



FAMARA FIASCO

Here is a cautionary tale for those pilots that fly on Lanzarote, other coastal sites or anywhere that creates the possibility of an out landing leaving you stranded somewhere exposed.

Over the last 10 years I have become a regular visitor to Lanzarote for the winter flying. One of the best sites there is the Famara Cliffs which top out at over 1800 feet and stretch for approximately 10 miles, enabling a ridge run out to the northern tip of the Island where they terminate at Mirador. For a large part of their length they are vertical faces which drop straight into the Atlantic, offering no option if forced down but a water landing with no where to swim to. The only place where it is possible to land safely is by the old salt pans up at Mirador, however this will leave you with a day long carry out on an old packhorse route up the cliffs (speak to John Aldridge if you want a first hand account of this!).

The cliffs face north-west and with a fresh breeze from that direction offer an easy and spectacular out and return. Often there is a bit more north in the wind so creating a bit of headwind; the better for making sure that you will make the return leg quickly and safely. However, beware when the wind goes too far round to the north....

This year I arrived on the island for another week's flying on Sunday 6th February. As luck would have it the conditions were north-westerly enabling the Famara ridge run both on the Sunday and Monday. The latter day's flying including being able to fly out over the harbour at La Graciosa, topping out at over 4000 feet over the cliffs and a landing on the beach at Caletta, shortly followed by the customary herbal sedative and Dorada beer, bliss!

On Tuesday the conditions had deteriorated. The wind had strengthened (30 mph on the hill, 20 mph at height) and had gone round to practically due north, with it forecast to be north-easterly the next day. The weather had become more broken as well, a large cu-nimb was about 20 miles out to sea, the cloud base was lower and there were heavy showers scattered around the sky. The wind strength made it unsafe to use the 1200 foot "high" take off we had used for the previous two days so we opted to use the lowest one, at about 700 feet.

I cheerfully rigged my Laminar ST04, took-off and bimbled up the ridge. The strong headwind made progress a bit slow but the lift was plentiful enough and I had no difficulty crossing the various gaps on the ridge taking me eventually onto the beginning of the cliffs. Things were very different to the previous day...



Famara beach

Cloud base was at 2000 feet, just over the top of the cliffs, and it was necessary to push out to sea to avoid being sucked into the grey stuff. I flew a couple of miles along the cliffs then loitered, waiting for a heavy shower and consequent low cloud to clear from further up the cliffs near Mirador. I then pushed further up the cliffs which drop down to about 1500 feet after about 4 miles. I was now also struggling to stay on top of them.

My awareness as to my altitude was not assisted by the fact that I had my main altimeter set to height above take-off, which of course was 500' lower than the previous days. Never mind, I thought, I was just going round a corner which causes a 20 degrees change in direction to the cliffs, placing them squarer on to the northerly wind, bound to take me up! The hoped for lift was not to be found and suddenly I woke up to the fact that I was now at about 1200', 4/5 miles from the nearest landing and starting to go down increasingly quickly.

It was time for a quick decision.

I decided to turn back the way I had come in the hope that I would be able to connect to the lift I had left on the high section of the cliffs. No chance! I found myself getting drilled on the corner where the cliffs change direction slightly. Here the vertical face of the cliff is set back slightly, with its erosion having created scree slopes that start about 700' below the cliff tops and slope down to the sea. This scree and debris is in turn eroded into a series of steep spines. Where two of these spines reached the ocean they had created a slight cove, with a strip of boulders about 75 meters long and 10 meters wide along the back of it. Time for a good spot landing.

Trying to put thoughts of "I can't believe this is f*****g happening!" to the back of my mind I addressed my concentration to the task in hand. Assuming any wind would be northerly I tracked parallel to the boulders and turned to execute a reasonable "fly on the wall" on rocks with an average diameter of 1m. The only damage was a slightly bent base bar. A result in the circumstances, and certainly better than a swim to the bottom of the Atlantic.

As the euphoria of landing ok started to wear off it was time to take stock.

On the way down I had been concentrating mainly on setting up my landing, but had got the firm impression that there would be no way out on foot. My GPS told me that I was just over 4 miles in a straight line from my previous day's landing point on the Famara beach, probably 5 miles around the bay. I had no radio but did have two charged mobile phones and a strong signal. I phoned Ray Cooper, the resident English pilot. He wasn't sure exactly where I was, but thought it may be possible to climb out to a footpath that runs along the cliffs from the Famara beach. I was happy to try because I was anxious to avoid calling out the emergency services unnecessarily and, it was only 2.30, so I still had plenty of time...



Famara Cliff (~20km) and La Graciosa Island

I packed the glider away and stashed it in a gully which gave the only access from the scree to the shoreline, the rest of this boulder "beach" having a 100' vertical face at the back of it. With my fully loaded harness bag on my back I then scrambled up this gully and started to traverse and climb the scree to see if I could connect with this path to the south. The climbing was very difficult. The scree is in fact made of a combination of compacted soil, stones and rocks. It was only just not too steep to climb on most of it, and was unpredictable in how firm a footing it gave. It was particularly difficult to descend on. The process was made stranger by the permanent presence of a huge flock of seagulls that were continuously circling over me and making one hell of a racket. Their noise and activity seemingly triggered by the novelty of a human on what was otherwise their exclusive domain.

Over an hour later, having reached 700' and confronted with a towering spine back joining the vertical cliff face it was apparent that this was not the way out. Another hour later and having tried the same exercise to the north, this time going too far up a steep face so that I had trouble getting back down, I realised that there was no way out by land. It was now time for a re-think.

One group of friends had been trying to reach me from Famara whilst others had headed to Orzola, the fishing village at the north end of the island to try and get some sort of a boat organised. The ferrymen who operates the ferry from there to the island of La Graciosa agreed to turn out upon their return to La Graciosa at 6.00. I therefore returned to the shoreline for 5.30, by now dirty, hungry and thirsty from the futile efforts to climb out.

The promised 20' boat turned up at about 6.30. It would not come very close into the shore because of all the boulders in the water and the rough sea condition. They waded me round to the next bay, where I was able to scramble round because the tide was out. This was in fact no better and a stand off developed with myself waist deep in water and them not being prepared to come any closer. I was anxious to save what I could of my kit (the words of a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing!) and was not prepared to abandon everything in my harness bag to the sea which would then have been necessary if I had swum out to the boat. Had I known what the night had in store my decision would have been different. The boat then went off and I finally resorted to calling the emergency services. It was now getting dark.

The emergency services initially thought that they could get to me overland from Famara. By the time that they appreciated that this was impossible it was now dark and I was told further efforts would have to wait until the light of the next morning, and to make myself as warm as possible. Fair enough I thought, quite liking the idea of bivouacking next to the ocean, notwithstanding the lack of food, drink, bed or shelter. I returned to the gully where my glider was stashed, dressed myself in all my flying clobber and cheerfully zipped myself into my harness, whereupon my legs, which had got soaked in my efforts to wade out to the boat, started to warm up and count the 12 hours or so away to daylight.

All went well for the first couple of hours. I even phoned up my sister in the UK and cheerfully described my oceanside location and the pleasant sound of the crashing waves etc etc. It then started to rain, gently at first, then progressively harder. There was also a fresh breeze and, by now soaked through, I started to get cold, very cold. I was trying to get to sleep but struggling. A zipped up hang gliding harness is very restrictive, I had a fancy new helmet which is faired at the back, making it impossible to sleep on my back, and rock doesn't lend itself to sleeping on your side. In any event my thoughts of sleep were soon overtaken by the weather.

At about 1.30 it started to rain, hard, very hard in fact. The rainstorm that night was the heaviest on the north end of the island in the last year. It caused the track up to the take off at Mala to be washed away and the closure for several days by flooding and mudslides of the new road up the east side of the island. Initially I just tried to close the gap between my top and the base of my helmet. Then I began to be sprinkled by tiny pebbles that I could hear pinging off my helmet, rather like some elf further up on the cliffs was entertaining himself by aiming them at me. A minute later there was a crash and a rock the size of a breeze block landed by my head. At the same time I heard the sound of running water coming from above me. My shelter was turning into a storm drain. Time to move!

Ripping my harness off I went and stood to the side of the bottom end of the gully, about 3 meters across from my hang glider which was lying with its thin end up the slope. Two minutes later I could hear the deep crashing of a large rock bouncing down the gully. In the dim light I could just make out the form of a two foot wide boulder as it bounced into sight, onto the middle of the glider ripping a 1 meter hole into the cross country bag, and then onwards into the sea.

I decided to abandon the gully and in the darkness felt my way round the corner on to the shoreline, which was just a few yards wide with the tide being up. At this time the air became full of the sound of stones and rocks hitting the boulders on the shoreline around me. I kept myself pressed to the cliff face to try and avoid being struck, but before long some object struck me on the left side of my head and left shoulder. The helmet did its job and luckily my shoulder could still move and, although badly bruised, nothing had broken. I decided I couldn't afford to remain on the shoreline and to return to the front end of the gully where there was a slight overhang and hopefully not in the path of any more bouncing bombs funnelled down it. Pressing myself under the overhang I found myself a small boulder to perch on and used my open harness as some form of a blanket. This is where I spent the next six hours, ticking off the minutes until dawn. The rain, water torrent and rock falls slackened off and my biggest enemy became the cold. I was soaking and there was a cold northerly wind coming off the ocean.

Physical activity involved a combination of hunching up to minimise my outside area and standing up to move about vigorously when it felt like I was seizing up and my bodies shivering and shuddering was not adequate to generate the necessary heat. Mental activity involved breaking the time into segments which could be counted off, whilst trying to avoid the temptation of looking at my watch too often. Occasionally I treated myself to a rendition of "Oh what a beautiful morning" or "I do like to be beside the seaside" and other such suitable numbers.

As I expected the hours between 3 and 5 proved to be the hardest. As dawn arrived slowly through the overcast and drizzle at a quarter past seven I cannot pretend that I was in a good shape. It's easy to see how sleep deprivation, cold, thirst and hunger can be used to reduce peoples' spirits when others (the Americans for example) wish them to do their bidding.

I had spoken to the emergency services again by phone at about 6, expressing a preference for a helicopter. At about half past seven a coast guard cutter turned up and marked my position by holding station off-shore. A helicopter arrived an hour later and was able to touch down, gently on the boulders, by virtue of the fact that the tide was now out, exposing a 30 yard wide shoreline. They didn't want to hang about, apparently because of the risk of rock falls, so a crewman ran across, grabbed me, we ran to the aircraft and were out of there in no time. I was able to take my battens and harness bag with me, but my now filthy and boulder struck glider was left behind. The cloud was still low so we had low level fly around the north end of the island and down the east coast to the airport, where I had my first food in twenty hours and drink in sixteen.

My glider has now been recovered at considerable (and probably wasted) expense by the Graciosa boatmen. It remains to be seen whether it is salvageable, I will assess it when I return at Easter. The rest of my kit has cleaned up well enough.

Henry Blackshaw