

TAKE THE LEAP

One day while visiting Queenstown, New Zealand, I could swear I saw pterodactyls flying over the skylight in my shower. Granted, without my glasses I'm fairly blind, but there was something huge hovering overhead watching me soap up. As it turned out, I was in the flight path of landing paragliders. As they swooped down from the mountains, they gently landed across the street in a local soccer field, simply taking a step or two before coming to a complete stop.

"I wonder where they're coming from?" I asked my husband, Dan, as we sipped our coffee, watching glider after glider come down.

"It's hard to tell. It seems like they're circling down. They must have started on top of one of these mountains," he surmised.

We didn't think much more about it as we went out to play tourist. Eventually, like everyone else, we made our way to Coronet Peak to check out the views. As we got closer and closer, it was clear that the top of the peak was the launch pad for the paragliders. One after the other, tandem riders would take a few running steps and jump off the side of the mountain. Like birds, the wings would fill with air and they would glide over the abyss.

"We should do that," I said to Dan.

"Are you crazy?"

"It's like flying. I've always wanted to fly like a bird."

"Since when?"

"Since I was a little girl. Didn't you want to fly?"

"Yeah, but I'm not six-years-old any more."

“Good point,” I reluctantly admitted.

It kept gnawing at me. This could be one of those experiences of a lifetime. I should do it. I knew I’d regret it if I didn’t. On the other hand I could die. You see the dilemma?

“I think I’m gonna do it,” I say.

“Really? You’re sure?”

“No, but let’s check it out. There’s the sign-up kiosk.”

It didn’t take long for the agent’s sales pitch to sell me. Dan – not so much.

“You go, I’ll take pictures of you,” Dan said, pretending not to be horrified at my choice.

Within minutes I was being harnessed while an amiable guy named Guy worked very quickly to spread out the wings, leaving me little time to chicken out. He exuded confidence, a very important trait at a time like that.

“So, what instructions do I need to know? What do I need to do and not do?” I asked shakily.

“It’s pretty simple. When I say run, run,” he answered matter-of-factly.

I expected some type of safety chat, some emergency string pull lesson – something. But, that was it. Once he completed checking the lines, checking me, and checking his gear, he strapped himself to me from the back. He was easily a foot taller than me, so I nestled in rather comfortably against him.

“OK, on the count of three, start running towards the edge.”

I gulped, trying to swallow my anxiety, and looked straight ahead over a cliff that had a one-thousand foot drop.

“One, two, three!”

And with that, I took three steps. The wings immediately filled with air and the ground dropped out from beneath us as we soared out over the canyon. I half-expected some jarring moment, but it was seamless and gentle. We literally had a bird’s eye view of the entire mountain range, lake and city. It was magnificent. Thankfully I have no fear of heights because this would have been a really bad time for that to emerge.

The experience of flying was so exhilarating that all I could feel was pure joy. I think Guy noticed how much I was loving it and asked me if I wanted to go a tad faster. Up until then, we had been lightly soaring about, as he slowly dipped a wing to turn us one way or the other.

“Sure, why not?” I exclaimed.

Within seconds, he turned one of the wings a bit more sharply, plunging us into a free-fall that made me feel like I was on the Cyclone at Coney Island. As my stomach rose in my throat, I kept it together, trying to enjoy the thrill of the ride. After a few minutes, I did ask him to dial it back a bit, bringing us to a happy medium.

I had lost all sense of time by that point. We had circled down from the mountain and now we were over the lake just as the sun was beginning its sunset. Our reflection in the water looked exactly like a seagull passing by. He pulled one of the wings to the left, and we headed back over land. The houses were starting to get a bit too close for comfort. Before I knew it, that same field across from our hotel came into view. He circled overhead as I lifted my feet, trying not to touch the leaves of the approaching treetops. Within seconds we were over the field. Just as we were about to land, he dropped the wings. We took two steps forward and we were down – as simple as that.

Handing Guy a generous tip for not killing me, I thanked him profusely. As he gathered his gear, I made my way back across the street to my hotel, and waited for Dan to get back to tell him about my adventure.