La Cerdanya Expedition 2016

Mylynn Bowker, Trinity College

From September 19\textsuperscript{th} - 27\textsuperscript{th} 2016, a team of 6 OUGC members - Elliot Akama-Garren, Mylynn Bowker, Qin Cao, Artur Doshchyn, William Nash, and Jonathan Pedde, joined by our instructors Jonathan May, Pete Stratten, and Phil Sturley, escaped the cold and rainy British weather for a week of exhilarating flying in La Cerdanya, Spain, near the Pyrenees.

This was a fantastic opportunity for OUGC to experience flying abroad and trying out a new airfield with different conditions and challenges. We were very lucky to have a team of highly experienced instructors who had already racked up hundreds of hours in the mountains, and they imparted their expertise and gliding wisdom on us. We rented a Duo Discus and a Twin II, two very capable cross-country two-seaters, and we had one weeks’ unlimited use of both gliders. We certainly made the most of this, amounting a total of 23 flights and 37 hours up in the air between us, with the longest flight lasting 3 hours and 10 minutes.
The view from the Duo Discus at 2800m

La Cerdanya airfield
For all of the students, this was our first experience flying in the mountains and certainly an interesting challenge for all of us. We were able to develop our mountain flying skills, and improve our skills as pilots. With mountain flying, strong awareness is needed to combat the massive lift and sink, as well as for choosing the correct speed to fly and your route to retreat. There is also the added challenge of a lack of visual reference to a horizontal horizon due to the mountains, which made for some very exhilarating and stimulating flying! We also had to watch out for vultures - they are a huge threat for gliders in the mountains, since a collision with one of these birds of prey could easily take part of your glider off! The ridge lift was often hard to locate and the thermals were tough to manage but once we got away, we would be soaring up to heights of 3100m (around 10000ft)! Of course, at the same time we were able to enjoy the impressive landscape offered by the Pyrenees from the cockpits of our gliders, and in many flights we soared over the borders and snuck into France and Andorra.

William flying in the Twin with Pete Stratten - made for some exciting formation flying
Naturally, as is the case with all OUGC expeditions, we also made the most of the time we had when we weren’t at the airfield or chasing vultures in the sky. We rented a gorgeous and quaint casa rural for our stay, where we were able to enjoy a nightly log fire, and we were treated to some delicious meals by our honorary expedition chef Artur, as well as having a group barbecue in our garden one night, and on our last night, an exquisite stew cooked by Qin, followed by a blind wine tasting which was accompanied by some regional cheese. We also made the most of our ‘holiday’ in Spain by going out for tapas and drinking lots of sangria and Rioja wine!
Tapas (and wine) at La Caixeta, Puigcerdà

Happy faces ready for some blind wine tasting
Apart from the exciting flights we had, the highlights of the trip include playing Soviet card games, eating rabbit heads, stargazing near our cottage (we saw multiple shooting stars and could even see the Milky Way!), a very close encounter with some maggots, many economic and political debates, elopement stories, RAF drinking games, for some of us, a quick trip to Montserrat on the way back! All in all, it was an excellent and very memorable week of flying, as well as bonding as a group and with our delightful instructors. We’d like to say a big thank you to Jonathan, Pete, and Phil for joining us on the trip and instructing us in the mountains. After the success of this expedition, we’re now hoping to have an annual overseas OUGC expedition and next summer we will be moving across the border to France so stay tuned for updates!