

How Safe Is Paragliding

The good news is, it's safer than it's Extreme Sports image would have you think. Of all the so-called Extreme Sports, paragliding has perhaps the widest range of participants. In Japan, you will find old people serenely gliding across dormant volcano slopes. Through the Alps in France, you might spot daring young men pushing the limits of their skills and their paragliders while flying cross-country in challenging conditions.

Have you never flown in a paraglider, either alone or in a tandem wing? Are you hankering to just give it a try, but not yet sure whether you actually want to take it up as a sport? If the answer to both questions is yes, then this article is for you.

The advertisers of paragliding adventure holidays take advantage of the sport's currently good safety record. You might see lines such as this:

"Bali Adventure Paragliding is safe, secure and is a totally new experience not to be missed."

Well, the second bit is totally true, the first bit might be glossing over the occasional twisted ankle or bruise from beginners attempting their very first landings. But under ideal tourist-flying conditions, yes, it's pretty safe and secure! And of course, you can't go wrong if you are under a tandem wing with an instructor doing all the flying.

Now of course, every sport has its risks. Also, aviation in general has it's risks. So Paragliding, being both an adventure sport and a form of aviation, also has a degree of risk. When it comes to safety though, the aviation side of paragliding is all-important. All pilots are trained to operate their aircraft safely, by minimizing potential risks. In some cases it's a matter of pure judgement such as during an approach and landing. Or it might mean sticking rigidly to a check list while preparing to leave the ground. The joy of flying, year after year after year, is the reward for doing it right.

It has been said that paragliding is as safe or as dangerous as the pilot makes it. There's a lot of truth in this, from at least a couple of angles. Firstly, pilot's choose what conditions to fly in. Secondly, they choose how far to stretch their piloting skills. Let's make an analogy with driving a motor vehicle now.

A learner driver can choose to drive around the back blocks for a while, or head straight out onto the freeway at rush hour. That's choosing driving conditions.

Secondly, he or she can choose to observe the speed limits and traffic signs, or push the pedal to the metal while running red lights and overtaking everyone in the way. That's choosing how far driving skills are pushed.

Just for a moment, let's consider what the most dangerous thing about paragliding might be. Many years of experience have led some instructors to believe that this is in fact the ease with which people can learn paragliding. After picking up the basics quite quickly, some novices can start to think that they know a lot more about flying than they really do. This can lead to over-confidence and increased risk-taking. The only way to get really good and fly safely in more challenging conditions is to fly frequently, over a long period of time.

For some reason, people who have a passing interest in paragliding also have an interest in the statistics of the sport. Particularly the fatalities count. Fair enough, I guess we all instinctively try to assess our risk of dying when trying something new and exciting! So let's get the death-and-gloom out of the way first. The figures are actually quite reassuring, given the many, many thousands of people flying and the flight hours they are accumulating.

The stats for horse-riding and paragliding make for an interesting comparison. And... you guessed it, more people die from being thrown off a horse than crashing a paraglider.

In a similar vein, I came across an insurance report that listed paragliding fatalities per participant to be less than motorcycle riding. Now that doesn't surprise me, I've never trusted those things. Motorbikes that is.

Another outdoor activity which compares with paragliding in terms of injury rate per participant is snowmobiling. Of which I know nothing, coming from The Great Dry Flat Land, Australia.

Despite there being quite a few thousand active paraglider pilots in the U.S. during 2005, only 3 people died in paraglider accidents. This continued a trend towards fewer paragliding fatalities each year in the U.S.

Now, to be accurate and truthful, the situation in Europe has been much worse in recent years, in terms of total fatalities. But in Europe, there are many times as many active pilots as there are in the U.S. And a big percentage of them are 'pushing the envelope' by flying in challenging weather over very challenging terrain. The Alps, no less! As a beginner, you will not fit that category, hence those particular stats need not worry you.

Enough of death and dying, I'll just touch on a couple of U.S. stats now. In 2005, only 50 accident reports relating to paragliding were received, which was a 5 year low. Also in 2005 in the U.S., 32 pilots or passengers suffered paragliding

injuries. 15 of these people required an overnight stay in hospital.www.faa.gov World Aviation Portal Aviation Ads Aviation Business Directory Aviation Links Index