

San Antonio Del Mar: ***Paragliding Nirvana in Baja California*** article and photos by Rich Parry

Abstract - This paper describes a three-day paragliding trip to San Antonio Del Mar located 150 miles south of the border in Baja California. Pilots of all abilities from the Torrey Pines Gliderport in San Diego, CA joined the fun. Everyone had a great time flying along the 14-mile ridge that hugs the Pacific Ocean and provides some of the best flying anywhere.

INTRODUCTION

When David Jebb, the Director of the Torrey Pines Gliderport in San Diego, California, announced he was organizing a trip to San Antonio Del Mar in Baja California, I knew I had to go. My enthusiasm came from attending the eighth annual Baja Thermal Clinic in October (see *Paragliding Magazine*, December, 2001). The clinic was three days of great flying, instruction, and camaraderie.

A possible showstopper for the trip was my lack of camping equipment, which is a must since San Antonio Del Mar is in the middle of nowhere. Preparing for the trip was going to be similar to going to the moon. I didn't need a space suit, but I would need everything else. I would need a tent, lantern, and just about everything else that Eddie Bauer offers.

Being a typical male, I wasn't going to tell the clerk I knew nothing about camping. I was born and raised in New York City, the Bronx to be exact, and never camped in my life. I wasn't going to let it be known I was a city slicker. My idea of "roughing it" is staying at a five star dude ranch. I needed a reason for my lack of equipment. It took a while, but I developed what I thought was a plausible scenario.

I walked into the exclusive adventure store and tried hard to look like I belonged. A bearded salesman that resembled a lumberjack asked if I needed help. I informed the young man that I was a direct descendent of Sir Edmund Hillary, famous for being the first to summit Everest with Sherpa Tenzing Norgay in 1953. He looked at me with interest and awe. So far so good I thought to myself; I continued my canard.

K2 was brutal I explained. While climbing it, I had lost all of my equipment in a three-week blizzard that nearly took my life. He was hooked by my story of man versus nature. In fact, I started believing it myself.

I stated that after a break in the weather, I headed down the mountain and stumbled into base camp more dead than alive. I spent the following six months in a Tibetan monastery clinging to life. During my recovery I was assumed to be beyond hope several times. But somehow I had survived and was prepared to face the elements once again.

I told him that *National Geographic* had hired me to explore the coast of Baja California in search of the ultimate paragliding site. I ended my story by asking if he could outfit me for the expedition. A few hours later I walked out of the store with the equipment I needed and started growing a beard in preparation for my adventure.

There was just one other item that might prevent my departure for the trip. It conflicted with my wife's birthday, and I didn't want to miss celebrating the day with her. I am pretty lucky however; my wife is also a pilot and I managed to convince her that the trip was her birthday present.

GETTING THERE

San Antonio Del Mar is located at latitude N 31 05.63 and longitude W 116 18.74. It is not a place you will find easily on a roadmap. For this reason, we agreed to meet at the Torrey Pines Gliderport and caravan down. There were five vehicles that made the trip Friday morning. Some pilots that had visited San Antonio Del Mar on previous trips and knew where it was located left the night before to get a head start on the weekend.

As we reached the border, we dreaded being stopped and asked to unpack our paragliding equipment. I must admit, if I were a border guard I might enjoy seeing our motley crew opening wings in search of illegal contraband. Fortunately, the border guards were not so childish and waved us through.

In Tijuana, we took Route 1 south and didn't stop until we entered Ensenada an hour later. Ensenada is a large town where we picked up last minute necessities. A few minutes later we were back on the road; next stop, San Antonio Del Mar.

If you miss the small sign at the side of the main highway, you might travel to the end of the peninsula before realizing you missed the exit. Even if you see it, you will find yourself on a 10-mile dirt road murmuring to yourself, "I must have made a mistake". The only indication that there might be flyable conditions were vertically shaped clouds in the distance. There was no other sign that we were heading in the right direction. As I looked around, I was reminded of the years I spent in Illinois where you can roll a marble in any direction for miles.

The dust rose as our caravan ventured down the dirt strip. A left turn at the fork in the road followed by maneuvering around a few curves and we were overlooking the Pacific Coast at San Antonio Del Mar, paragliding nirvana!

WHAT DO THEY DO HERE

Have you ever traveled by car from Dallas to Denver, or San Diego to Albuquerque and wondered to yourself, "What do they do here?", as you pass through a town with a population of 100? That is exactly what I said to myself as we turned off the main highway and headed down the dirt road leading to San Antonio Del Mar. I also wondered, "How did anyone ever find this place?". I didn't get an answer to my first question, but I did to the second.

I asked David, our expedition leader, how he learned of this secluded jewel. He replied that in the early 80's he had met a hang gliding pilot at a local flying club. The pilot told him of this pristine flying location south of the border where you could fly for hours along a ridge that extended as far as you can see. It wasn't long after that, that David headed south to confirm this potentially mythical site.

The site lived up to expectations. In fact, he tells the story of a 3 1/2 hour flight in which he came across migrating gray whales, which are common in these waters. Gray whales annually give birth during the winter in the warm waters of the San Ignacio Lagoon. When the newborn calf has sufficient strength and weight, they travel North along the Pacific coast to Alaska to feed in the nutrient rich waters during the summer. A pod of whales was heading north when they came upon our intrepid paragliding pilot and interrupted their journey to watch the curious site. I pondered the veracity of the story, but later that day I saw a water spout off shore several times, a sure sign of a whale.

LET'S FLY

Total travel time from the Torrey Pines Gliderport in San Diego was slightly over 4 hours for the 170-mile trip. We arrived just after noon. Within one hour, most everyone had his or her tent set up and waited for a volunteer "wind dummy".

Weather conditions were on the windy side, 20 to 25 mph. David was first to spread out his wing and test the air. He is a master pilot who could fly in a hurricane. So just because he thinks conditions are good for flying doesn't mean mere mortals can fly. Nevertheless, a little parawaiting and most everyone was in the air. We would soon learn that the high wind speed was not the problem, but the direction. In fact, the following day I would learn why the speed bar was invented.

At sunset everyone returned to the LZ and enjoyed dinner around the campfire followed by a birthday cake for desert (remember, it was my wife's birthday). Afterwards, we spent a few hours swapping stories, looking at planets through my wife's telescope, and then off to bed.

The campsite is located about 200' from the ocean. So as I lay down and waited for sleep to come, I listened to the Pacific Ocean's soothing white noise and started dreaming of the following days flights.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT IT

The next morning I awoke not to the peaceful sound of ocean waves, but to the cacophony of a dirt bike running through the campsite. One of our sophomoric expedition members thought the sound of a motorcycle racing through camp would be a humorous wakeup call. It wasn't. I, and most other pilots, vowed his bike would have an accidental flat tire the following morning.

After breakfast most pilots chatted at the campsite waiting for the wind to pick up. David and I took the opportunity to explore the beach on dirt bikes. As we traveled side-by-side along the 14-mile beach I was reminded of the motorcycle scene in *Easy Rider* with Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper traveling down a country road. Although our sojourn along the beach had nothing to do with paragliding directly, I couldn't help but think that one of the fringe benefits of paragliding is the opportunities it provides to go places and do things one would be unlikely to do or experience in any other sport.

It was late morning when pilots started unpacking their paragliders. One by one, pilots took to the air and started to disperse along the ridge. Wind speed conditions were good, about 10-12 mph, but the wind direction was still cross making penetration against the wind difficult.

I suspect many readers would be surprised to find I didn't have my speed system attached to my harness. In retrospect, I agree. However, most of my flying is in tame air making a speed bar of limited use. When I find turbulent conditions, I practice parawaiting. I would soon find a flaw in my reasoning. The speed bar is an important part of a paraglider because you really don't know when you will need it. Even in calm air you don't know when conditions will change. I say this with 100% hindsight.

I learned my lesson soon after launch and an exhilarating flight down the ridge. It was at this point that I turned and learned what it meant to be unable to penetrate. I had heard stories about difficulty penetrating, but this was my first experience. I actually stood still in midair. It was an odd sensation to look down and see a point remain stationary relative to my position for several minutes. It soon became clear I wasn't going anywhere. So after eating a little humble pie, I descended to start my mile long walk back to the LZ. I later learned that I was not alone, even pilots that had speed bars succumbed to the cross wind.

HAWKS 1, PARAGLIDERS 0

While I walked back to the LZ, I could see nearly a dozen of my fellow pilots high in the air. At least two pilots took off down the 14-mile ridge. Near the ridge's end, they met with nesting hawks. Hawks are territorial and protective of their turf and nesting hawks are particularly aggressive when protecting their young. One of the paragliders was virtually brand new; it had 2 hours of airtime on it when a hawk attacked. A maneuver to avoid a collision with the hawk failed. Talons grabbed the canopy and made a fist size hole. The hawk continued the attack and headed for the second pilot. He was a little luckier. A quick big ear tuck of the canopy and the hawk missed. Both pilots made haste and headed back to the LZ thankful that they had lived to tell the tale.

CONCLUSION

The morning of our last day, a man claiming to be the owner of the property where we were staying requested a \$10 camping fee from each car. He didn't have any documentation proving he was the owner, but no one was prepared to argue the issue and we all gladly paid the small fee for three days of camping.

San Antonio Del Mar doesn't provide much in the way of amenities, but that is not why we went. We went to fly and that was provided in abundance. Despite the rural setting, there was never a shortage of food, camaraderie, or flying. The trip to San Antonio Del Mar is an event that occurs each year, come join us!

A special thanks to all the pilots that joined us and to my wife who introduced me to paragliding, she will always be the wind beneath my wing.

RESOURCES

<http://w9if.net/cgi-bin/ImageFolioPro/imageFolio.cgi?direct=Paragliding> San Antonio Del Mar trip photos.

<http://www.wsradio.ws> The Paragliding Talk Show heard weekly on Internet radio. Get answers to your paragliding questions, and talk with the pros.

<http://www.flytorrey.com> Home page of the Torrey Pines Gliderport.

aircal@ix.netcom.com Torrey Pines Gliderport email address. Send email to get information on future trips.



Photo 1. A cursory examination of this image would lead one to think the pilot, David Jebb, just landed on the beach. Actually he started on the beach and is shown here kiting up a small incline in preparation for launch. Believe it or not, you can actually launch from sea level.



Photo 2. Sunset at San Antonio Del Mar overlooking the Pacific Ocean.



Photo 3. Pilots working the ridge.



Photo 4. This is a small portion of the 14-mile ridge. Several pilots easily flew the entire length and back. The motorcycle tracks show our trip down the beach in which we never encountered a single person. If you want to getaway, this is the place.



Photo 5. This is the results of a close encounter with a nesting hawk. You can easily put your fist through the hole in the canopy.



Photo 6. Life is good!