

Choosing a Hang Gliding / Paragliding School

by G.W. Meadows

Many of you reading this have either just had your first experience with hang gliding/paragliding or are considering it. Hang gliding and paragliding are without a doubt the most exhilarating sports in which a person can participate, but sometimes a new pilot will have had a bad experience learning to fly that can be attributed solely to the instructor. The bad experience I'm referring to doesn't necessarily concern flying itself. Sometimes, although not very often, an instructor can be confusing, preoccupied or downright rude. This can leave a student with a bad impression of the sport, and he is not likely to continue, so I'd like to point you in the right direction when it comes to choosing an instructor or school.

One of the most common mistakes prospective students make is to select a school solely on the basis of price. Just as when choosing a brain surgeon, look for skill first and price second. There are a number of "cut rate" schools out there (although their numbers are shrinking) that are definitely the last place you want to learn to fly. For a professional school to stay in business, it must charge a reasonable amount of money for lessons. The gliders you abuse during your lessons will have to be replaced in time, and the money for that has to come from somewhere. No one - absolutely no one - is getting rich in the sport. The instructors who do it right are making somewhere between a paltry and a reasonable living. When considering the cost of lessons, remember: you get what you pay for.

The first thing you do want to look for when considering a hang gliding or paragliding school is professionalism. Of course, the first thing to look for is HGFA certification.

Hang/paragliding instruction is a business, so when checking out a school notice how professional the instructor or school is. Ask them what kind of equipment they use and why. Not all equipment has to be new, but if an instructor is using older equipment make sure he has a good reason for it (other than cost). Many schools must use older style gliders because of the constraints of their training facility. Older gliders don't glide as far as the newer ones, and they may be used in training areas where the size of the landing zone is a concern. Other schools may use more up-to-date equipment, so the student will be able to transition to his own new glider with little or no need to relearn some basic flying skills.

Another way to judge professionalism is by how you are dealt with over the phone. If you are treated like a customer and not someone who is a bother, you can figure that this person sincerely wants your business and cares about you, the student. If the prospective instructor answers the phone professionally and is able to carry on an intelligent, informative conversation, satisfactorily answering all your questions, you will want to consider him further. If he is short with you, or if you feel you know no more after hanging up the phone than you did before, rule this guy out as your new instructor.

Another good way to find out where to take lessons is to go to the nearest (and sometimes only) flying site, and ask as many pilots as you can where to take lessons. You'll learn an incredible amount about the folks you're considering dealing with from the people who have already dealt with them. Don't make a judgement on the basis of one person's bad experience, but if you hear numerous bad reports about a particular instructor you should be cautious.

Setting business hours and sticking to them is another indicator of professionalism. Not all schools have to be open five or six days a week to be effective, but when considering the choices remember that you not only want instruction, you want someone whom you can contact on a regular basis to ask questions and get advice about learning to fly. An instructor should be there for you.

Manufacturer support and representation is a must. If the school you are considering does not represent a manufacturer's line of gliders, that should be a clue that the school wasn't professional enough for a manufacturer to allow them to sell its gliders. However, just because a school does represent a manufacturer doesn't mean that it is professional. You'll still need to check them out.

Don't pass up a school just because it's new. Obviously they will not have a track record, but the instructors they've hired or the instructor who started the school will have one. In this case, check into the instructor's background. Check Hang Gliding or Paragliding magazine for ratings issued by a particular instructor; this will be an indicator of his experience and professionalism.

I hope this has been helpful. With just a little investigation you can determine if the school you're considering is the place to learn. Use common sense and not your bank account as the deciding factor and you'll do well. Good luck in your flying career, and welcome to the most rewarding experience you'll ever have.