

# easy glider

Hang gliding may not be an acrophobe's first choice of hobbies. Well, one acrophobe's, anyway.

At no point during my 29 years has "daredevil" been a word used to describe me.

I'm cut from what I'd describe as the adventurous, yet responsibly cautious cloth, and on my very worst days, I'm a stick giving only a passing glance toward the mud. That is to say, with one glaring exception: Don't ask me to travel to the top of a world-famous monument to take in the view; don't ask me to accompany you to an exotic local, then request my companionship as we bungee jump from a picturesque cliff. If you do, you'll encounter my abject refusal; no way am I going to allow that much space to pass between the tips of my toes and solid ground. I'm afraid of heights.

My variety of acrophobia was manageable fear, one easily kept close to the cuff, and manageable from day to day. As long as I don't look out the window, I'm OK with

Courtney Hazlett



flying; I'll still visit friends who live on the upper floors of Manhattan's taller apartment buildings, but I won't take in the view. My fear of heights has pretty much been off the radar until two years ago when I threw a weekend-long bachelorette party for my best friend. As part of the weekend festivities, I arranged a white-water rafting trip for our group of seven along the Youghiogheny River. It ended with our scaling a large rock, and the only way back to the river was to jump. I did, more than just reluctantly, and I haven't been right since.

#### ◆ Taking the plunge

On the eve of my family's near-annual excursion to the Outer Banks, North Carolina, it occurred to me that this might be the time and place to deal with my issues of altitude. Situated about 80 minutes from Norfolk, Virginia, the Outer Banks' Kitty Hawk Kites has been "teaching the world to fly since 1974." They give more than 15,000 lessons a year as one of the biggest hang gliding schools in the world. Numbers aside, the place is steeped in history. Students take off from the dunes at Jockey's Ridge State Park, the East Coast's largest natural sand dune and the same stretch of sand that played host to the Wright Brothers' first flight back in 1903. I witnessed many a man, woman, and child take these lessons, and no one, as far as I knew, ever experienced anything close to injury, or a mental meltdown. Perhaps this was my golden ticket to terror-free trips above sea level. It was time to give Kitty Hawk Kites a ring.

Bruce Weaver, Kitty Hawk Kites' manager, took the call. I felt it best to be up

front about my motives.

"Bruce, I'm afraid of heights, so I want to take some hang gliding lessons to try to get over it," I say.

"Well, you know you probably won't get more than 10 to 15 feet off the ground," he replies.

"Trust me, that's plenty."

"We have a tandem flight that we offer," Bruce says slyly. "Drag ya up behind a plane, let you go at about 2,000 feet. That oughta get ya over your fear."

"No thanks, Bruce. I think the one on the dunes will be just fine."

"Ya sure?"

"Positive. In fact, just thinking about the 2,000 feet has made me nauseous. Baby steps, Bruce. Baby steps."

And with that, I was committed.

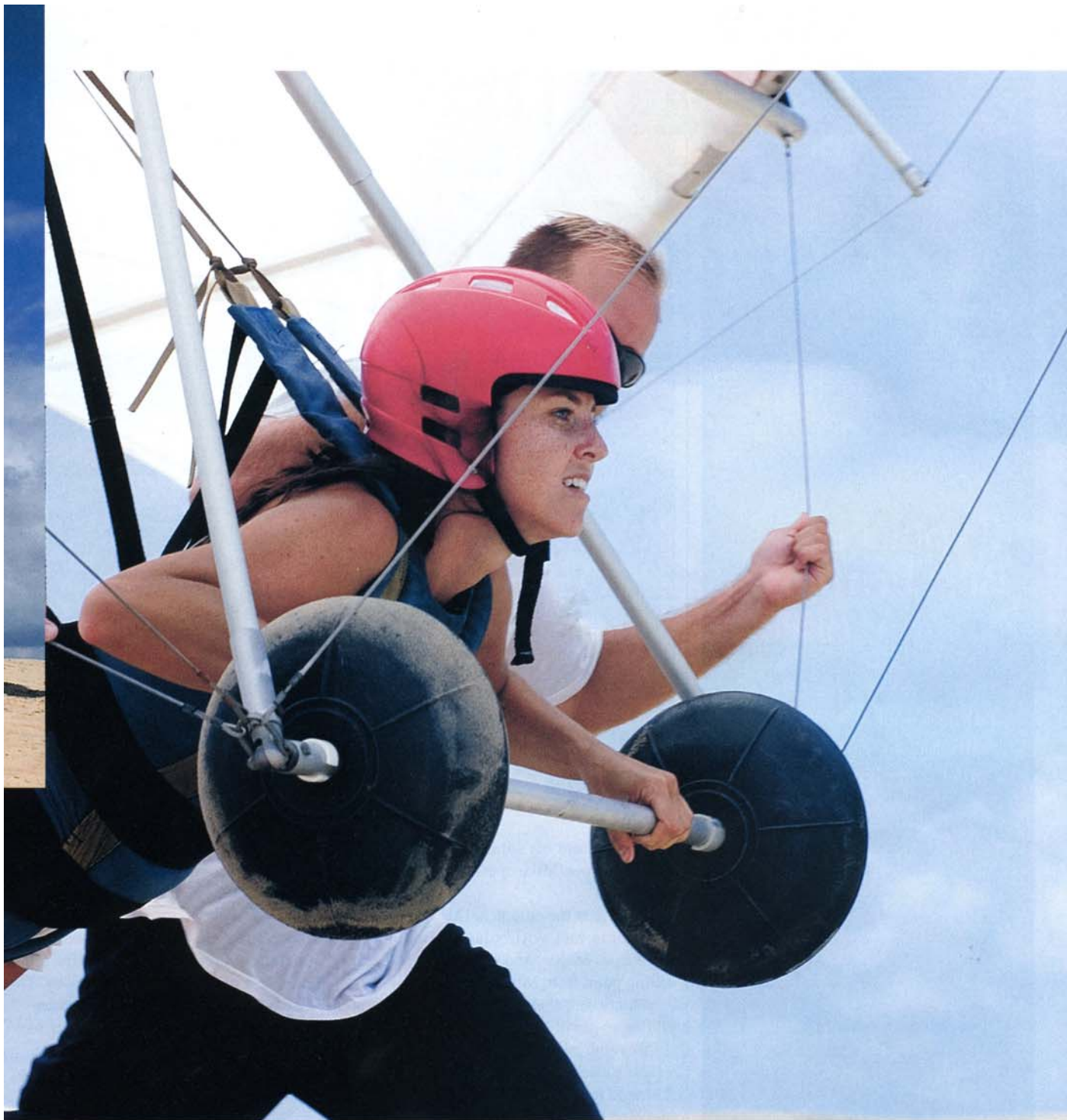
#### ◆ Getting airborne

The day my lesson was scheduled, the sky opened and a huge storm system tracked through the area. Although Kitty Hawk Kites will often hold a class in some drizzle, they don't mess around with the heavy stuff — and that would include lightning. So, after having an entire extra day to bite my nails in anticipation, I was on my way the very next morning. The first order of business upon arriving at the foot of the dunes: sign my life away. I gripped the pen and signed and initialed no fewer

than a dozen statements with phrases such as: "There is no warranty of merchantability or that the said glider is fit for any purpose" and "I may suffer a broken limb, paralysis, or fatal injury." Super.

After the release signing, I made my way to a small classroom filled mostly with preteen boys and their parents. I wouldn't have minded a parent then, maybe to hold my hand. As we waited for an instructor to walk us through the basics of hang gliders, a video was played. It showed hang gliding mavens soaring thousands of feet in the air, above water, sand, mountains. And they aren't just flying on an even plane. They're managing cartwheels. I'm sure it was meant as a way to entertain us, but I didn't find it a selling point. Could I lose control and find myself twirling through the air?

Before I could obsess too much about an inadvertent acrobatic move that could leave me with facial features different from the ones I started with, our instructor, Mike Cosner, entered the room. Mike, 24, is from Richmond, Virginia, and embodies the very idea of beach-dwelling-recent-col-



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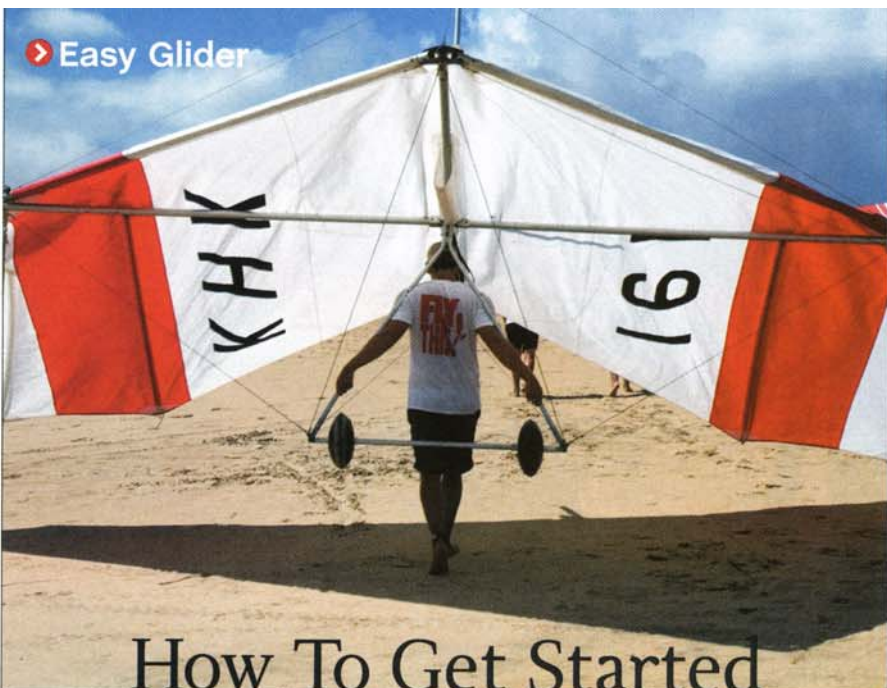
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## Easy Glider



## How To Get Started

Kitty Hawk Kites is the granddaddy of hang gliding on the East Coast, and if you are anywhere in the Norfolk vicinity, it's worth a trip out there. You can book online at [www.kittyhawk.com](http://www.kittyhawk.com) or ring them up at (877) 359-8447.

They offer a variety of lessons: A three-hour beginner lesson will cost \$89, and you'll make about five flights or more, depending on the size of your group; once you've mastered that, more skill-focused dune lessons are available (price: \$79); tandem lessons at 2,000 feet and airport tows are also available, and no experience is necessary for either (prices begin at \$129 for these).

According to Kitty Hawk Kites, to be proficient enough for soaring off mountains, you need about 20 lessons. If you love the sport enough to want to buy a hang glider, it's not terribly expensive. Basically, it involves a one-time investment of about \$3,000 to \$4,000 for an entry-level glider. If the history of the sport intrigues you, check out [www.kittyhawk.com/rogallo](http://www.kittyhawk.com/rogallo) for the Rogallo foundation, named for the guy who started the phenomenon and still resides in the Outer Banks.

lege-grad, from his sunburned nose down to tanned toes. Mike opened the class with a question:

"Where is the engine in this aircraft?"

This is met with silence. Obviously, there is no engine, and apparently, this is a selling point from Mike's point of view.

"There isn't one! That's what makes hang gliding so great! It's a foot-launch aircraft."

Beyond being a foot-launch aircraft, which means exactly what it sounds like it should mean, the hang glider is a simple machine with a design that hasn't changed much since a NASA scientist, Francis Rogallo, designed it in the 1940s. Basically, it's a big wing with a crossbar of sorts, under which the pilot is suspended. The pilot holds onto a control bar and steers the aircraft. Mike went on to equate this sport, the very one whose main focus is to drop from the sky, to skiing, a sport with a focus on keeping mostly in contact with the ground.

"When you snow ski, you go to the top of a mountain, and in order to go forward,

you have to go down, with gravity," Mike explains. As with skiing, your body movement controls the hang glider. To turn the glider, you move your body from side to side. To control pitch, you push the main bar of the hang glider out and away from your body, or pull it in toward your body. Then Mike posed the million-dollar question:

"What happens if you take your hands off the bar?"

Without waiting to be called upon, a young boy pipes up: "You die."

"Maybe this isn't the sport for you," Mike responds. Was he reading my mind?

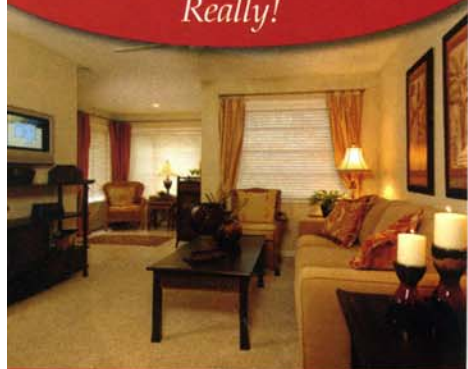
It was explained to us that the main goal for the day was to learn to relax while in the air, and to land, preferably on your feet. There are several methods of landing, and the ideal method involves pushing the bar you're holding away from you, which allows you to drop gracefully to the sand. On both feet. The not-so-preferable method is affectionately referred to as the Fred Flintstone method and, aside from the silly footwork, causes the nose of the hang

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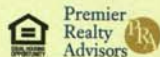


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glider to dive into the sand. Though it won't hurt you, it surely isn't attractive. That said, if you don't launch properly — running as fast as you can, glider gripped in your hands with arms mostly outstretched — you won't really have to worry about landing. And you might not have to worry about the flight part, either.

Mike surveyed the wind direction to determine where we'd launch. To get the required lift to get airborne, one needs to run into the wind. Unfortunately, the wind direction that morning required us to launch from a part of the sand dunes that admittedly was not very steep. All the same, I'd be required to run full-bore, relying only on a swath of fabric (and the supervision of instructors) for my safety.

Finally, it was time to hook in and go. Suddenly suspended from the hang glider's frame by hooking in with two carabineers, I was surprisingly calm. The hang glider is a much more formidable rig than I had anticipated. In my mind, I expected something that felt more like a big kite, attached to me by a flimsy bar. I felt, dare I say, safe.

#### ♦ A wing and a prayer

With an instructor running alongside, we took off toward the dune's edge. There was a moment when I realized that in only a pace or two, I'd either fall or be airborne. But by the time I wrapped my brain around that thought, I was, you guessed it, airborne.

The whole flight lasted no more than 10 seconds. But consider how long 10 seconds is if, say, one was standing at the edge

of a very steep, yet scenic cliff posing for a picture in a stiff breeze. It can seem longer than it really is, and my trip at altitude, so to speak, was no different. Surprisingly, though, I wasn't panicked, and I didn't even have a death grip on the crossbar. During those 10 seconds, I was so at ease that I actually let out a laugh and had time to consider the really important things, like whether my pose from the hang glider was photogenic or not. Before I knew it, the instructors to either side of the glider were talking me through a landing. Gently pushing the nose out, I drifted toward the ground and landed on my feet with a little bit of grace.

I made about seven runs, and each one got easier. The breeze picked up a bit, and that allowed for some longer rides. I did an inadvertent Flintstone landing on one, but I laughed it off, and had at least one really decent flight, where I felt like I was truly soaring. Better yet, it didn't even bother me. And as for my fear of heights? I'm definitely better off than I was before the lessons, at least in situations where there's soft sand beneath me. I wouldn't say that one morning on the dunes at Jockey's Ridge healed me permanently, and I wouldn't say that I'm ready for that 2,000-foot-high tandem flight, but hey, there's always next year. And if I ever encounter that rock from the rafting trip, I'm going to climb it, and jump right back in the water. ☺

**Courtney Hazlett** overcame her fear of higher education at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.