

Steve Bernier and Hope Philbrick give a thumbs-up once airborne.



STEVE BERNIER

The foot launch pad at the top of Lookout Mountain



HOPE S. PHILBRICK

TAKING FLIGHT

Hang gliding in Chattanooga, Tenn.

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

In multi-story open atriums, you'd never see me leaning up against the railing to look at sights below. Doing so requires trusting that the railing will not give way and no one will push me up and over—neither of which is absolutely guaranteed. So what convinced me to go hang gliding? Several folks who grinned through stories of breathtaking vistas enticed me. I negotiated with my fears: Falling from heights is what scares me, not being up in them. Since a hang glider is open from the start of the flight, it can't fail like a parachute. Besides, I'd be with an instructor, not alone. So I signed up for a tandem flight, and, as preparation, spent the next 24 hours visualizing myself strapped to a hang glider and calmly

TRAVEL

stepping off a mountain.

On the drive up to Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga, Tenn., I learned that my main assumption was wrong. I would not step into the air; an airplane would tow me up. I grew nervous, unable to visualize details. When told that winds were too strong for flight, I wasn't disappointed. But the idea of hang gliding took root, and a few months later I returned to Lookout Mountain to try again.

The morning of my scheduled flight

was warm with calm winds, ideal conditions for hang gliding. I reported first to the launch/pro shop at the top of Lookout Mountain for check-in and then navigated a twisted gravel road down to the Landing Zone from which tandem flights launch. After locating my contact, I watched a safety-orientation video in which the students appeared calm, happy and engaged throughout their flights. It eased my concerns.

Next, my instructor, Steve Bernier—who seemed like a guy who enjoyed life enough to land safely—fit me with a harness and helmet. He positioned the hang glider and said, “Step into my office,” gesturing for me to step over a metal bar into the small triangular space behind it and between other bars. He hooked the tow rope to each of us; it resembled three strands of macramé jute stitched together with black fishing line. *That* connected us to the airplane? I watched other takeoffs, trying to see how people were positioned. This had been my primary concern since

Steve Bernier and Hope Philbrick approach for landing.

learning of aerotow: How could I possibly run fast enough to keep up with an airplane? I soon got my answer: Wheels are mounted to the hang glider for takeoff and

landing. “This is going to feel awkward,” said Bernier, instructing me to grab the bar at my feet and step back while leaning forward until I could lift my feet off the ground. I hung suspended several inches off the ground, Bernier underneath me and to my right.

“Now we get acquainted,” he said, asking me to grasp handles on each side of his harness. “Ready?” He waved his arm to signal the airplane pilot. It sped forward; we bumped along on the earth behind. Within seconds, we were airborne; the ride smoothed. The wind offered a welcome cool on the hot summer day, yet it wasn't too loud to prevent conversation.

Bernier explained that we'd get towed to 2,000 feet, pointing to the instrument on my left that measured altitude. As soon as we reached position, he dropped the tow line. The jolt felt at that moment was slighter than I'd anticipated. “When you feel bumps up here, it's nothing to worry about,” he said, explaining it was the air equivalent of riding ocean waves in a boat.

As we sailed the sky above Lookout Valley, Bernier taught me some basic moves: To turn left or right, simply press the front bar with that hand; to slow down, press the bar away; to speed up, pull it in. Tight turns made me nervous, so we drifted down in big loops, taking in the gorgeous view.

I wondered how many people who try hang gliding get hooked on it. “Lookout Mountain Flight Park teaches five times more pilots than any other hang-gliding school in the world,” said Bernier, who has taught at Lookout Mountain for two years but worked as a hang-gliding instructor for 11 years. “The last place I worked, there were a lot of first timers; here, a high percentage of people come back for certification—it's cool.”

After about 15 minutes, Bernier brought us in for landing, which was fast yet smooth. We rode back to the launch site on a golf cart, hang glider in tow. Bernier would take up dozens more people that day. I smiled at those already in line, knowing what fun awaited them. **SP**

IF YOU GO

Lookout Mountain Flight Park is approximately a two-hour drive from Atlanta.

WHAT TO EXPECT

A Discovery Tandem Flight costs \$139. Onboard pictures are an additional \$20. Flights last 12 to 20 minutes and are scheduled from 9 a.m. until dusk. Flights are available to people age 5 to 92, weighing less than 250 pounds.

WHERE TO STAY

Sky Harbor Bavarian Inn offers amazing views of Chattanooga and basic amenities, and it's about a half-hour drive to Lookout Mountain Flight Park. For details, call 423-821-8619, e-mail skyharborinn@aol.com, or visit www.skyharborbavarianinn.com.

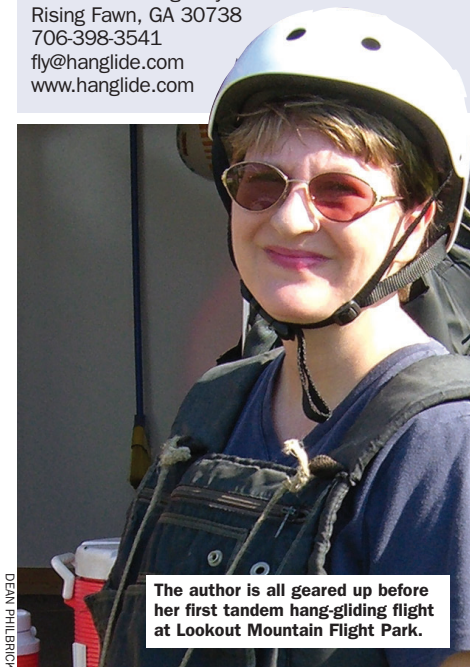
Lookout Mountain Flight Park offers a full-service campground with tent camping, cabin rentals and an RV park with full hookups in its 44-acre Landing Zone. Call the Landing Zone at 800-803-7788 for details.

WHAT ELSE TO DO

Visit a Chattanooga attraction, such as Rock City, Ruby Falls, the Bluff View Art District, Creative Discovery Museum, Lookout Mountain Incline Railway or the Tennessee Aquarium. For more information about what to see and do in Chattanooga, call 800-322-3344, or visit www.chattanoogaafun.com.

MORE INFO

Lookout Mountain Flight Park
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DEAN PHILBRICK

The author is all geared up before her first tandem hang-gliding flight at Lookout Mountain Flight Park.

Dan Link (left) instructs a student on the bunny hills.



HOPE S. PHILBRICK