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A tow plane pulls a
sailplane to soaring height

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Roy Pinney / Monkmeier

Gliding Over Fall Foliage

By SETH MASIA

I first soared during a ski trip to the Grand Tetons. A lovely Schleicher glider looped silently above the skiers enjoying the sun at Targhee Resort, and I was so enchanted that I drove down to the tiny airport in Driggs, Idaho, and signed on for my first flight. For nearly an hour we wheeled through the ridge lift on the west slope of the Tetons. As soon as I returned to New York, I began looking for a place to learn to soar.

After making some telephone inquiries, I set out in my car for New England one fall day, choosing the fall because of its cooler weather and the spectacular foliage; the woods of Vermont in October can be described by no milder word than pyrotechnic.

There are soaring schools in every part of the United States. Among the largest and best known are those at Elmira and Wurtsboro, N.Y., both within reasonable distance of New York City. But I settled on Sugarbush Soaring at the Sugarbush Airport near the Sugarbush ski area in Warren,

Vt., where I had skied and where other sports can be pursued enthusiastically. Among the local offerings are running, bicycling, hiking, climbing, horseback riding and kayaking on the aptly named Mad River. Moreover, the neighboring towns are chockablock with top-notch restaurants, antique stores, art galleries and boutiques.

Soaring is one of the most exhilarating experiences imaginable. High-performance sailplanes ride rising air currents to stratospheric heights, and the freedom of engineless flight must be experienced to be understood by any person who loves the wide open spaces.

Most schools offer the beginner a complete course. Sugarbush Soaring — operating out of the Sugarbush Airport — however, offers only individual lessons leading to a solo flight or, beyond that, to a Federal Aviation Administration glider pilot's license. Those who demonstrate an aptitude for the sport may solo earlier than the usual 20th flight.

Getting to the Sugarbush Airport is easiest by a private or chartered light plane, but the Burlington, Vt., Airport,

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SETH MASIA is senior editor of *Ski* magazine and co-author of "Walks in the Catskills."

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Gliding Above the Fall Foliage

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If You Go . . .

. . . sailplaning, there is excellent soaring in Hawaii, along the West Coast, throughout the Rockies, around the Midwest and along the Appalachians as well as in Vermont and New York. A licensed sailplane pilot may rent an aircraft for about \$18 an hour whenever he has the time for it. At most locations the soaring is good year round. There is thermal lift in the spring and summer, ridge and wave lift in the fall and winter — and some of the best soaring of the year coincides with the October foliage.

Following is a list of some places to consider in the Northeast. The fees quoted do not include membership in the Soaring Society of America (\$20, but not mandatory), the cost of books (about \$15, and necessary for learning ground-school lessons), meals or lodging.

Stowe Soaring, Morrisville-Stowe Airport, about 40 miles north of Sugarbush, Vt. This facility offers good wave soaring conditions, plus a wide, fully drained runway, which makes possible year-round operation. A beginner's course of 30 flights costs \$500. Membership in the Stowe Soaring Club is \$185 annually and entitles members to rent Schweizer 2-33 trainers at \$6 an hour or high-performance two-place 2-32's for \$15 an hour. The club has a reciprocal privilege arrangement with clubs in Plymouth, Mass., and Waterbury, Conn. Details may be obtained from Stowe Soaring, a division of Yankee Aviation, Morrisville-Stowe Airport, Morrisville, Vt. 05661 (802-888-5150).

Sugarbush Soaring, Warren, Vt.: This operation offers lessons for beginners and experienced pilots and is now run by a private club of soaring enthusiasts. The airport manager is Bill Potts. The club maintains two 2-33 trainers, which rent for \$18 an hour, plus \$14 an hour for an instructor. Tow-plane costs are \$5 for the first 2,000 feet of vertical tow, plus \$1 for each 1,000 beyond that.

If you already have a private pilot's license, a conversion course leading to a glider license will cost \$399 at Sugarbush. The solo course typically takes a week, depending on the weather, which, at worst, must be partly cloudy to permit flying gliders.

Mr. Potts estimates that a first-time student should expect to pay \$500 to \$700 to reach solo. Soloed students may rent the club's 1-26 single-seater for \$18 an hour; pilots holding glider licenses can check out in the high-performance Pilatus B-4 or either of the two-place Larks. The club also expects to acquire a three-place Schweizer 2-32. Glider conversion for a licensed power pilot costs \$399. Sugarbush Soaring is open daily until the end of October, then operates on weekends only until the snow covers the runway, usually around Dec. 1. For information, or to reserve instruction time, contact Sugarbush Soaring, Warren-Sugarbush Airport, Box 68, Waitsfield, Vt. 05673 (802-496-4188 or 802-496-2290.)

Connecticut Soaring Center, Waterbury Airport, Plymouth, Conn.: The gliding school here is supervised by Richard Zisa, who says that he will get you licensed for \$900, but a spokesman, Glen Adams, says: "That's not a guarantee. Eight out of 10 students make it to licenses before exhausting their accounts, but if they don't we'll extend the special rates until they get their licenses." The rates are club rates: 50 percent off the \$20 hourly rental of a Schweizer 2-33 trainer. Tows cost \$12 to 3,000 feet; instruction is \$14 an hour. Those who do not feel like putting down \$900 may join the club for \$200 a year or \$150 if they live more than 60 miles from Waterbury. That provides the discounted rental rate. There is no ridge lift and little wave soaring at Waterbury — almost all lift is in thermals. Contact John Seymour, Connecticut Soaring Center, Waterbury Airport, Plymouth, Conn. 06782 (203-283-5474).

Wurtsboro School of Aviation, Wurtsboro Airport, on U.S. 209, Wurtsboro, N.Y.: A 20-flight instructional package for beginners is offered here for \$299. The package includes tows to 2,500 feet or a maximum of 30 minutes a flight. Rental of a 2-33 is \$15 an hour, instruction is \$10 an hour, and a 2,500-foot tow goes for \$7.50. Wurtsboro is also home to the Metro Airhoppers Soaring Club. The club's membership plan may be obtained by contacting the Wurtsboro School of Aviation, P.O. Box 188, Wurtsboro, N.Y. 12790 (914-888-2791). — S.M.

nervous I had completed my checklist, signed thumbs-up to the line woman, wagged my rudder at the tow pilot (the go-ahead signal) and was rolling down the runway. The Schweizer trainer weighs less than 600 pounds — less than

some motorcycles — and within a couple of hundred feet the single wheel had left the ground.

I put the stick forward to stay low. Too much altitude on takeoff can pull the tow-plane's tail up, keeping him

Sailplane pilots experience the freedom of engineless flight at the soaring school in Wurtsboro, N.Y.

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which is served by Allegheny Airlines, is 40 minutes away, and rental cars are available there.

When I arrived at Sugarbush on a Tuesday morning, the director issued me a student pilot's license and assigned me an instructor, June Schlichting. The weather was good, and we made five flights the first day, during which June taught me the elements of ground handling, aero tow, coordinated turns, stalls and landing approach. Since June is also a professional ski instructor, we slipped into a natural common parlance. Turning lazily a few thousand feet above the chairlifts of Glen Ellen, she would warn me to use more rudder with the admonition, "Remember to carve your turns," a reference to the smooth, skid-free turn of the expert skier.

We made four flights on Wednesday, and I managed my first clean thermaling turns — turning tightly inside a rising bubble of warm air. These early flights averaged about 20 minutes in length, including the four-minute aero tow to 3,000 feet over the airport.

The tow gave me the most trouble, and it was not until Thursday that I managed to hold tow position successfully without June's aid. That day I also made my first unassisted landing, which meant my first solo could not be far off. So it was frustrating when the clouds closed in on Friday, and we managed only one rough flight in turbulent air. The clouds did not break up until noon on Saturday. By then the weekend pilots had shown up at the field. There was heavy demand on tow-plane time, and a student pilot can feel left out. Wave conditions were excellent, and all afternoon I watched the silent aircraft climbing through the cloud window into the smooth lift air on top.

Finally, Steve Fried, an experienced pilot, took me up in one of the high-performance Schweitzer ships. In a one-hour flight we soared to 14,000 feet, quitting at that point because the plane was not equipped with oxygen.

During the late afternoon June took me up for a couple of takeoffs and landings, then signed my logbook as O.K. to solo.

The solo was my 17th flight, and I had had five hours and 20 minutes of dual instruction. Before I had time to be

from climbing out. "Release at 2,000 feet," June had told me, "and stay upwind of the airport." I did.

The sun was low, and the trees below cast long shadows across the fields and roads. The western half of the valley was gloomy, the dark reaching almost to the airport. I took up position over the I.P. — the initial point of the landing pattern — and made a couple of gentle turns. The wind blew straight from the I.P. toward the field at a speed, at this altitude, of 40 miles an hour. So, by heading straight into the wind and holding the glider just above a stall, I hung motionless above the knoll marking the I.P. The wind sweeping up the slope of the knoll created just enough lift to maintain altitude, and with a growing sense of freedom I realized I could hang there until darkness fell. But while the sun filled the cockpit with an orange glow, shadows were quickly advancing across the runway. I made a couple of long descending turns and began my approach.

Tradition demands that the fledgling buy a bottle of champagne for the assembled party — perhaps to compensate the onlookers for failing to provide them a spectacular landing in the trees. We polished off my bottle and added it to a long row of empties, marking a procession of 22 newly soloed students, and returned to my quarters at the Valley Inn, my shirttail intact. (Traditionally, a flight instructor cuts the tail off his newly soloed student's shirt.)

The Valley Inn, which is in Waitsfield, about five minutes' drive north of Warren on State Route 100, is owned and managed by Bill Stimson, a soaring pilot. Mr. Stimson is a genial host who will talk soaring or skiing well beyond the hours kept by reasonable people. The inn, a warm and rambling frame building, still feels like the farmhouse it grew from, and the Stimsons feed their guests family style at breakfast and dinner. Mr. Stimson maintains an impressive if disordered library of soaring books and magazines in the large living room/lounge, and the bar in the basement is for telling lies.

I returned to Sugarbush a few weeks later to put in some solo time toward the seven hours required for the Federal Aviation Administration license. In the meantime I had visited San Francisco and taken a lesson at the Calistoga Soaring Center two hours north of the city. Since there are soaring centers in all parts of the country, it is easy to arrange to fly at short notice — as easy, say, as arranging a round of golf. ■

Mike Garrard/De Wys