

Wasserkuppe Visit

Somewhere over the horizon one always hopes to find some holy ground, a Mecca if you will, for the beliefs one holds near and dear. For me, soaring is more than sport; it is a pursuit of challenges that brings honest communion with nature. Soaring with friends is always more than a competition of children to establish a pecking order, but a joint experiment which raises each of us to higher levels. As our skills expand, we do more than soar further and higher, but cross the sky with the confidence we belong flying wing on wing with the birds.

Where is the soaring pilot's Mecca? Our sky crosses international boundaries and continental borders, so one must look further than ones own nation and scour the earth in its entirety. For the simple blessing of lift I have chosen the [Sierra Nevada Mountains / Great Basin of Nevada, USA](#) as my place of worship; but today I look beyond geography and into time for a spiritual ground belonging to the great pioneers who have paved the way for me. Today my search has brought me to a sports center in Germany called the Wasserkuppe.

In this report I will just share the excitement of my visit. If you are unfamiliar with the history of this place the following links that will open in a new window are excellent:

<http://www.soaringissa.org/wasserkuppe/>

<http://www.fact-index.com/w/wa/wasserkuppe.html>

<http://victorian.fortunecity.com/hurst/664/wings.html>

Climbing the hillside I see a monument that is good testimony that others have felt warmth to this place in the past. The outline of a bird statue peers over the lush and picturesque countryside.



However arriving by car at the beginning of this 21st Century one is greeted with another image: a tourist attraction reminiscent of Disneyland with its gift shops and tour buses.



But does this atmosphere detract from or add to the experience? The soaring pilot has always felt like a poor stepchild of the athletic world who is unappreciated by the population as whole. Perhaps this tourist attraction is not a bad experience, but the predictable result of the exposure desired by soaring pilots for years.

Soaring equipment was dominated in the beginning by sailplanes, or gliders. As hang gliders emerged in our recent history fighting to share the mountains and airspace, conflict was inevitable with the young hippie hang glider pilots feeling shunned by the established sailplane pilots. Oddly enough as paragliders began gracing our skies, the hang glider pilots fell into the same trap of prejudice, adopting the same self-serving arguments they used to hear from their sailplane brethren. Throw in some modelers of Radio Controlled gliders and with the variety of speed size and weight of the four types of soaring aircraft one not need look far to find reasons to not play together. But here at the Wasserkuppe all soaring flight is honored and managed so all can play from the perch of the control tower.



With just a glance skyward one is blessed to see all types of soaring displayed with the models speeding about in the foreground, hang gliders and paragliders foot launching from the many faceted mountain side, and sailplanes being towed aloft from the runways atop this high ground above the scenic German countryside. The four disciplines appear to bring in more than just the four times as many spectators and explain quite well the gift shop and bungee playground for the visiting guests.

In between the busy attractions lays a modest round building in which are housed the real treasures of the Wasserkuppe: the museum. More than just a gallery of art, or display of technology, each display represents both the beauty of past flight and the struggles of the people to conquer the air with just the skills of our feathered friends. One passes the friendly warden to enter the circular room with the gliders in the center and informational



displays upon the wall. One is first greeted by three of [Otto Lilienthal](#)'s hang gliders from the turn of the last century suspended amongst the large collection of famous gliders that are the main characters of fabled stories. The Rhoensperber, [Grunau Baby](#), [Rhoenbussard](#), and countless more appear overlapped and piled together in such a way one just has to marvel how they all can occupy such a small space. And from the rafters the [Minimoa](#) and others are hung with same kind of complexity.





In a wing to the side, people can sit and watch the videos of informational material while above them hang model gliders of equal historic value to the full size ones in the middle of the room. A simple joystick and pedal contraption connected to a model encourage the visitor and child in all of us to sit down and experience how the controls work to affect the sailplanes of yesterday and today. A walk along the walls is both a history lesson and place to see displays the instruments of days gone by.

I have the great pleasure of coming to the Wasserkuppe with the intent of sharing some material which I hope the museum will find interesting, and this appears to make me exceptionally welcomed by a friendly staff who wish to show me more than just the current exhibits. We take a trip around back to a non descript work shop and I am introduced to Josef (Sepp) Kurz and Otto Becker who are applying the woodworking tools of the past and the skills of an era gone by to restore even more treasures to the



glorious beauty they deserve. Today it is the Horton 33 flying wing upon which they focus their labor of love. Up close one



can see the enormity of this design that pictures and models just can't capture. The thickness of the wing is beyond the average of any time period as the designer attempted to carry a wooded spar to extreme lengths. Its massive 30 meter wing is rich with cord as well, and I must make Guenter stand by the wing when I take a picture so that there is some perspective to its size.

Finished and standing alone on the floor of the workshop is the Reiher III in all her glory. Another Reiher stands amongst the pride of the museum floor as well, but this well finished example sits before me without the proverbial velvet rope keeping back and forcing me to admire from a distance. Certainly all these gliders have a beauty about them that will be appreciated forever, but unlike the blonde bombshell that is the Minimoa or Rhoensperber, the Reiher is both curvaceous and timeless in her beauty like a Sophia Loren. Here on the shop floor I am able to have that special up close moment with her like sharing a Cappuccino with Sophia, rather than just admiring her on the big screen.



But I digress.

My hosts share with me their vision into the future of their museum. Behind the modest rotund museum, construction of a large glamorous building is taking place as workmen erect 8.5 ton beams to create a great space worthy of the displays which will be sheltered and hung from the roof.





The displays previewed today will soon be in this building for all to see. Especially look for the glider pictured below, a distance record holder.



The really special part of my visit is the effort of the staff to help me with my research. Because all will soon see the many gliders being prepared for the new building, the unique treatment I hope to share with the reader is the gathering of minds I experienced exploring some history of gliding at Darmstadt.



First there is [Walter Kahn](#) seated at the far left, author of: A Glider Pilot Bold, whose enthusiasm for the subject is infectious. Wally introduces me to [Fred Weinholtz](#), founder of the Club Class in Germany during the 1960's as well as many other efforts to promote the sport. He is seated in the middle. Fred is a board member of the museum and is tireless in his job of holding my hand through this adventure. Fred brings me together with [Manfred Penning](#) who has done great work researching gliding at Mainz including the first women's workshop. Then we get together with [Katrin Schapka](#) who works towards creating a museum at Darmstadt. She is at the far left of second picture, Ursula Eckstein, author of gliding history at Darmstadt is in the middle, and [Guenter Schapka](#), LS engineer. We all work under the leadership of the museums director: Theo Rack, a titan of industry. (see below)



On Theo's belt one can see the keys to his office and it is his office that dwell the treasures that our little group has special permission to review. Through the modest door are shelves of material that holds the documentation of our past, which we all find the most interesting gold mine of all.



Here in Theo's office we sit and share the fruits of each others work, search the archives for more, and chatter like excited school children until the day has turned into night.



Although I came to worship golden idols, what I really find are men who could be gods like Robert Mandetzky, below.



My personal enrichment has been monumental; therefore it will be very difficult to give back more than I have taken. But if soaring is my religion, and this a place of worship, I must try or remain in the hedonistic hell I know only too well. So look for a good story of soaring in the thirties to come from my little laptop in the future. I will fight to present more than just a plot of technological progress, but of educational development and international cooperation to spread the gospel. The story will not only contain the adventures of colorful characters, but the loves and passions of the humans who wished to fly like the birds. Our history is not simply that of a developing corporation, it is the story a visionary part of the human race who dared look skyward and ventured on to fulfill a dream despite the many setbacks and tragedies that pioneering flight can bring.



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xcnick (cross country nick)
Nutty Professor (November Papa)

Links:
Main link:
<http://www.segelflugmuseum.de/>