Sandia Sojourn

By John Wiseman

Thirteen years ago, the electronics firm that I worked for eliminated my division, and I left Albuquerque, New Mexico, the area that I had lived in for the previous seven years. Eventually I settled in eastern Pennsylvania, where I have been ever since. When I left Albuquerque, I thought that I had seen pretty much everything that there was to see in that area. I'd had fantastic views of the high desert of New Mexico, both close-up by riding my dirt bike many miles into some very inaccessible areas, and from afar by hiking on top of the Sandia Mountains, which rise up over 10,000 feet above sea level, and up to a mile above the city of Albuquerque below.

About six years ago, through a series of random events, I started hang gliding, and I have been consistently flying the mountain and aerotowing sites of the mid-Atlantic states ever since. Quite quickly I learned what all pilots know: hang gliding has that special ability to transform an otherwise non-descript mountain ridge or even a small grass airport in the middle of nowhere into a magical place that few humans ever have the opportunity to experience. I also learned (from reading various stories and from talking to pilots who had flown there) that my old stomping ground, Sandia, was a world-class hang gliding site. Somehow I'd missed that one during the seven years I was there—I was totally oblivious to hang gliding until I became involved with it long after I had left New Mexico.

But these thoughts set me thinking: I had been to the Sandia Mountains many times in the past, and I knew the area well. What would it be like to fly a hang glider from an already spectacular, magical and intimidating place like Sandia? I began seriously considering that question four years ago while on a family vacation in Albuquerque, during a ride up the mountain on the

Steve Tomany, one of the Sandia Crest guides, gets me set before launch amongst some of the many broadcast antennas at the Crest launch site.

Photo: Linsey Whittaker

Sandia Peak tram. As amazing as that tram ride is, I knew it would pale in comparison to flying a hang glider from the top. I was a low-airtime H2 at the time, but I set it as a life goal of mine to return to Sandia someday with my hang glider, as it was obvious to me that I really had missed something during my original tenure in Albuquerque.

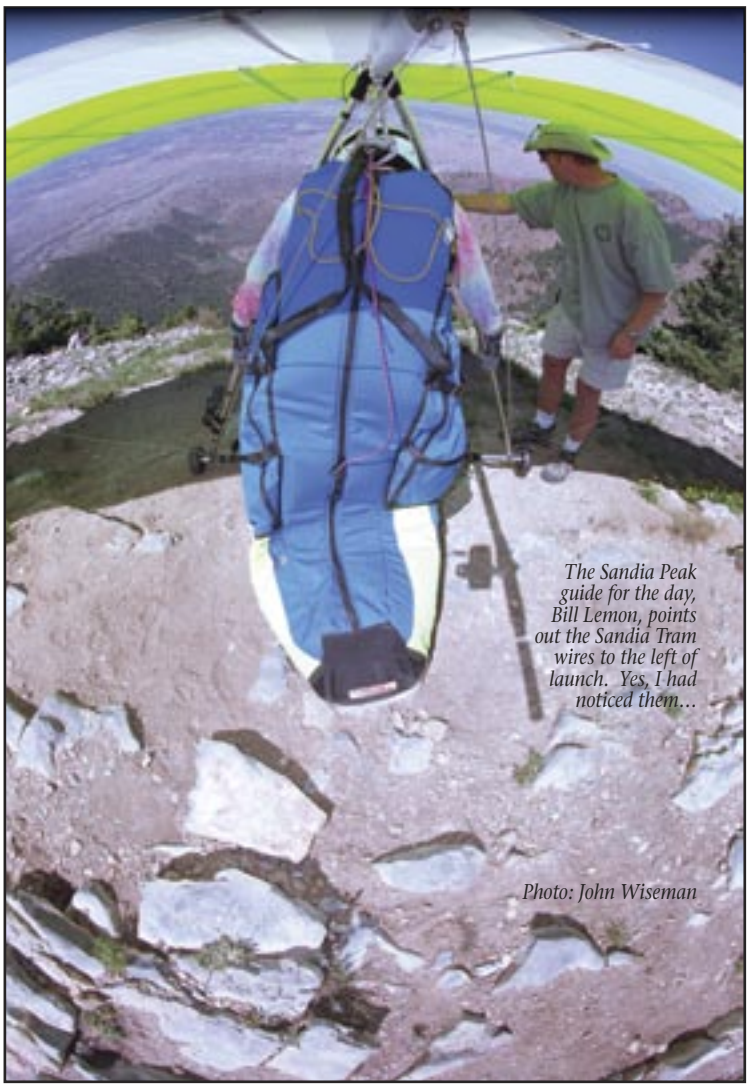
Eventually I reached the skill level required to fly from either the Sandia Crest or the Peak launch, and last winter I started making inquiries to members of the Sandia Soaring Society about how I could turn my dream into reality. Coincidentally, Larry West and Andrew Vanis were organizing a fly-in that they were calling the Sandia Solstice Soar'n, scheduled for late June 2004. The required Crest and Peak guides and drivers would be available for an entire week, making this event an optimal time for an out-of-towner like myself to come and fly for the first time. I easily recruited the always-adventurous Pennsylvania pilot Shawn MacDuff, along with Jim Carroll (who'd had a single flight from Sandia Crest 10 years ago), to join me on the trip.

From the moment I arrived in Albuquerque, the overwhelming, sheer scale of the place hit me. Now that I was actually here with my hang gliding equipment, the place seemed a little bigger than I remembered. The mountain is absolutely gigantic, requiring an east-coast pilot like myself to totally readjust perspective on almost all the components of hang glider flying. A typical mountain site that I fly may be one or two thousand feet above sea level, and maybe one thousand feet above the landing area below. The various parameters of Sandia, on the other hand, can be measured in miles! The mountain launches are roughly two miles above sea level, and one mile above the LZ, with a six- to seven-mile glide just to get there. Those are some awfully big numbers to comprehend just standing on the edge, contemplating the view as a hiker or a tourist, but they become almost astronomical in scale when you're thinking about actually leaving the safety of the mountain with little more than a few square yards of sail cloth and some aluminum tubes over your head! I always come away from my various hang gliding flights with a feeling of being "small" compared to nature, but this place made me feel that way almost to the point of total insignificance.

And it wasn't just the magnitude of the area that got my attention; the terrain below the launches is about as inhospitable as it gets. One of the thoughts that I had while circling over one of the knife-edged granite spines below me was that at most east-coast sites, a pilot can eke out a landing somewhere in an emergency situation. As a matter of course, we are taught as students to retain our wits even if we have to flare or parachute into the tops of the trees below us. But there is no option like that at Sandia, at least not until you get out to the foothills away from the mountain. Here I was, faced with a very large stretch of terrain where I could land absolutely nowhere if disaster were to strike. Sharp, jagged granite towers, reaching hundreds of feet straight up from their already incredibly high bases, are separated from each other by deep menacing canyons, with ominous-sounding names like The Cauldron and TWA Canyon. If the latter doesn't immediately sound scary, then you haven't ridden the tram to the top of Sandia Peak. For if you had, you would certainly have heard the infamous story about the TWA airliner that crashed on the Peak in 1955. Almost 50 years later, pieces of metal from the plane are still visible from the tram high above, hammering home the fact that no hang glider pilot wants to end up in that area.

Sights and stories like these can play havoc with your imagination, with the sharp boulders morphing into teeth, the ridge spines transforming into legs and a tail, and the canyons and cliffs blending into backbones and plates. All of this conspires to make the view below appear to look like that of a menacing monster or a dragon, just lying in wait for something edible to make a mistake above it. This same imagery has obviously been experienced by people other than myself, as the point of rock that the TWA plane actually hit before tumbling into the canyon below is known as the Dragon's Tooth.

These thoughts called to mind a book that I'd been reading on the plane, describing a very risky nuclear weapon experiment performed in New Mexico during the days of the Manhattan Project. In that story, the famous physicist Richard Feynman had described what they were doing as "tickling the tail of the dragon." Indeed, that is exactly what hang glider pilots at Sandia do, tickling his tail as they fly over him, trying to prod him enough to breathe his fire into the air, just enough to kick off the strong thermals that they need to soar well above him and stay out of his clutches. But of course it's a game with the dragon of Sandia. Tease him too much, especially as he becomes more alert and active during the mid-day hours, and he awakens angrily, trying to swat the fragile hang glider pilot out of the air like a wild cat clawing at a butterfly. That is one of the reasons why the Sandia Soaring Society absolutely requires guides for any pilot without the substantial experience necessary to be flying there unsupervised. These guides have an intimate understanding of the beast based on years of accumulated site knowledge, and they are an absolute necessity to help an out-of-towner like myself avoid the potentially serious trouble that might be lurking between the launch and the landing zone at Sandia.



The Sandia Peak guide for the day, Bill Lemon, points out the Sandia Tram wires to the left of launch. Yes, I had noticed them…

Photo: John Wiseman

But there was more to be intimidated by than just the imaginary dragon lurking below. Being into electronics by trade and hobby, I found the antenna complex that surrounds the Crest launch to be fascinating, both for what I could and what I could not directly see. The towers themselves are very large and daunting, especially when you read all of the DANGER signs that are spread liberally around on the ground near their bases. But what is really scary is when you get direct feedback from your instruments that there is some serious radio frequency (RF) energy being emitted from these towers that humans cannot sense directly!

I had three electronic devices with me as I launched my highly conductive aluminum-framed craft from the Crest: my variometer, GPS, and 2-meter ham radio. Each of these protested in a different way when the RF soup that they were being immersed in overloaded their sensitive circuitry. My GPS would not lock onto a satellite when I was standing on launch. My vario, as soon as I stepped into the air and got out in front where the various beams converged toward the city of Albuquerque below, howled in protest with a song that I have never before heard it sing. After a few confusing seconds, I realized that this cacophony was a combination of all the stored warnings and alarms that my vario can be programmed to emit, albeit all at once. A quick glance at the ridge showed me that I was indeed going up, not falling out of the sky as my sink-alarm song seemed to indicate. Luckily, my altimeter's digital readout appeared to be working correctly, confirming my visual observation that I was not in immediate danger. Once I traveled some ways south, perpendicular to most of the antennas' beam paths, the electronics all returned to normal. That was certainly a welcome relief, as launching from the Crest is enough of a sensory overload experience without the added distraction of malfunctioning instruments crying out for attention!

But later in the flight, I rode a mild thermal up and started once again drifting toward the antennas and their invisible, yet very real, beams of energy. Again the vario started shrieking with the sounds of random alarms, my GPS flashed its display a few times, and my radio's squelch overloaded. These warnings, coupled with the actual sight of the massive metal structures getting closer to my fragile craft, were more than enough incentive to leave the thermal early and head south again. I've already had my children in life, but it just didn't seem like a great long-term health strategy to get any closer to these menacing RF energy sources, especially if I ever wanted to see any future grandchildren. So I again turned south and flew away from what for hang gliding pilots is potentially the world's largest mosquito zapper.

Catching a thermal from the Sandia Peak launch. The Crest launch and antenna complex are visible on the ridge to the right, and the city of Albuquerque is in the distance to the left.

Photo: John Wiseman

I was able to work a thermal high enough to fly over the top of the ridge and view the back side of the mountain to the east. I always find it fascinating when I launch from a mountain to be able to look down on the road that I drove to launch, and Sandia was no different. It was very easy to see why it takes over an hour to get from the landing zone to the top of the mountain, as I could pick out the roads that went all the way into the city, through the I-40 mountain pass, then up the back side through the town of Cedar Crest, before meandering up the much more gradual, tree-lined slope of the mountain's east side. I could see a couple of cars slowly negotiating the last few hairpin turns as they approached the parking lot by the Crest gift shop and snack bar. Since I was high enough at this point, I turned south and pointed my glider down the ridge, flying directly over the trail between the Crest and the Peak, the same trail that I had hiked with family and friends many years before.

But one of my biggest thrills in flying Sandia came when I was able to launch directly from the Peak. The stunning 2.7-mile-long Sandia Peak tram provides pilots with access to the Peak launch, with the gliders riding on top of the cable car. I had ridden the tram up to the Peak many times in the past, but I had always purchased a round-trip ticket—it felt a little strange to ask for just a one-way ticket on this day. I'd seen tram passengers ride up with their skis, but I had no idea that pilots could bring their hang gliders up the mountain on the tram as well. I had always gauged the magnitude, splendor, and of course the dangers of the mountain by the views from the tram, which itself is suspended only by steel cables and supported by a few widely-spaced truss towers anchored into the rock on the side of the mountain. The intimidation factor of this mountain is often quite evident from the looks on the faces of the passengers riding the tram, especially when you notice their eyes dwelling on the cables and the supports. Little do these people know, but it can be a lot more intimidating flying literally hundreds or even thousands of feet higher over those same rocks, with no steel cables to hold you up and guide you, or even a floor to stand on!

As I left the mountain to fly out over the foothills to the landing zone, I could see directly below me Tramway Boulevard and the unique and expensive neighborhood where my crazy old boss

used to live and host his office parties. I could even clearly make out the roof and parking lot of the County Line Barbeque restaurant, where my family and I used to enjoy eating during trips to this part of town. If somebody had told me during one of these family dinners that 15 years later I would return to fly a hang glider right over this very same restaurant, I would certainly have thought that they had been out in the hot desert sun a little too long! But in a strange twist of fate, like a scene right out of the Twilight Zone, I ended up eating dinner there with Shawn, Jim and another pilot after this same flight, and the whole experience still seemed almost incomprehensible to me as we sat there discussing our flights. I had actually accomplished my goal of flying a hang glider from Sandia! It still is hard to believe, even as I write this now.

When it was time to return home to Pennsylvania, I boarded the plane, taking my window seat on the right-hand side just behind the wing. With the engines straining in the high altitude, the plane accelerated down the runway toward the east. As the sun was rising over the Sandia Mountains, we lifted off the ground, banking over the city of Albuquerque as we turned north toward Denver. Looking down to the right, I was treated to a parting sight of the mountain in its entire splendor. When we passed Sandia Peak, I could follow the tram wires all the way up the mountain, as they were glistening brightly in the early morning sun. Directly down from my window were the primary and the alternate landing zones, clearly visible within the neighborhoods surrounding them. The antenna complex on the Crest appeared a lot less intimidating when viewed from an airliner at this distance, but I had to

Left to right, Pennsylvania pilots Shawn MacDuff, Jim Carroll, and John Wiseman wait with their gliders for the next tram car to arrive before heading up for a Peak launch.

Photo: Dallas Willis

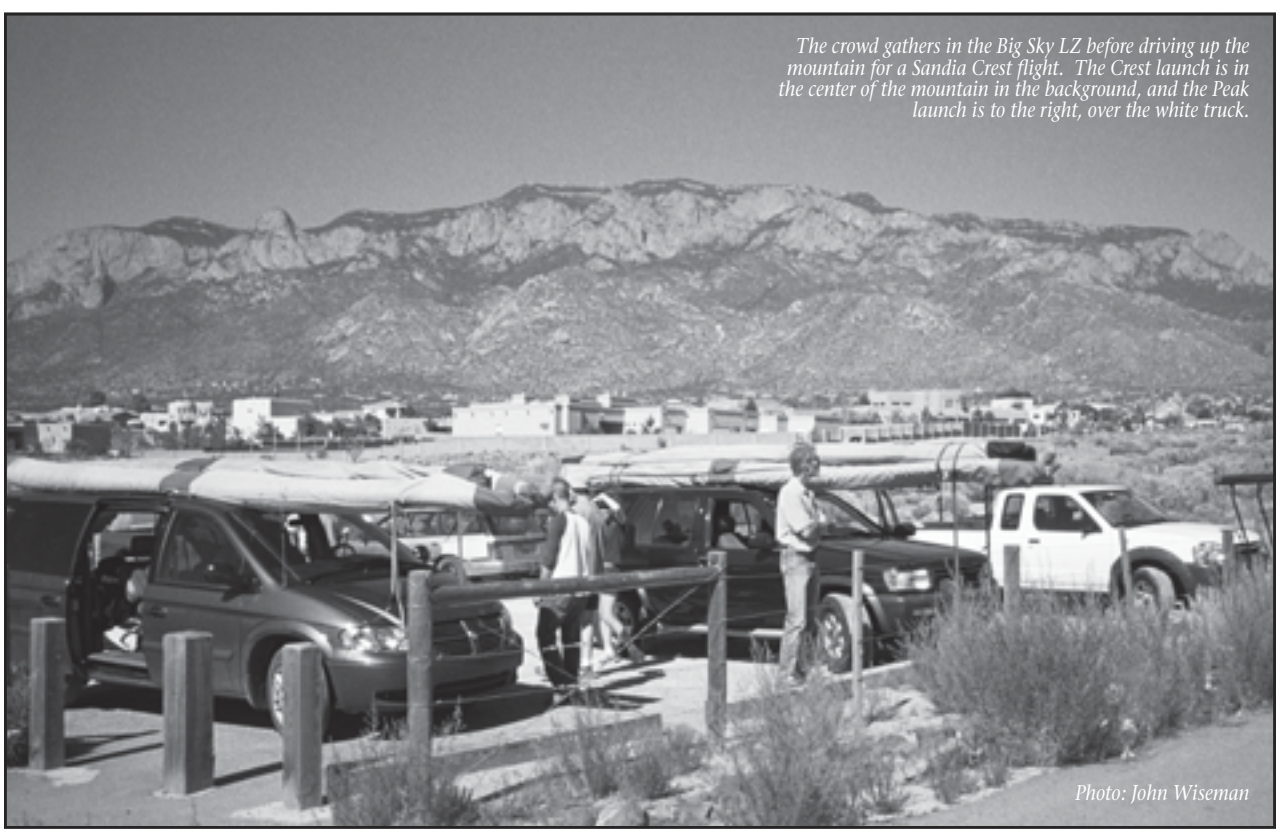
wonder if the pilots noticed any electronic interference with any of the plane's systems as we flew through the invisible beams of energy. Knowing from first-hand experience how powerful those beams really are elicited a silent chuckle when I heard the stock announcement requesting us not to use our meager portable electronic devices, to minimize potential interference with the plane's navigation equipment.

The conversations around me indicated that I was not the only one who was marveling at the view of the mountain passing by us. I heard a woman behind me tell a fellow passenger that the view from the plane was very impressive, but that the best view of the mountain and the surrounding area was to be had by riding the tram up to the top of Sandia Peak. Up until a week before, I would have totally agreed with her. It had taken me 20 years to discover that there was a much more spectacular way to experience the mountain and the surrounding area. Maybe she'll be so lucky some day.

As we quickly gained speed and altitude, I turned back for a final look at the mountain. The sun angle was just right—all the sharp spires and deep canyons of the west side of the mountain stood out clearly from the mountain itself. And for one ephemeral moment, I saw the awakening dragon with his sharp teeth, claws, and tail staring up at me. Just as he faded from view, I faced forward in my seat, pulled down the window shade, and fittingly selected the Who's "I Can See For Miles" on my iPod. As I closed my eyes and started to fall asleep, I realized that the Sandia dragon had issued me a challenge, which I answered to myself in my best pseudo-Austrian accent:

"I'll be back."

John Wiseman is a Hang 4 pilot who's been flying for more than six years. His current glider is an Aeros Discus breakdown model, bought to make trips like this one easier to do. John is a member of the Wind Riders Hang Gliding Club in eastern Pennsylvania, and is the author of three articles published in Hang Gliding *magazine. More photos from his Sandia trip can be found on his Web site at http://www.john-wiseman.com.*



The crowd gathers in the Big Sky LZ before driving up the mountain for a Sandia Crest flight. The Crest launch is in the center of the mountain in the background, and the Peak launch is to the right, over the white truck.

Photo: John Wiseman