny day in over a week. The weather had got me so down that I had even gone caving, twice. Once down Tunnockschacht (named after the Tunnocks chocolate biscuit) and once down the new cave called Balconyhöhle (because the entrance is on a balcony of a 30m wide funnel of shattered rubble).

The wind seemed okay to me. Who was to say otherwise? I did, though, pick my moment to run off the ramp very carefully. I waited an exceedingly long time before I was happy that the particular interval of headwind was firmly enough established to get away safely. Only the crowds of tourists waiting to see the take-off got frustrated. I had no pressure from any other fliers forming a line behind me.

The flight was absolutely amazing. I got high and followed my usual route from Loser across the Altaussee lake to the Trisselwand, and from there across the Grundlesee lake into the Bad Mitterndorf valley, which is enclosed and doesn't seem to experience valley winds. Last year one of the locals on take-off described to me the best spots for thermals around the Grundlesee lake. None of them worked. However, by going towards them, I was drawn so completely outside my comfort zone (roughly a 45 degree cone above the landing field) that I was forced to improvise. Now I have my own favourite hot spots across this familiar landscape. I have



Julian on the Loser take-off

also landed in the Bad Mitterndorf valley enough times to know where the flags and windsocks are.

Beyond Bad Mitterndorf is the Grimming, a teetering 2351m high pile of bare limestone slabs festooned with sailplanes from the airstrip in the Enns valley at the foot of the mountain. My goal is to one day complete the classic triangle route known as the Schlommerdreieck. You follow the Enns valley west until you are above the high Dachstein with its glacier, and then go over the back on a 24km direct glide to the landing field in Altaussee.

In the past, at the turn of the 1990s when I originally flew here, everything was difficult. There was no internet, no mobile phones, no GoPro cameras to help you recover your experiences that your brain recorded as a blur, no GPS, no bright white LEDs that use no battery power, no Flytech flight computers with the little UP arrow that directs you back to where you fell out of the last thermal, and no Camelbak pouches to stop you getting so dehydrated that you eventually throw-up your breakfast all over Altaussee.

In those days there were student hang gliding clubs in almost every university (along with the caving clubs). One year I helped three other caving students who had learnt to hang glide launch off the Loser on our rusty university gliders. These were so old they didn't even have a floating cross-tube. One fell off the side of the ramp on take-off (which is why I'm so careful about it), and another deliberately flew her Clubman onto the treetops

because it was a better option than drowning in the lake. And I wasted my time with a seriously crap glider and even crappier vario, never once getting to cloudbase no matter how hard I tried.

Now it's like a dream. Hang gliding works for me. But people are less adventurous for new sites than they used to be. Or they are working too hard at their jobs these days in spite of all this amazing tech that should have given us more leisure time, for the same reasons that it's made live flight planning like surfing the web.

The CUCC expedition to the Loser Plateau will come around again, and the chances are I'll be rigging in the car park on my own again. That is unless any of you pilots learn to cave over the winter - or at least

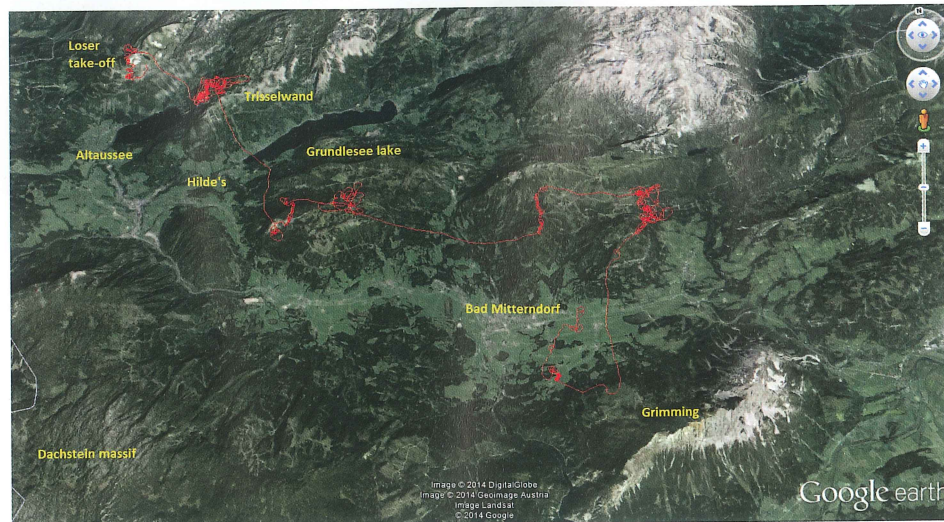
learn how to live with cavers on an expedition and invite yourselves along. I don't think cavers are ever going to learn to fly hang gliders again. That era is long gone with the demise of the university clubs and the entire training infrastructure. I am the only one!

Notes

1. <http://expo.survex.com/years/1976/report.htm>

2. www.loser.at/summer/summerresort-loser/flying-on-the-loser.html

Julian Todd blogs at www.freesteel.co.uk/wpblog.



A good day at the Loser Plateau