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Dachstein – mission accomplished!

In September 2015's Skywings Julian Todd described flying over Austria's Loser Plateau. Last year he returned to the area to attempt the 90km Schlömmerdreieck Triangle route ...

All photos: Julian Todd

Have you ever noticed that, just as you gain the ability to do something impossibly amazing, it stops being such a big deal? But sometimes a dream is so far out there relative to what you knew that you don't recalibrate.

In 2013, at the start of my first summer back into hang gliding, I was coming to terms with the fact that I was just as useless at this game as when I gave it up in frustration years before.

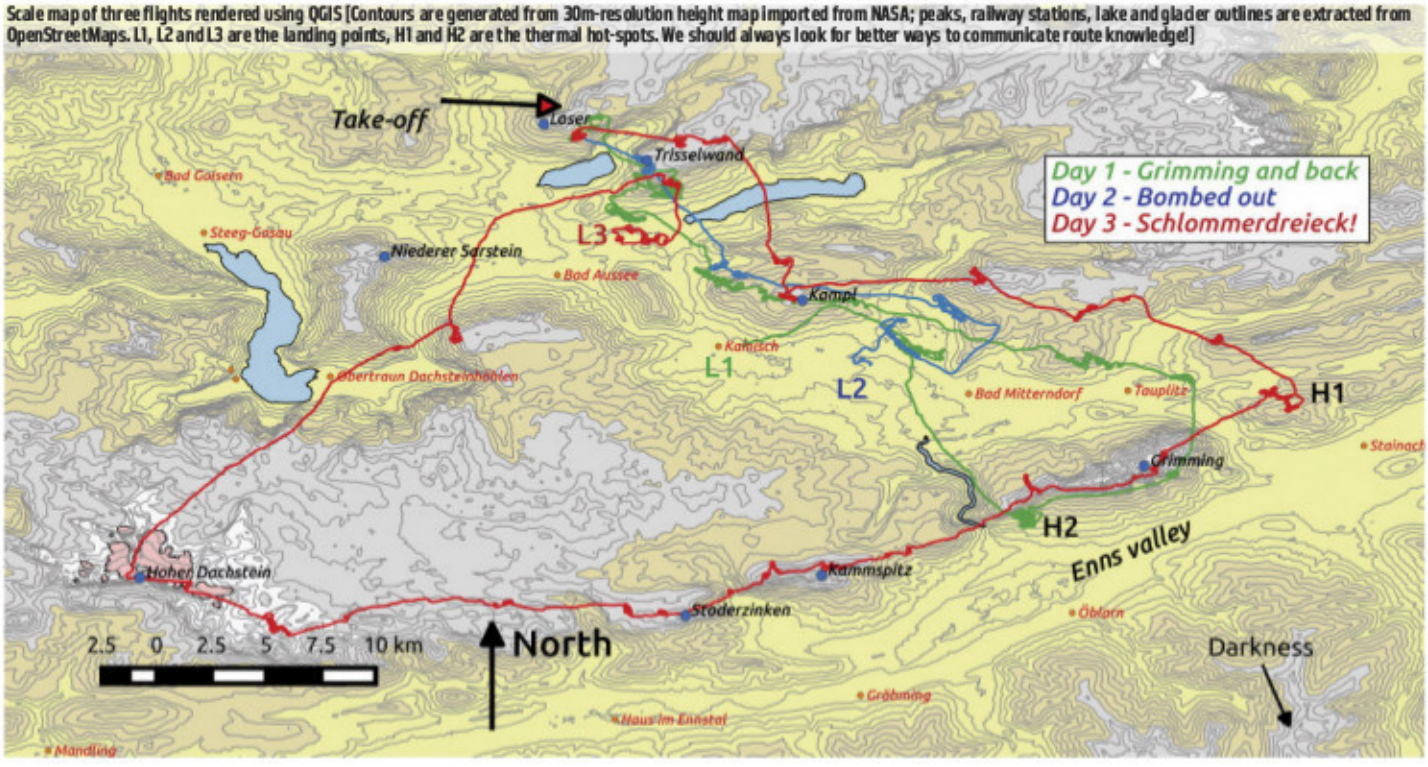
Day after classic day I ran down the Loser Plateau ramp in Austria between 1pm and 2pm, missed all the thermals, and landed 20 minutes later at the bottom. A discontented derigging was followed by three hours of sweaty cycling up the road, cursing the sky, to fetch the car before returning to the landing field at around 5:30pm to load my glider.

2. Get a log-in to the Austrocontrol Flugwetter website for their thermal predictor.
3. You must do the classic XC route that takes you from Loser to the Grimming, then to the 3000m peak of the Dachstein, from where you have a 24km direct glide back to this field.

The Dachstein is the big, snowy Christmas cake of a mountain with glaciers sprawling on the horizon in every picture-postcard view from the Loser Plateau. The idea I could fly over it had never crossed my mind.

The secret mission he had given to me remained confidential for two years. Then, Oliver Guenay's *Best Flying Sites of the Alps* book named the route as the Schlömmerdreieck. I would point it out to friends: 'Can you believe this is possible?'

Scale map of three flights rendered using QGIS [Contours are generated from 30m-resolution height map imported from NASA; peaks, railway stations, lake and glacier outlines are extracted from OpenStreetMaps. L1, L2 and L3 are the landing points, H1 and H2 are the thermal hot-spots. We should always look for better ways to communicate route knowledge!]



One day a sleek topless glider arrived in the field. The large German pilot was just out of his harness and stretching his stiff back from having flown around the mountains for the last six hours. I put on my long face and went to ask for help. He provided me with three vital pieces of information:

1. This late in the season (July) the thermals exist only above 1800m on higher ground; you will find nothing in the valleys.

With the critical assistance of the Flytech 6030's 'Automatic indication to the last best lift' feature, I improved enough to gain 19 hours in the air over 12 flights, two of them at Griefenburg.

It was enough to make me feel that the mission was realistic. I returned in May 2014 for a three-week trip and got 15 hours in nine flights, mostly at Griefenburg. I was back in July and got 18 more hours in another nine flights, but still I couldn't make it. July 2015 was inexplicably bad, with only three flying hours in five flights off Loser, none of which reached even 3km to the Trisselwand.

And so came 2016 which was set to be a big year for the cavers [readers will recall that Julian combines many of his flying trips with caving activities]. At the end of their 2015 expedition the Cambridge University Caving Club had discovered the deepest-going (-600m) passage they had ever known.

On top of the world, pointing the way home from the highest point – 3,500m – across a sea of rock and ice

A cool wind blowing out of it signified the lack of a blind ending. They left most of the ropes in the cave over winter, planned an underground camp and extended the start of the expedition back into June.

This was my best chance. If the Schlömmerdreieck wasn't going to happen for me in six weeks on this mountain, starting in the main season, I'd really had to stop wasting my time on this stupid idea.

The first day out was easy. After cleaning off the ants' nest that had moved into the sail overnight, I took off at 1:36pm and made a leisurely flight, not worrying about the timing, all the way to the Grimming and partway back when the lift died.

Day 2 was going to be the big one. 40 minutes after takeoff at 2:16pm I had an altitude of 2916m when I flew away from the thermal by Kampl, 9km along the course. 3.8 minutes later I was at 2455m, having experienced a sink rate of 2m/s for 3.3km (a glide angle of 7.3:1). Then it got worse, with a sink of 3.1m/s for 2.2 minutes down to 2051m, a glide angle of exactly 4:1. The bottom of this seven-minute 1100m vertical ride was at 1857m asl, from which I couldn't recover.

I had no plans to fly on the third day due to a forecast of thunderstorms, but I went up the hill with my glider anyway. For once I was not alone. A couple of other pilots took off too early and went down. I hesitated on the ramp for about two hours till an older pilot with a glider on his roof rack showed up, went into the restaurant for an Austrian lunch, and then wandered over to me and said: 'I really think you should go now.'

Looking west along the Enns Valley from scarily close to the Grimming

This time I took no chances, flying the route way back in the mountains far from the Bad Mitterndorf valley. A yellow paraglider was not far behind when I saw him go for exactly the same short-cut I had tried the day before. 20 minutes later he was ahead and above me – so much for that hard-earned lesson! There's a certain futility in believing you can always know what to learn from your mistakes.

As I skirted far and wide around the Grimming towards a thermal hotspot I knew from the map, I saw two paragliders crossing the gap quite low and spiralling up on the shadowy north side. That wasn't supposed to work either. Meanwhile, from just below the clouds on my by-the-book route, I reached the Grimming below its main ridge. I was too intimidated by its pillars of fractal rock to make even one 360 near to it. Fortunately I knew of a second reliable thermal hot-spot near the ravine dividing this mountain from the Dachsteinmassiv.

I was now onto completely unfamiliar territory. The dark fingers of the Hohe Dachstein jutted through the glacier in the far distance. I forced myself not to rush as there was still 36km to go. It looked like there was about 10km of hopeless foothills below its the ridge, none of which looked landable to my overburdened brain. It seemed to be do or die.

Meanwhile, across the Enns valley to the south, on my left, the sky was darkening. By the time I saw the white anvil shape of the cu-nim towering behind it I could no longer ignore the fact that this thunderstorm had grown to the size of Belgium.

But over the Dachstein the sky remained blindingly blue with playful little wisps. Paragliders zipped this way and that, seemingly unconcerned. I traded on their apparent confidence and joy.

It was a bad year for floods for the cave explorers. Three times caving parties had become trapped, causing a rescue situation when they did not arrive on the surface by their call-out time. In one of them a caver barely got down and off the rope to shelter when he heard the torrent of water crashing through the passages above. All you can do is keep warm in the 1-degree air and sit out the flood, however many hours that takes. It's high on a mountain and the caves can't fill up because the water runs out of the bottom. It may be more boring than being sucked into a cu-nim but it shouldn't be lethal.

Home valley after the Dachstein – note the cloud over the Trisselwand between the two lakes

I had been asked if there was any way avoid these floods. I explained that the storms, like most clouds, are random events. You can measure the probability of a storm, but you have no idea exactly where, when, or what landscape it's going to follow the wind over to dump its load.

At 4:50pm I soared high over the glacier and the peak of the Dachstein, snapping some photos (since lost) from the phone mounted on my basebar which runs XCSoar. And then, perhaps too soon, I commenced the long, long straight glide across the 8km wide ocean of rock towards home.

Back in the Loser valley the Trisselwand seemed to be wearing a huge mushroom-like cloud on its head. I instinctively soared under it for a couple hundred metres before consciously telling myself to land before anything went wrong. Later, while I was derigging, the cloud evaporated completely.

I had a lot of height to lose above the base camp. I knew the cavers were probably in their deck chairs drinking beer under the awning, definitely not looking at the sky. Luckily the basebar phone still worked, and I tried dialling a number.

'Hello? Hello? I can't hear you. Is something wrong?' the voice said. When your face is

My favourite landing field, just 1km up the road from the base camp

dangling more than 20cm from a phone open to the airstream, it doesn't matter how much you scream. I succeeded in texting (which I don't ever want to do again) the message: 'Look up – flyyrying.'

The great thing about mixing with non-flying cavers is they don't give a damn what amazing thing you've just done, and would rather you had a beer and shut up about it please.

The following week I got my own back by going on one of the deep cave-camping trips, where we were responsible for causing the biggest cave rescue of the summer.

A final note: beware of achieving your dreams. I could not believe the Schlömmerdreieck flight was really going to happen until it was over. There will never be a first time again.