



IS IT A BIRD... IS IT A PLANE...

Neither. It's champion paramotor pilot Paul Martin. For him there's nothing better than seeing Suffolk in all its glory from the air

WORDS & PHOTOS: Mike Trippitt

High above Suffolk, Paul Martin circles and swoops. Below him, a patchwork of green and brown. The waters of the rivers Deben and Orwell shimmer, and the vast expanse of the North Sea dwarfs container ships and cranes at Felixstowe.

With the grace of a swan and the precision of a Red Arrow he is, in a trice, back on the ground stowing 40 kilos of engine and 20 square metres of fabric back in his van. And that is what he loves. "It's the simplicity of thinking, 'It's nice tonight, I've got a couple of hours'. I can come down to the field, fly down to Felixstowe, or go down the coast, or go where I like."

Paul, a service manager, is British Paramotor Open Champion after winning the British Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association (BHPA) championships in September 2018. He is also a member of the British Paramotor Team competing internationally and in Europe. The team

came second in the 2016 World Championships and fourth in the 2017 European Championships.

Paul, a married father, who lives in Suffolk and has worked at BT Martlesham Heath since he was a 16-year-old apprentice, only took up paramotoring six years ago after competitive amateur careers in canoeing and cycling.

"Flying has always attracted me. I didn't want to have to go to an airfield, or share a plane with someone. I always wanted to fly a helicopter, but that is a totally different league. I used to have dreams of being able to fly, to swim in the air. The harder I swam, the higher I went. I don't have them now, I don't need to."

A paramotor is the cheapest form of powered flight. An investment of £1,000 in lessons and £4,000 in good second-hand kit will get a new pilot flying competently and safely. The craft has two main parts – the wing, a less lift-efficient but faster version of a paraglider wing, and the motor, typically two-stroke between 80cc and 200cc. Each attaches to a seat



Paul Martin, British Paramotor Open Champion

into which the pilot is harnessed, and from where he or she creates lift using the engine throttle, and controls speed, direction and braking by pulling a series of lines with hands and feet. The ability to create lift and take off from flat ground gives a paramotor great flexibility.

"The big advantage is you can go somewhere and you can come back again," says Paul. "It's something you can do on your own, you don't rely on other people. Ballooning needs a whole team of people and with paragliding you need a taxi or someone to come and collect you. With a paramotor you can get back to where you set off from without any help from anyone."

Paul learnt to fly by taking lessons in Essex and becoming a member of the BHPA. But no pilot's licence is required to fly a paramotor, nor is formal training or insurance compulsory. Pilots can take to the air after reading a book or watching videos on YouTube.

"Whether that will stay the same who knows?" says Paul. "The more people that don't follow the rules, the more hassle for the ones that do. That's when regulation will start coming in. If too many people fly in airspace they should not be in, the CAA has got to do something about it."

But what goes up must come down, and Paul has words of warning. "If you can take off, you can probably fly it. But obviously you have to land. You will land, but how graceful that will be is another thing." Training through BHPA approved instructors is available across the country in a variety of ways. Paul had



Paul prepares to get airborne

'pay as you go' training, but spent many hours on the ground becoming proficient and confident at 'kiting the wing' (getting the wing in the air and controlling it without power) before taking to the air.

Paul recommends anyone to have lessons before buying equipment. "An instructor will give you what you need to do it safely. They'll give you advice on equipment and they normally provide equipment to train on. Once you have had some flights, you then start to know about what [equipment] you need."

Although competing with the British team and practising for competitions satisfies his competitive streak, Paul says paramotoring is really about flying, especially on a clear sunny day with just a gentle breeze.

"It's about seeing things from a different perspective and going places you just wouldn't go in a car. When you're up there at 1,000 feet, everything looks small. It's a sort of 3D environment. You've got another dimension to being on the ground. On a good day you can see the buildings in London from here – The Gherkin, The Shard."

Inevitably paramotoring, like all forms of flight, carries some risk. Paul is one of a small number of pilots who carry an emergency parachute – a 'reserve' – in case the paramotor wing collapses and he is unable to recover lift. And he has had to use it to save his life. Two years ago, near Woodbridge, his paramotor wing collapsed when he had insufficient altitude to get it flying again.

"I was at 800 feet and you really need 500 feet to open the reserve. Instinctively,



A different perspective on Landguard Point and the Port of Felixstowe

I just reached down for the reserve and threw it. You're supposed to look up to make sure it's open, but I couldn't see anything because my helmet was in the way. I thought, 'It must be open.'

The reserve wing did open and Paul looked down. "I remember thinking, 'Do I stand up or sit down?,' because when you're landing by parachute you bend your legs. You can't do that with 40 kilos of metal on your back."

With adrenaline coursing his veins and the ground racing up towards him, Paul does not recall whether he was sitting or standing when he came down. "I landed in a clearing in the woods next to an electricity power line. It was a gorse/heather area, so the landing was quite soft. I was quite lucky actually."

He remembers thinking, 'I'm alive!', but even though he had been navigating in the air he was disorientated. "I wandered around for 10 minutes, couldn't get a good phone signal and I just didn't know where I was. Up until that point I'd known exactly where I was. But there was a sense of relief."

When his mobile did work he made a call. "I didn't tell my wife. My son was home and I told him that I'd come down on the reserve. I told him not to tell his mum, but that I needed a lift home."

Although flying his paramotor gives Paul "a bit of a buzz", he realises that it's not for everyone, especially his wife who, he says, worries about him. "She has never seen me fly. Every time I win something she says, 'Are you going to give up now?'"

Perhaps one day he will. But not just yet. ♦

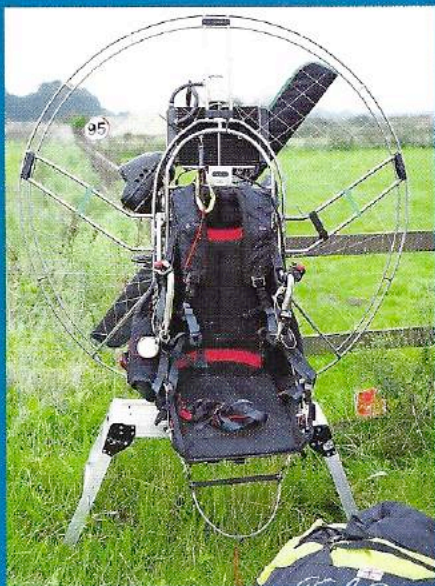
WHAT & WHERE

Mike Byrne, from Essex, built and flew the first paramotor flown in 1980 and coined the term 'paramotor'.

A paramotor pilot is exempt from requiring a CAA licence due to it being launched on foot. In March 2018 a change in the law allows a paramotor weighing less than 70kg, with wheels, to be flown without a CAA licence.

The BHPA is the governing body for hang gliding, paragliding and paramotoring in the UK. It serves the interests of pilots, and works with the CAA. It provides insurance, a training syllabus and a rating certification scheme for pilots, and regulates instructors, coaches, clubs and schools. Details of BHPA paramotor schools and clubs can be found at bhpa.co.uk/sport/power/

Paul Martin trained with BHPA instructor Alex Anderson of Foot Flight Paramotors flying. footflight-paramotors.com



A good pre-loved rig costs a few thousand pounds