

Wallaby Ranch – A Hang Gliding Paradise



Ready for an Aero-tow.



Tow plane getting in position for the next Aero-tow.



Wallaby's Dragonfly ultralight that they use for towing.

Wallaby Ranch, near Orlando, Florida, is the hang glider pilot's paradise. Year after year, more pilots are trained at Wallaby than anywhere else in the world. What's their secret? Aero-tows!

In most places you need a cliff or mountain to launch a hang-glider. But at Wallaby the gliders are towed aloft by a Moyes "Dragonfly" ultralight, especially designed for short takeoffs, rapid climbs and a low-cruise speed.

Besides aero-tows, Wallaby has another unique training aid: tandem instruction. The two-seat hang glider allows the instructor and student to launch together on the student's very first flight, alleviating the apprehension a beginner might experience.

The combination of aero-tow and tandem instruction allows new and intermediate students to climb to 2500 feet and enjoy ten to 15 minutes of flight even on days when there is no atmospheric lift. Under the instructor's watchful eye the student is permitted to control the glider throughout most of the first lesson. Wheels mounted on the hang glider facilitate landings. This relieves the necessity for the instructor and student to coordinate their steps in a traditional stand-up landing.

Thanks to the innovative use of wheels, tandem seating, and aero-tows, a hang glider student is able to accomplish more training in a week at Wallaby than in a month at a traditional flight school that's dependent on "lift and a cliff."

The person responsible for these unique concepts is Malcolm Jones, the founder of Wallaby Ranch. Malcolm hails from Tampa, and began hang gliding in 1973 as a teenager.

In the search for perfect soaring he has traveled to Guatemala, Australia, the Grand Canyon, and Glacier Point in Yosemite National Park. He has competed in numerous contests, and was twice the world hang gliding champion, as well as a member of the 1980 American Cup team. He was commissioned by Disney World to establish the towing operations for their 20th anniversary aerial ballet.

While flying in Australia, Malcolm met Bill Moyes, the designer of the Dragonfly. This ultralight is specially designed for towing hang



Almost ready to launch.



Hangar used to store the Dragonfly.



Preparing the next Aero-tow.

gliders at their modest speed of 28 to 30 miles per hour.

Today Wallaby Ranch employs three Dragonflies and a Cosmos trike for aero-tows. When Malcolm acquired a 200 acre ranch in 1992 he named it "Wallaby" in honor of the cuddly Australian marsupial, which is related to the kangaroo.

When first meeting Malcolm, one would never guess that someone so laid back and casual could have accomplished so much. Over the years Malcolm buried power lines, planted grass, and prepared 45 acres of level land for the ultralight operations.

Today Wallaby Ranch is much more than just a hang glider field. It's a complete family resort, with a swimming pool, sun deck, picnic area, trampoline, climbing wall, swings, camping facilities, showers and lavatories. The clubhouse has a TV, video and stereo.

People vacation at Wallaby from all over the world. There are plenty of recreational activities for non-flying spouses and children, both at Wallaby and the nearby attractions, such as Disney World and Universal Studios.

But the main focus at Wallaby is flying—specifically, hang gliding. The facility is open all year, and manned by seven full-time ranch hands. Soaring is great in both summer and winter. A convergence of weather fronts from the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean often creates a ridge down central Florida which results in exceptional lift, even though there are no mountains in the state.

In May 2000 Dave Straub set an East Coast record flying 212 miles from Wallaby to Valdosta, Georgia. During his 7 1/2 hour flight he climbed as high as 7600 feet. Even beginning student tandem flights have lasted more than an hour and soared to 6000 feet.

Most tandem flights are towed to 2500 feet, which takes about eight minutes. First time students fly early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when the air is calm. Although usually no atmospheric lift is available at these hours, the "sled ride" back to earth still affords 10 minutes or more of flight time after being released from the tow plane.

After landing one can quickly hook up for another tow and be back in the air in a few

minutes. It sure beats hauling the glider back up a hillside.

The tandem gliders have large wheels on the control bar and a pair of small wheels mounted on a long "stinger" extending from the back of the keel. The student and instructor snuggle into their harnesses and complete their preflight checks before an assistant hooks up the towline. In their prone position with the glider sitting on its wheels, they're at just the right attitude for takeoff.

Since the solo (non-tandem) gliders do not have wheels, they are placed in a specially built dolly. The dolly has 12 inch castoring wheels, and supports the hang glider at the right attitude. The towline is almost 300 feet long. It consists of an ingenious but simple combination of loops, bridles, "weak links," and a tow release. The distance required for takeoff is only 50 feet. When ready to fly, the glider simply lifts off the dolly.

The hang glider wing span is about 35 feet. They are constructed of tubes and four ounce Dacron sails. Each glider has an emergency parachute attached to the harness, although so far, no one had needed to deploy one. All the gliders are certified by the US Hang Glider Association.

Presently more than 150 pilots store their gliders at the Ranch in large irrigation tubes kept in a hangar. All the pilots flying at Wallaby are members of the Florida Hang Gliding Association. The storage fee is \$100 per year.

Introductory tandem flights are \$75. A ten lesson package is \$650; 20 lessons, \$1200. A solo tow is \$15. If you don't have your own glider, you can rent one for \$15 per flight, or \$45 for the day. The typical student with no previous flying experience can solo after about 15 tandem flights. No FAA flight check is required.

The ranch is located about eight miles from the boundary of Orlando. Take I-4 westbound out of Orlando toward Tampa. Turn off at Exit 23 (US Hwy 27) and travel north for 1.5 miles to Dean Still Road. Turn left (west) and drive for 1.7 miles to the Wallaby entrance.

The address is 1805 Dean Still Road, Wallaby Ranch, Florida 33837. Telephone 863-424-070 or 800-WALLABY. The international telephone number is 0101-863-420-0070. Web site <http://www.wallaby.com>. E-mail

fly@wallaby.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Thornburgh is a periodic contributor to UltraFlight and various other magazines. He is an ultralight instructor and an FAA Certified Flight Instructor. His previous UltraFlight articles may be seen at

<http://www.cyberskies.com/ultralight>.