

A mountain rating in Spain

Why not go flying in a country with real mountains?
AOPA Spain's **Marlies Campi** invites you to the Pyrenees



The air is fresh and smooth at this early hour. I advise the guest pilot to stick close to the cliffs, searching for the first updrafts that will help the aircraft gain altitude in less time and with less effort. At 4600 rpm the small 80hp 912 Rotax of the P92 Echo takes us gently to the north-east, to the French-Spanish border following the ever-narrowing valley of the Esera river, the source of which is at the foot of the 11,168 ft high Aneto, the highest peak of the Pyrenean range.

Fresh snow from last night covers the peaks, offering a beautiful contrast to the deep blue of the sky, the green of the grass and the myriad shades of red, orange, yellow, brown and

degrees to the west and start our descent to 6000 ft, where the approach to Peyresourde begins. A few minutes later we join the special and demanding landing pattern while reporting our position and intentions in French on the air-to-air frequency. The guest pilot is overwhelmed by the amount of information and sensations he has to process in such a short time. I let him fly the aircraft but keep an eye on the altimeter, the airspeed, the vario, the turn and bank coordinator, the power setting (hmm... that makes more than one eye). When turning final I take control and tell the guest pilot what I'm doing on every phase of the final descent, landing and up-hill taxiing

to the apron.

The guest pilot cannot believe it – here he is on this amazing sloped airfield, surrounded by high peaks in the middle of the Pyrenees. Happiness, in the form of an ear-to-ear smile, shows on his face.

After the briefing and his first downhill take-off, we will practice three or four more landings. Once back at our base in Castejón, where his wife and the kids are waiting for him, he tells them how wonderful today's flight has been. Tomorrow we will fly to a different kind of mountain strip to progress with the introductory mountain flying course.

This four-day-course provides private and

Above: gliding along the Spanish Pyrenees towards Castejón de Sos from Santa Cillia de Jaca, 90km to the west

Right: a Pyrenean mountain pilots fly-in, complete with goofers' gallery

green of the mixed forest leaves. The view from the aircraft is breathtaking. My guest pilot is easily distracted by all this splendour.

After taking off from the airstrip at Castejón de Sos, we are now at more than 7,000 ft, but there's still 1500 ft left to climb before we can cross the natural border at the lowest pass in this area to get to our destination: the French altiport of Peyresourde (LFIP). An aerodrome with a 17% slope and no possibility for a go-around, Peyresourde requires a thorough planning and training before pilots can dare a landing and take-off.

I tell the guest pilot how mountain pilots cross the ridges and saddles, and suddenly, we are in France! With Bagnères de Luchon's aerodrome (LFCB) in sight we turn a few

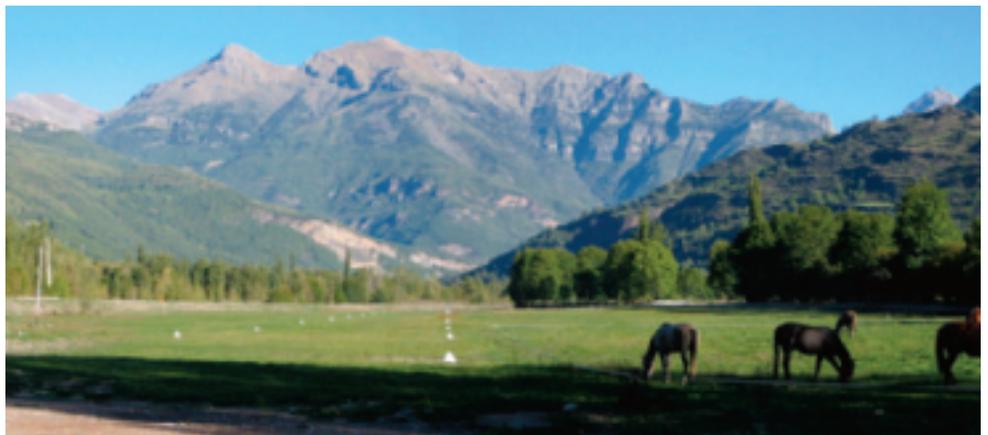




microlight pilots with the principles of flying in high mountainous terrain, and landing and taking-off from sloped mountain strips. Based on the French Mountain Rating ('Qualification de Montagne'), the course teaches the basics of mountain flying. Subjects like navigation in high terrain, flight planning, weather forecasts, density altitude and aircraft performance, history of mountain flying and so on are

Above: instruction includes tips on how to choose the correct angle to cross a ridge
Top right: on short finals for runway 16 at Castejob de Sos

Right: the view in the opposite direction – note the obstruction on climb-out



covered during ground school, which takes about six hours. This theoretical knowledge part is quite dense, so I usually split it up over the four days of the course, trying to combine theory and flying so that the student or guest pilot can practice what he or she has learned in ground school.

It helps that for ground training we have the club-house, a big wooden cabin with panoramic windows, an oven for cold winter days and a bar where pilots slake their thirst with cold beer after the flight training.

Flight training is mostly done in the morning when the air is calm and smooth, giving the best conditions for practicing take-offs and landings on sloped runways. To get an idea on how to fly safely in high mountainous terrain and understand the basic rules of landing and taking-off from short steep runways I recommend at least five hours of dual flight training. This covers how mountain pilots fly in high terrain, how they approach a mountain strip, what to watch out for in the non-standard landing pattern, how to fly following valleys and canyons, and much more. At the end of the course you won't be a professor of mountain flying, but you will be able to fly safely and in an enjoyable manner. But be warned, once you've been bitten by the bug you'll want to fly in mountainous terrain as often as possible and landing on mountain strips, tackling the easy ones first and graduating to increasingly difficult destinations.

The Tecnam P92 Echo is an excellent aircraft for mountain flying. It has a nose wheel, but this poses no problem for gentle uphill landings

Right: the approach to Peyresourde Altiport begins at 6,000 feet QNH

on the main gear. The P92 is easy to fly, but it is also a good trainer that helps you polish your piloting skills since you have to be even more precise than with heavier aircraft. Both private and microlight pilots get used to it very quickly. The experts say that flying in the mountains improves the level of piloting skill, requiring accuracy and precision. It is a demanding discipline, but it is highly rewarding.

The courses are tailored to the needs of the individual pilot. There are no scheduled courses, so that you choose the dates that suit you best. Although the southern side of the Pyrenees benefits from a very benign weather, allowing flying all year round, the best months

are from March to October.

The village of Castejón de Sos lies in the central part of the Pyrenees, in a narrow valley that ends at the French border with Mt Aneto (3,404 m) and its glacier, one of the last in the Pyrenean range. The airfield lies about a kilometer north-west of the village. Castejón and the Benasque valley are well known for excellent conditions in which to practice paragliding, winter sports in the nearby ski resorts of Cerler and Llanos del Hospital, and mountaineering. Besides flying you can go hiking, climbing, alpine or cross-country skiing, snowshoe walking, biking, swimming... After all this activity you can

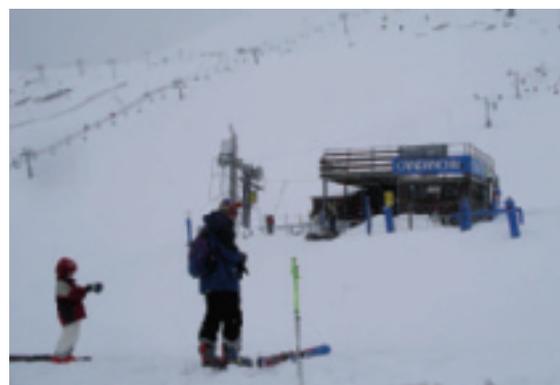




refresh yourself in the swimming pool or one of the spas and have a siesta (the best Spanish invention!) under the shade of a tree in the light afternoon summer breeze.

While pilots follow the four day course, the family can have a great time with outdoor sports, sightseeing, visiting the typical mountain villages of the region with their stone houses clinging closely together, sometimes overlapping with each other on the mountainside, the small romanesque hermitages or the magnificent stately homes with coats of arms on their façades. Castejón de Sos is the ideal destination for pilots who wish to come with friends or family as it offers something for everyone. The gastronomy of the valley is based on its excellent local products, veal, lamb, sausage, trout, walnuts, pumpkin cake, 'pastel ruso' (I do not know why it is called 'Russian cake' but don't expect any vodka!) The nearby region of the Somontano provides some of the finest red and white wines.

Most mountain airstrips are located in the French, Swiss and Italian Alps, but there are also mountain strips in the Vosges, the Massif Central and the French Pyrenees. Castejón's airfield is only 25 minutes flying time from Peyresourde, the only 'altiport' (a French word



Top left: a typical Pyrenean village decked in snow for the tourists

Above: flying continues throughout the winter on the southern side

Left: definitely not Norfolk, is it

Bottom right: Marlies Campi and Tecnam P92



created in the sixties to describe a sloped aerodrome at altitude) of the Pyrenean range. It is also close to the many mountain strips scattered around Bagnères de Luchon. On the Spanish side the nearest mountain strip is Ager, about 35 minutes away – a place well known to paragliding pilots.

Fancy featuring in the next mountain flying course? Why not get in touch with me... contact me, here are my details:

- Marlies Campi (PPL FI-Mountain Rating Theoretical Knowledge, Microlight instructor with French "Label Montagne", more than 10 years of mountain flight experience in the Alps, the Massif Central and the Pyrenees).
- The four-day course, "Introduction to Mountain Flying" includes theoretical knowledge plus five hours (minimum) dual flight training
- Aeroplane: Tecnam P92 Echo
- Airfield: www.aviador.net
- Phone: +34 656 312 528
- E-mail: marliescampi@gmail.com
- Aeroclub Aviadores de Montaña de Aragón: club house with bar, courtesy car, bikes,
- Accommodation and tourist information: www.castejondesos.es ■