

The Magic of Manilla

by Amir Izadi

The sun is out. Wispy mare's tails clouds stretch across a lazy azure blue sky. We sit on launch soaking up the ozone-unfiltered rays of the big golden ball of fire we depend on for lift. Far in the distance, we can barely make out a row of well-developed cumulus clouds. They are too far away to cause us worry and just far



enough to give us hope of impending instability. Already, cycles are coming up the slope and the first few competitors are gearing up for launch. We smile in perfect bliss, knowing it will be a good day and just waiting for the right moment to time our departure.

Suddenly, a scuffle breaks out on launch! Several people are jockeying for position, fighting over one particular spot that doesn't look any more appealing than its immediate surroundings. "What's going on?" I ask a fellow pilot who's calmly observing the struggle. "Oh, this happens all the time at these competitions here." He says "Didn't you see? God just launched from that spot, and those pilots think that if they do the same they'll fly farther.



'God' of course, is Godfrey Wenness, the organizer of this event and former paragliding distance world record holder. He also happens to own Mt. Bora here in Manilla, Australia – one of the best and most consistent flying sites in the world for open distance cross country flying. Godfrey knows this area like the back of his hand, which explains his groupies, who follow him everywhere, and not just when he's flying.

It is late in the Australian summer and at the tail end of the worst drought in the country's history. Eighteen months without rain set much of Australia ablaze with fires and created "diabolical" flying conditions in Manilla earlier in the year, with cloud base up to 16,000 feet on some days. Unfortunately (or fortunately, in some respects), the drought has been relieved somewhat the week before by heavy rains causing wide spread flooding, enough to force the hangliding competitions to get cancelled. The ground is still wet when we begin, and as a result we have much lower cloud bases (6000-9000 ft.) and weaker conditions than expected for this time of the year.

Originally, I had plans to go to Brazil for my winter holidays, but when I heard of this opportunity to partake in back to back competitions over two solid weeks in the Australian and New Zealand nationals, I couldn't resist and quickly booked my flight. The same thought must have passed through all of the other competitors' minds since both competitions have rapidly filled up to the maximum number of 140 pilots who have come from all around the world. The entry fee is a very reasonable \$150 usd, which includes everything except retrieves. It soon becomes apparent why retrieves are not included, since the majority of the tasks are a race to goal and pilots are often scattered over a 100km course. Even with people teamed up, it costs an extra \$30/day for retrieves.



Manilla is a quiet, sleepy, agricultural town with a population of about 1800. It sits in the heart of Australia's cowboy country only an hour away from Tamworth, the nation's country music capital. For such a small town, the influx of some 200 international pilots is a major event. The town mayor as well as the chaplain are present at the opening ceremonies where we receive a very warm welcome and are sent off with a prayer. Shops and restaurants stay open late for our benefit and, surprisingly, there is a good Chinese restaurant in town.



Initially, I am leery of trying Chinese food in rural Australia, but Chinese migrants have a long history of working as laborers here and have developed deep roots and have brought their excellent cuisine with them. We stay at Eric and Francois' Caravan Park which has every amenity imaginable as well as being very quiet and affordable. Originally from France, they came here a few years ago on holiday and fell in love with the place and have stayed here ever since. Their humor and hospitality has made them many friends the world over.

The primary flying site around Manilla is Mt. Bora, which is an 800 feet bump in the middle of hundreds of miles of flat, agricultural lands and forests. The launches are wide and open in three different directions, making it an ideal place to hold a competition. But because of the short launch height, climbing out can sometimes be a



challenge. It is not uncommon to see even experienced pilots bomb out and come up for a second attempt. But once you do get up the possibilities are endless. You can pretty well fly in whichever direction the wind is blowing. It was from this very same hill in 1998 that Godfrey flew 335 km to claim the world paragliding distance record – a record that stood for

nearly five years, surviving many close attempts at breaking it, until June of last year when Will Gadd towed up in Texas and bettered it by almost 100 km. Godfrey, who believes that separate records should exist for foot and towed launch, arguably contends the record.

During the first few days of the Australian Nationals conditions are weak, which favor the lighter pilots and those who are patient. The recent rains combined with the unseasonably cold weather (it had snowed in the white mountains the night before) keeps the thermals suppressed in the 150-200ft./min range. On one day, three women are in the top 10, including the Japanese pilot Megumi who has been flying for just over a year and has little more than 50 hours. Interestingly, none of the local pilots do well in these conditions when, under normal circumstances, without a competition, they wouldn't bother to fly.



By the third day conditions improve considerably and we are able to get in a couple tasks in the 80-100km range. I can start to see what sort of potential this place has when during one of the tasks I manage 44 km on just two climbs. I also get a taste of rural Australian hospitality when I land on a deserted road with a dead radio battery and am greeted out of nowhere by a farmer offering me a cold beer and a cell phone. I ask him if he always drives around with cold beer in his car, and he says “Only when I see you guys dropping out of the sky like lemons. I know it sucks when you land.”

In all, we manage six valid tasks consisting of lots of technical flying as well as a couple of full on race days. Grant Middendorf of New Zealand wins the men’s category and the Kiwi girls sweep the podium led by Britta Stuede. The barbecue and awards ceremony are a big hit, but the high school band sounds like a bunch of screaming koala bears. Almost everyone has a go at arm wrestling, Australia’s national drinking sport. There are numerous prizes in multiple categories. Tor-Erik Stranna of Norway can barely juggle the handful of wind speed indicators he walks away with after winning in each of the three categories: veteran pilot, best serial class, and best DHV 2 class – a performance he repeats the following week at the New Zealand nationals.



One might wonder why the Kiwi Nationals would be held in Australia considering the quality of flying they have in their own country. The fact is, the weather in New Zealand is just not as consistent and, therefore, every other year they hold it at various sites around Australia. It was by sheer coincidence that the two national championships would be held one right after another at the same site. From a foreign pilot's perspective it was quite a treat, but unlikely to happen again in a long time. Judging from the success and turnout of this year's events maybe the two countries will coordinate future competitions.

With many of the same pilots from the Australian nationals in attendance, the pilots have by now settled into their daily routine and know which pilots to look to for inspiration and which to for entertainment. Mr. Sho of Japan livens up the days with his entertaining launch technique and his comical martial arts routines on launch. His secret weapon is the wood chips, which he uses as thermal markers by releasing them in flight. He'd tried toilet paper in the past, but that got tangled up in his lines. “Light wood chips have the same sink rate as the glider and don't get stuck in your lines,” he says. Nobody told him that only water and sand can be dropped from a glider.



Each day begins with an excellent weather briefing and an analysis and review of the previous day's task, complete with a computer-generated horse race of the leaders. Prizes are awarded to the top three finishers as well as the pilot who did the most stupid thing and survived. For this, the winner has to wear a toilet seat around their head while reciting their story before the entire group of competitors. Mr. Sho would often present the poor pilot with a few extra amenities like toilet paper or a newspaper.

The conditions for the Kiwi Nationals are great with cloud base near 10,000 feet on some days and about half of the pilots making goal. It starts to get more stable toward the end of the week and the tasks get progressively shorter. Amazingly, there seem to be pilots in goal at least every day, and almost an equal number in the bomb out fields – a sign of good task setting. In the end, Steve Ham of the UK wins the competition.



These two weeks were a hugely successful event, and great fun to boot. Besides the 140 competitors in each event, there were another 50 or so free flyers. Every facet of the competition – the site, the people, the organization, the scenery, the weather, the stories, the barbecues – was top notch. The only grumbling I heard

was from some of the local pilots who were a little disappointed that the flying conditions weren't as strong as they're used to. They must be a spoiled lot, because to me it's a success anytime one flies twelve valid tasks over a two-week period. And, in spite of the large gaggles and some times crowded skies, there were no major accidents. The only one that comes to mind was a mid-air collision between two relatively inexperienced pilots, resulting in a reserve toss and a torn canopy. Both pilots flew the next day.

Manilla has to be one of the best places in the world to fly. During the summer, conditions are next to perfect for long distance cross-country flying. The thermals are well mannered, the scenery is magic, the people are friendly and the infrastructure is good. Only a retrieval vehicle would be recommended, but even that is not necessary if one sticks to the main roads and has the luck of the leprechaun.

