

Dec. 19, 2013 - Hanging Around Clewiston, FL.

Back in the late '90's, because of a potential medical problem which would preclude my maintaining a FAA medical, I reluctantly sold my Twin Comanche and stopped flying "cold turkey" For the first time in 3 decades I was without an airplane and began feeling the pangs of aerial withdrawal. So, I decided to take up flying a Paramotor, which was a nylon glider wing (kinda like a parachute) with a small pusher engine which you wore on your back. The idea was to run with this 60 pounds of equipment until you reached 15 MPH, at which time the motor would get you up into the air. At that time I was approaching 60, and soon came to realize that the Paramotor was definitely a younger man's game. Eight years later the Light Sport Airplane came to receive FAA approval, and with it flight would be again possible without the necessity of an FAA medical certificate.

However I still recalled the thrill of hanging under that glider wing, strapped into a sling seat, flying along with the air streaming across my face and through my hair. You traveled low and slow and seldom got over 300 feet or 30 MPH, but it was as close to flying like a bird that man would ever achieve. Then, about a year ago, I received an e-mail offer from *Amazon Local* for a hang glider promotional flight at nearby Clewiston, FL. I signed up for this adventure, and promptly filed the certificate away. Last week Amazon sent me a reminder that this voucher would soon expire, and that I needed to get this flight scheduled. So today I made the hour and a half drive over to [The Florida Ridge Air-Sports Park](#) (click on link) for my introductory tandem flight. This is an cleared orange grove, which has been converted to a grass runway, dedicated to the aviation sport of hang gliding. 99% of the aircraft based here are completely powerless.

After a brief ground school and safety briefing I was strapped into a sleeping bag type of cocoon which hung under the delta hang glider wing, and directly above my flight instructor. We were towed up to 2,000 feet, behind an ultralight, powered aircraft, and released to soar, float and gradually descend back to the home strip. In the 15 minutes or so that we were airborne we had a beautiful 360 degree unencumbered view South Florida's terrain, just below Lake Okeechobee. I did get to handle the weight shift controls, for a while, to experience shallow turns, some straight and level flight and gradual ascents and descents, all the while in free fall. It was quite an experience and I was impressed with the sense of freedom that this form of flight offers, once you release from the tow plane. Communication with the instructor was conducted at a regular speaking level with only the sound of the wind through the wing and its rigging competing for attention. The landing was extremely smooth on the tri-wheeled gear affixed to the lower portion of the frame.

A fellow pilot at my home airport in Indiantown, FL. is one of the instructors at Florida Ridge. He is also a commercial airline pilot and part owner in an aerobatic two seater airplane. I can understand why, after a couple of weeks of work flying between the US and Europe and the US and Asia, that he relaxes by taking his small private aircraft over to the Florida Ridge and climbs aboard a hang glider to enjoy the openness and freedom that this sport offers. This is something that I definitely will do again.



Strapped in and awaiting take-off



The tow plane - 250 feet out in front of us



Finally, free flight at 2000 feet



Returning for landing at Florida Ridge strip