

A gliding honeymoon in Israel

Mike Morgulis, Air Sailing

“So dear, what shall we do on our honeymoon?”

OBVIOUS ANSWERS LEAP TO MIND of course, but then again, not everyone likes gliding. I'm fortunate that my bride, Thuy, enjoys flying as much as I do, so when I suggested we find a gliding club during our honeymoon in Israel her reply was an instantaneous and enthusiastic “yes!”

Why Israel? Well, it's my roots and now it's Thuy's adopted roots too. Why during the Intifada? Well, why not? After all, despite everything going on, the Israelis still live there, get married, have babies, and go gliding too. So, with some research on the internet and some e-mail correspondence, we made plans to visit the Negev Gliding Club in early November, the only club of the four in Israel which would be operating when we wanted to fly.

Israel is no stranger to gliding. In 1927, Tzvi Nadav discovered that the British would allow Jews to organize themselves into gliding clubs, so later that year he traveled to Paris to study the sport. In March 1933 he helped found the Flying Camel Club, and in 1935 gliding was a featured sport in the Maccabiah games (Jewish Olympics) in Tel Aviv that brought in many international competitors, most of whom left their gliders behind to aid the development of a budding air force and the national airline. A pristine *Wrona* primary glider from the Hadera club is displayed at the Israel Air Force Museum at Hatzerim and serves as a reminder of the country's humble origins in aviation.

During the week the Israel Air Force owns the skies, but during the Sabbath they rest their students and the gliding clubs jump into action. So instead of going to synagogue on Saturday morning, Thuy and I drove quietly through Jerusalem (feeling somewhat guilty for ducking morning services) and then hurtled down routes #1 and #40 towards Be'er Sheva in our little white Suzuki rental car. After an hour and a half drive through gorgeous bougainvillea and citrus groves, we arrived at Sede Taiman, the civilian airfield just outside of Be'ér Sheva. The gliders were being rolled out and the operation was just getting underway.

The field itself began as an RAF base in WW2; the 2000 foot runway is surrounded with arched concrete shelters for the Spitfires and south of the runway are earth embankments for the bombers that once served here. The field served the IAF from 1948 to 1966 and was turned over to the public in 1967. The field gets its name from the Taimani (Yemenite) Jews who were airlifted into Israel in 1949 during “Operation Magic Carpet”. The gliding club began on the field in 1961 with a Slingsby T-31 trainer. The fleet had obviously improved since then. When we looked around we saw a Lark IS-28, two Grob 102's, a G103, K7, and we were told that there were an-

other two G103's and a Discus in trailers. The towplane is an ex-IAF Super Cub.

To go flying we would have to find the folks in charge, so we looked for the person wearing a tee-shirt and white hat... We introduced ourselves to Yehuda, a nice fellow who was at the flightline trailer, who then introduced us to Amnon Harari, the club's president. Amnon assigned two pilots to take us up, Menachem would fly with Thuy in the Lark 28 (affectionately known as “Romani” for its Romanian origin) and Raeli would fly with me in the Grob 103 (known as Gulu Zulu, having been purchased from a South African club and its registration 4X-GGZ). Raeli looked over my logs and FAI certificate and, with a grin, said that he'd rather look out the canopy if I wanted to do all the flying. Unless I was an Israeli citizen I couldn't fly solo, which I already knew, so having a back seat pilot was a must, but I was glad for the company too.

During our flight Raeli showed himself to be a great tour guide and historian. We lined up alongside runway 32, I introduced Raeli to CISTRSCO and he informed me of a big “O” at the end of the runway. It had been four years since I'd flown a Grob behind a Super Cub, but this was my first asphalt take-off. The temperature on the ground was a mere 34 degrees Celsius, the Cub staggered into the sky, somewhat reminiscent of my earlier days at Air Sailing on a late August afternoon. Then came the trees at the end of the runway that I had assumed were one of the forests that were being planted throughout the country. The big “O” at the end turned out to be a tree-lined army base with canvas tents covering up all but five feet of many 120mm gun barrels — it was a tank base. Rope break options? Well, straight ahead definitely was *not* one of them.

We released at 2000 and found a nice thermal shortly thereafter. Raeli was quick to point out the no-fly zone to the south aka Hatzerim Air Force base. A huge base, it is home to flight training as well as operational fighter squadrons, and home to the IAF museum we visited the next day. It had been a few years since I had last flown the Grob, having gotten used to the much nimbler and lighter Krosnos. Raeli commented that we all would enjoy the thermal if I slowed down from my “must be excited” 60 knots down to my old friend 50 knots. We shot up to 3400 in no time and headed off to see some sights.

Below, irrigated terraces were helping spread the greenery to the desert, a Wadi (seasonal dry river bed) was easily identifiable by the trees along its path. Of special note were the Turkish trenches cut into the desert floor from the WW1 battle between the Turks and the British. Coincidentally, my childhood public school was named after the British victor at the time, General Allenby. We



I should name the folks from right to left in true Israeli/Hebrew fashion: Amnon Harari, Raeli Saraf, me, Thuy, ?, and Menachem.

flew over Be'ér Sheva itself and enjoyed some more thermals that had sprung up in strength, but were capped a bit low due to an inversion that had blown in from the Mediterranean. Had it been clearer, we could have seen both the Mediterranean and Dead Sea.

Although a cross-country flight was possible that day, we had a one hour limit with the international beer penalty. Raeli suggested that we use some "creative" means to lose altitude as we ventured back to the airfield, so we cleared our airspace and did some wingovers. Mine was more of a stall turn while Raeli's were more of an Immel-mann-type affair. His talents as an air force pilot were clearly apparent, his control inputs were smooth, and there was little difference in the G's on the way up or on the way down. I demonstrated Steve Newfield's "rolling on the point" exercise that Raeli seemed to enjoy perfecting. And finally, we flew alongside the club's K7 before joining the circuit. Raeli handled the radio as my rusty Hebrew vocabulary never included circuit patter.

I did my SWAFTS check and demonstrated the modified "European circuit". I immediately thanked myself for that as the undershoot was none-to-inviting, consisting mostly of scrub, undulating hills, a ravine, and what I can only vaguely describe as a bomb crater. I wanted to represent Canada strongly and I could feel the many judging eyes that parallel any gliding club's runway. The hold-off was one of my best and the rollout was so smooth I didn't hear the chirp from the wheel that I expected to accompany my first landing on asphalt. Raeli gave me kudos for my landing, and Thuy reported that others on the ground thought it was *metzuyan* (excellent). Euphoria set in for me afterwards and Raeli and I replayed the hour-long flight during the walk back with the plane.

Thuy flew with Menachem in the Lark, enjoying forty-five minutes of flight. I'm fortunate that Thuy loves gliding, and enjoys taking the controls whenever the opportunity arises. She reported that the Lark was heavier on the stick than the Krosno, but otherwise easy to handle. Menachem treated her to the thermals that Raeli and I

had just enjoyed, and they were joined in the thermal by a few other gliders and a large bird of prey at the top. Menachem performed some wingovers for Thuy and also showed her the local scenery, Be'ér Sheva and the vast desert hills in the surrounding area. Then in true gliding fashion, the lift cycled, the sky went blue, and everything that was aloft locally landed within minutes, mixed in with some of the powered traffic that shared the strip with the club.

The last sailplane down was their venerable K7. There's nothing quite like the sound of a tail skid being eaten by asphalt and then amplified by the fabric fuselage except maybe hauling a Grumman canoe over many, many rocks.

We had a bit of time to wander around and photograph the Spitfire shelters, talk with the club members, and just enjoy the scene. Raeli, Amnon, Yehuda, Avinoam and Menachem all provided us with helpful hints and driving routes to get to our following destinations. The longest drive would be from the Dead Sea up to the Sea of Galilee, about five hours drive. The Galilee is home to the Megiddo Gliding Club, a popular goal for the Negev club members who fly cross-county. The distance is only 150 kilometres but it requires delicate navigating around the Ben Gurion International Airport air traffic control zone as well as the West Bank, which must be overflown by at least 6000 feet above ground. Thermals often take one to 8000 feet and on the rare occasions up over 10,000 feet. While the national gliding association does not use the FAI badge system yet, the Negev club is very proud of one of its members, Rafi Luski, who competed in a recent World Gliding Championships. We're looking forward to seeing more of their accomplishments on the international scene in the near future.

With a few group photos and a multitude of handshakes Thuy and I parted for Be'ér Sheva. That afternoon we passed out in the hotel room and were awakened by the concierge bearing a tray of dried fruit and free champagne for the honeymooners, a gift from the hotel. It was the second in a long line of free bottles that inebriated us over the course of two weeks. We awoke early the next morning and drove to Hatzetim Air Force Base to enjoy the IAF museum up close. I had only researched it on the internet and the photos definitely did not do the site justice. There are planes there from year one, as previously mentioned, when the IAF was little more than a gliding club auto-towing on a beach. The first planes of the IAF were not the better-known Spitfires but rather an underpowered Czech version of the Me-109, the Avia S199. There are also P-51's, Harvards, Mirage jets, Phantom, Kfirs, A-4, and a recently retired F-15 with four enemy roundels painted below the cockpit. All aircraft had seen active duty, and a rich history was provided on a plaque alongside each plane. For the aviation enthusiast, this museum is a must. Take lots of water though, there is little shade other than under the eucalyptus trees in the anti-aircraft static displays that we had to share with the local lizards.

I have kept in touch with a few of the club members since our return. Only after asking Amnon if there were many ex-IAF pilots in the club did I learn that Raeli was the only IAF pilot, and Amnon himself a retired Brigadier-General. His gentle and very humorous demeanor belied what one would expect of a typical military ⇒ p17

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general, but then again, Israel is not your typical country. We're looking forward to returning to fly with our friends. You can visit them online at our site or theirs:

<www3.sympatico.ca/mike.morgulis> or
<www.negevgliding.com>.

Postscript:

5 July was a great soaring day, so I skipped off up to Air Sailing and spent some time getting reacquainted with my old girlfriend, CF-RXN, the Ka6CR. We got up over 4000 feet and then the whole sky just popped with cu, and on my next flight my student and I were up to 6200 feet.

This student flight is a neat epilogue to my story, because the student was Michael Avraham from the Negev Gliding Club. He's now in Canada on a work contract and was solo back in Israel. He's taken most of the rust off and with a bit of paperwork will be enjoying the thermals in Southern Ontario solo in the near future. Funny, all it took was us going over there and suddenly the world got just that much smaller. ❖