

# Paragliding World Cup

Erzincan, Turkey

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by Amir Izadi

Photos by Murat Tuzer and Margit Nance

The silence of the crisp clear night is shattered by the sudden call to prayer: “Allahu Akbar, Allaa-AA-hu Akbar” the muezzin cries through the loudspeaker outside my hotel room in a voice still raspy from sleep. I bolt upright in bed, not having yet registered the cause of the noise and still groggy from the fifteen hour bus journey the day before from Istanbul. At any other time of the day I can say that the *azan* has a distinctively haunting and sacred quality, but at this hour of the morning I can only wish they lower the volume and give this particular muezzin some voice training.

A quick look outside to check the weather reveals nothing. It is too early to tell. I go back to sleep and when I wake up at midday the sun is bright and warm and sharply defined cumulus clouds, some towering up twice their width, are scattered across the cobalt blue sky. Just a few days ago I am later told, cloud base was at 4700 metres. Looks about the same today. Perfect. Where is everyone I wonder?

Erzincan sits in middle of an agricultural valley at an altitude of 1185 metres and is surrounded by dry, rocky ridges rising to 3700m. On the surface, the city leaves much to be desired. Even the guide book I have doesn't mention it as a destination worth a stopover. The reason being, it is in the heart of Turkey's earthquake zone and much of the town has been levelled by a series of the earthquakes, the worst in 1939 when nearly 33,000 people died. Wide and perfectly straight boulevards with meridians of struggling shrubbery crisscross each other in gridlike fashion, the result of an urban planners attempt to design a city from scratch with minimal effort, wary perhaps of potential future destruction. At least getting lost won't be much of a problem, I think to myself.

Though the city looks relatively modern, the people reflect a culture of time honoured tradition. In contrast

to Istanbul, the majority of women wear the *hijab* head covering and avert eye contact with men. Old men with beards and skull caps occupy park benches, some sitting idly counting worry beads, others huddled in groups absorbed in conversation. As much as Turkey likes to think of itself as European, it resembles more the Middle Eastern countries in everything from culture, religion, food, music and mentality.



I haven't a clue where to find the PWC headquarters and am not even sure I am in the competition. Though I registered last November, when I last checked I was still on the waiting list. I go to find an internet cafe.

By chance I run into a bunch of pilots who inform me that they've seen Semih Sayir, the meet organizer, who will take them up the mountain at 3 pm. We decide to go for lunch in the meantime. The food is a choice between pizza, kebab and a variety of Turkish goulashes. Thinking no bacteria would survive the fire hot oven, I order pizza. A mistake, as the pizza is way too salty but the kebab is great. I forget the cardinal rule of eating out in a foreign country: always order the local food.

At the appointed hour of 3 pm, two other pilots and myself are left standing on the street staring up at the clouds. The truck has come by at 2:30 and picked the others up. This is after all the Middle East where the relativity of time is a reality, not just a theory, and it works in both directions—people can arrive early or late.

The following day I go tandem with Scotty Marion in moderately strong (7m/s) conditions. At 3500m., close to cloud base, Scotty points to glider out of control. A yellow Boomerang is undergoing multiple asymmetrics followed by multiple surges and more asymmetrics. Within minutes the pilot has lost 1000 m. of altitude but finally the reserve opens and we breath a sigh of relief. Except then, we watch him being dragged along the ground for a few hundred metres before he manages to extricate himself from the harness. The glider, though, continues to be dragged another kilometer across the rocks. The pilot survives with only minor injuries, but his glider doesn't. The ride across the rocks has torn it to shreds.



Scotty and I manage a short cross-country flight before it starts to over-develop. I learn loads from Scotty and highly recommend a tandem flight with a top competition pilot as one of the best learning experiences. Shortly after we land we look up and see one of the Korean pilots coming down under his reserve. Apparently, he attempted a SAT from a steep spiral and ripped his Boomerang down the centre. We've had two reserve deployments in one day and the competition hasn't even yet begun.



The majority of the pilots arrive that night and share stories about their adventures in getting here. Registration goes without a hitch. I'm in. The competition begins.

**Day 1-** The day is cancelled because of bad weather.

**Day 2 -** 56.6 km task with 3 turnpoints.

Conditions look a little better, but early cumulus clouds and a low cloud base indicate a potential for over-development. We launch at 12:30 and the start window opens a half hour later. It being the first day of the comp,

the pilots aren't willing to venture beyond the one thermal that is working near launch. At one point it seems that all 95 pilots are in the same tight, elusive thermal. The first turnpoint is about 12 km from launch slightly out into the flats. I try to gain maximum height before heading to the turnpoint. On the way back my Bandit's lack of glide is evident. I am low and it takes me a while to climb out by which time over half of the pilots are almost out of sight. I scratch around in light thermals toward the second turnpoint which is actually in rain until they stop the task. Only three pilots: Alex Hoffer, Scotty Marion, and Shoichiro Tadana make it to goal before the task is called off. It is still a valid day.



Scotty says the key today was to be in the upper third of the sky near cloud base where the lapse rate was best. He and Alex headed up the ridge and scooted under the clouds ahead of others who took a different route and fell well behind. One pilot lost control of his glider and was lucky to survive. He had his reserve out but hadn't the time to actually release it. He packed it back into his harness and relaunched.

**Day 3 - 49 km. task with 3 turnpoints.**

The day is similar to yesterday, maybe a bit better. An inversion exists around 1500 m, just 300 m. below launch. From 1500-2500 meter the lapse rate is best, which is the place to be. The first thermal off launch is again tight and I have a close call with another pilot who rightly gives me shit afterwards. I've found it difficult to thermal with competition gliders since my glider banks well and I usually find myself turning a lot tighter than other pilots. It's bad etiquette to hog the core as I understand, though a few pilots do it regularly.



Most of the pilots make it to the first turnpoint about 16 km away without too much difficulty. On the way back to the ridge though a bunch of pilots sink out. I am close to doing the same, but manage a low save about 200 feet off the deck where I can hear the children yelling at me. Not wanting to get low again I opt for the security of maximum altitude wishing only to make goal no matter how long it takes. I make it to the 2nd turnpoint and am on my way to the 3rd with good altitude when I notice some black clouds and even a flash of lightening in the adjacent valley. Five minutes later I hear Xavier's voice over the radio: "All pilots, the task is stopped, repeat...." I think I could've made goal today, but unlike yesterday the fastest route was to stay low. Hans Bollinger wins by one second over Achim Joos.

I head toward the stadium in Erzincan where other pilots have landed, but come up a couple hundred metres short in an empty lot. I am immediately surrounded by children who trampel all over my lines in their attempt to get as close to me as possible. I try to be nice and answer the only question they know how to ask in English and which every child seems to want to try out on me: "What is your name?" I hear it again and again. After repeating my name at least

ten times, but to no avail as the question persists, I lose my patience and reply with a different name to every child. Their cheery expressions turn quizzical.

**Day 4** - 49.4 km. task with 3 turnpoints.

It rained hard the night before and again a low cloud base and early cumulus clouds portend the potential for overdevelopment. 10km/h cycles are starting to come through launch and Semih, the meet organizer, takes off on a glider much too small for him and promptly sinks out. Twenty minutes later the second wind dummy gets an asymmetric shortly after take off and crashes into the side of the hill injuring his arm. The third wind dummy is now too scared to launch. We decide to get off anyways in case it OD's which it never does. Everyone makes it to the first turnpoint 11km away within 10 minutes of each other. The sight of 100 gliders on glide is breathtaking.



I take the higher route again but am slowed by a headwind. The lead gaggle is just returning from the 2nd turnpoint as I'm on my way there. I'm in good position I think to myself and decide to go faster. I make the 2nd turnpoint but lose my patience and go on straight glide to the 3rd turnpoint thinking I will get something in the flats. Not to be. I land at the 3rd turnpoint and am picked up by a retrieval truck 10 minutes later with one other pilot, Steve Cox who

is more than a little miffed. Apparently, he was in the lead but got flushed when it shaded over only to watch 40 or so pilots pass over him and make it to goal. Hans Bollinger and Achim Joos are again first and second.

One of the German pilots plows into the side of the ambulance which is waiting at goal. He walks away uninjured but the ambulance looks the worse for wear with a big dent on its side. The day before the same ambulance got rearended by a taxi. We wonder if it will survive the week.

**Day 5** -55.4 km task with one turnpoint well out over flats.

I decide to shoot some video before I launch and am the last to take off. A mistake, as I need all the help I can get. I have the sky to myself off of launch and am thermalling when I look up and see the leaders 1000m. above me going on glide towards the first turnpoint. From my perspective it actually appears I might be able to cut them off and be in the lead, but my thermal drifts back to where they started their glide. There's no such thing as beginners luck in this sport

It's the first time we've gone this far west and the terrain proves quite the challenge since it is lightly sloped and at anytime one gets low there's a chance one will land on the desolate hillside far from any road. What makes it even more challenging is that we have to pass over a large military base which is riddled with silos and barbed wire



and is forbidden to land in. To make the point, we have been told that if we do land there neither our retrieval nor our safety is guaranteed.

The first turnpoint is easily enough reached by three quarters of the pilots but I only manage it after two low saves. The second turnpoint is well out over the flats and the half of the pilots that get back to the ridge and climb high seem to do better than those who take the more direct route. Still, no one makes goal or the minimum distance which was set at 50km. Only 200 points are allotted to the winner for the day and there is considerable grumbling on account of the low points received for all the hard work.



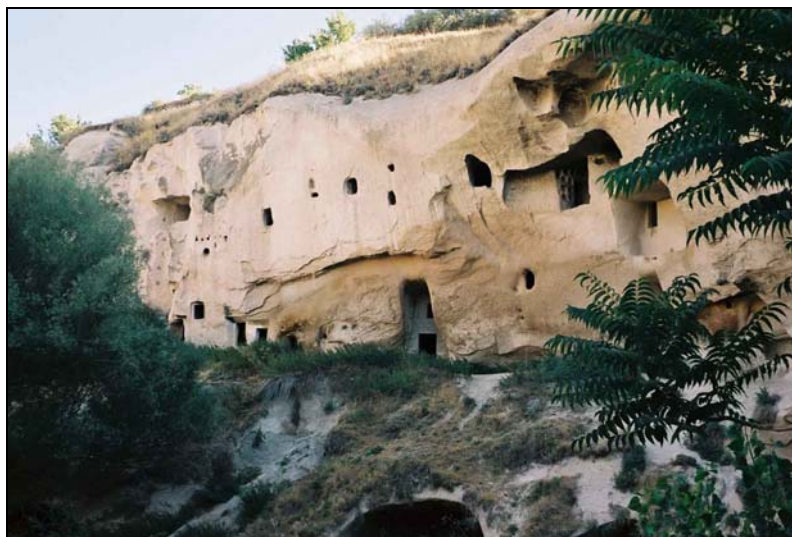
I just barely manage to avoid landing in the military base and get picked up by Louise Crandal in Semih's truck. However, she's unable to find reverse and we are stuck trying to turn tight onto another road. We don't wait for long before an army truck full of soldiers comes by. I flag them down and it takes all our strength to push the truck back up the hill. We find Semih who's busy on the radio organizing a retrieve for two French pilots who've

deployed their reserve and are stuck up in the mountains. One of them who speaks fine English with a heavy accent keeps asking in an anxious voice if we can "find a peilot who speks french?" "No!" replies Louise in a feigned french accent.

**Day 6** - The task set is the longest yet. It is a 70 km race to goal. There is a moderately strong east wind which will make it a fast race, but launching becomes difficult as it is completely cross. After some waiting a few straight cycles come up the hill and the launch window opens. The start is somewhat sketchy with multiple aborts and a few mishaps involving pilots being dragged across rocks. About 70 pilots take off before it starts to blow 25-30 km in every which way. The remaining 20 or so pilots are stranded on launch waiting for the wind to straighten out. Xavier has reservations about the conditions in light of what's happening at launch and decides to cancel the task before the start time is reached. The majority of pilots are quite dissappointed believing the danger was minimable and the task quite doable. However, as Xavier explains later, safety in the PWC is paramount and it is a competition for all the pilots, not just the top 10 or 20. I have the honour of being the first in goal, unfortunately not the one that counts.

**Day 7** - 73.5 km with 3 turnpoints.

The day looks the most promising so far. Cloud base is higher than it's been all week and there is little valley wind. It seems like the low pressure system has finally passed through. On the way up Scotty Marion suggests I get a good serial class wing and believes the UP

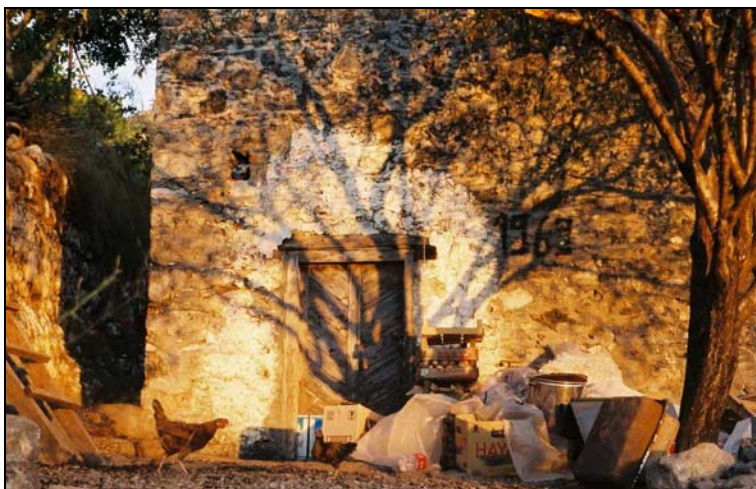


Trango the best of the lot as it is gaining a good reputation amongst competition pilots. "But" he says, "make sure you do a couple of SIV courses on the wing before competing with it." He himself did five SIV courses over water with his Boomerang the first year he got it and attributes that to why he's never had to throw his reserve.



When we arrive at launch there is no wind and light cycles are beginning to come up the slope. This being the last day and conditions better than it's been all week, some of the top competitors are expecting a long and challenging task. Unfortunately, half of the Swiss team have to catch a bus later that afternoon to make their 6:00 am flight from Istanbul the next day and are averse to a long task. A compromise is reached. A task which is both long enough and technically challenging but manageable in a reasonable time frame is called.

The first turnpoint is reached easily enough but the second turnpoint is 24 km away and over a large plateau. It's critical to have enough height over the plateau since it's about 1000m. above the valley floor. About half a dozen pilots misjudge the altitude and land on top of the plateau in a beautiful but arid landscape. On three occasions Scotty Marion takes the lead only to be passed by others who are a little more patient and climb higher before making the transitions. Alex Hofer takes a line over the plateau different than the lead gaggle and suffers for it losing his first place in the competition as a result.



Helmut Erchholzer, the young Austrian, wins the day followed by Norman Lausch. 41 pilots make goal. I manage 68.2 km (a personal best) after nearly 6 hours of flying (also a personal record). Later, when I am relating the story to Alex Hofer who is incredulous that I flew for that long, I recall a story about Bill Rogers who

won the Boston Marathon three years in a row in the late seventies in a time of around 2:12. When asked what he thought of the people who finish the marathon in 5 or 6 hours, he replied “I think that’s a remarkable achievement. Who can run for that long!”

The overall consensus amongst pilots was that the flying and the organization at this PWC were very impressive. The high, dry desert type of climate in a relatively protected valley has all the makings for excellent flying conditions, as was evident by the fact that despite the poor weather we had six flyable days and four valid tasks with many pilots making goal everyday. And, inspite of the appearance that the organization was slightly haphazard and disorderly during the first couple days of the competition, remarkably, as often happens in the Middle East, everything came together very well thereafter. As soon as the army and city officials realized that the competition was a reality and over 100 pilots were in town, they supported the organization with choppers, medics and parties. Retrievals were remarkably prompt. Even when pilots outlanded in the mountains or remote regions, a truck with mountain guides was dispatched to find them—not necessarily common or expected in many competitions when outlandings usually necessitate a several hour hike out.

The people of Erzincan never quite knew what to make of us. Though the young people would say hello to us everywhere we went and ask us all sorts of questions in their limited English, the older people regarded us mostly with indifference bordering on mild suspicion. Ours is, afterall, a world far removed from their conservative muslim culture. And let’s face it, the majority of pilots were there to fly, not to experience a foreign culture. It seemed that it was only when pilots outlanded and lost the distance and security provided by their hotel rooms, the organization, or their wings, and they became ordinary humans in need, did they experience what has always been a dominant feature of Turkish society: kindness and hospitality. As Xavier, the PWC representative said, “If Turkey were to host another PWC, we will happily return.”Pity the pilot who misses out.

