

# White Sands Soarers Offers Glider Experience in New Mexico

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**BY ALEXIA SEVERSON, LAS Cruces Sun-News**

ALAMOGORDO, N.M. (AP) — I arrived at the Alamogordo-White Sands Regional Airport on a cool Saturday in early April at the invitation of the White Sands Soaring Association. The group, formed in 1959 to share the art, science, fellowship and fun of flying gliders — small engineless aircrafts with long, thin wings that use atmospheric conditions and pockets of rising air to stay aloft. Club members wanted to show me what it felt like to ride in a glider, also called a sailplane, and how it can offer a new and different perspective of the world.

The WSSA consists of about 40 members from around New Mexico, including Alamogordo, Las Cruces, Cloudcroft, Ruidoso, Deming, as well as El Paso, Texas. Club members meet every weekend at the airport to go flying.

I met up with WSSA chief instructor and licensed glider pilot Lance Grace, a tall man with grayish-white hair and an easygoing personality, who showed me the glider I would be riding in. It was a two-seat sailplane — a Grob 103C Twin III SL (Self Launch), named ML, after long-time WSSA members Mike and Lynn Rice, who donated the plane to the club six years ago.

This glider actually has an engine used to launch the plane into the air without the use of a tow plane. Once the motor glider reaches the right altitude, the motor is turned off and the glider soars through the air without engine power, Grace explained. However, for my flight, we would use the club's tow plane to get the motor glider up into the air, Grace said.

I was excited because I enjoy trying new and adventurous things, but I also felt apprehensive. My only experience with flying in an aircraft had been commercial flights when traveling, so I wasn't sure what to expect and the fact that we wouldn't be using the plane's motor made me a little nervous.

When the big moment came, Grace and I rode down the airport runway in a golf cart, pulling the 1,200-pound ML glider behind us, its left wing balancing on a detachable bicycle tire. Once we reached the launch point, club members prepared the glider for takeoff by tethering it to a tow plane on the ground and Grace helped me strap on a parachute.

"We won't be using this," he reassured me.

After the parachute was secure, I climbed into the front seat of the plane and buckled in. Grace had told me earlier that he wanted to give me the best view and would fly the glider from the back seat.

As I sat in the snug and narrow cockpit, another club member closed the plexiglass dome of the glider over my head and showed me how to let air in through a small sliding door in the dome and through a vent inside the glider. Shortly after Grace climbed into the back seat, we were ready for take-off. Everything after that seemed to happen very fast, as my adrenaline began to kick in and I prepared myself mentally for the experience.

As the tow plane pulled us down the runway at high speed, Grace told me we would start to lift off the ground before the tow plane did and pointed it out when we began to hover a couple feet above the ground. Before I knew it, we were rising higher into the air, along with the tow plane, until the airport was far below us.

We continued to climb until we had a clear view of the nearby Sacramento Mountains. I snapped a few photos as my excitement increasingly turned into nausea. I also started to feel a little dizzy and my hands began to tingle. I was surprised at how much I was affected by the change in elevation since I don't get sick easily.

Once we had climbed up to about 3,000 feet above the ground (about 7,200 feet above sea level), Grace told me to pull a yellow knob located on the control panel inside the cockpit to release the glider from the tow plane. I pulled it and watched as the tow plane took off without us. The glider immediately took on an almost weightless feel, which reminded me of the fragility of a paper airplane. The glider soared up and down with the air currents as Grace pointed out landmarks on the ground, such as White Sands National Monument in the distance and a golf course.

I tried my best to pay attention to everything he was telling me, but I was beginning to feel more nauseous. I mentioned it to Grace, who told me there was a plastic bag in a pocket on my right side, put there specifically for people who may need to hurl during flight. If I couldn't reach the bag in time, Grace said I could also use the hat he had lent me — apparently, one of its common uses.

I didn't end up using the hat or the bag. I distracted myself with the incredibly close-up view I now had of the Sacramento Mountains. The beauty of the surrounding landscape was enough to make me understand how people get hooked on flying gliders.

We were up in the air for what felt like about 20 minutes before Grace told me we would begin landing. While I was disappointed I couldn't stay up in the air longer, I was relieved to get back on solid ground, where my feeling of nausea instantly began to dissipate and an energizing buzz from the experience took over.

When I asked Grace about feeling sick later, he said it's typical for people to feel nauseous the first time, or the first several times, they go up in a glider. It's something you get used to over time.

"The apprehension is gone; you just enjoy what you're doing," Grace said. "That feeling of nausea is actually a mental thing, because you're just getting all these different senses and once you get used to it, it goes away — and I'm a living example of that. I don't think anyone could be more susceptible to motion sickness than I was when I was a kid. But it'd be really hard to get me feeling bad now."

Las Cruces Peter Krebs, 73, an experienced glider pilot and a WSSA member for 13 years, said he enjoys flying gliders because it's a constant physical and mental challenge.

"You have to keep your mind at the task and physically, it's exhausting as well and challenging," Krebs said. "Here in New Mexico, you have the heat to deal with in the summer — when you have the best flying weather — and it can easily get up to 110, 115 (degrees) on the ground before you start up, and then you try to get as high as possible in order to cool off."

Krebs said his longest glider flight was about six hours long, and that he's flown as high as 17,000 feet above sea level. Flying over 18,000 feet above sea level requires special permission from the Federal Aviation Administration and a full oxygen mask, he said.

With instruction and training, anyone can become a licensed pilot for a sailplane, Grace said.

"To get a license you have to take an FAA written exam and an FAA flight exam," he said. "We have trained pilots to take this that have been between the age of 13 to 72 . and from zero experience to highly experienced."

Solo flying can begin at age 14 and licenses can be issued at 16, Grace said.

The club owns three normal gliders, two motor gliders and one tow plane. Along with the ML, a second motor glider, also a Grob 103C Twin III SL, was donated to the club by Las Cruces resident and glider pilot Louis Braddi in late March. Braddi's son, David, passed away from esophageal cancer last year. David Braddi was also a glider pilot and a joint owner of the motor glider. David Braddi, along with his father, was a glider instructor with the New Mexico Wing Civil Air Patrol and supported the glider cadet program, according to Joyce Braddi, Louis Braddi's wife. The club named the glider DL, for David and Louis.

Krebs said in addition to the excellent equipment the club has, the people involved are also a "very friendly bunch."

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Information from: Alamogordo Daily News, <http://www.alamogordonews.com>