



ABOVE Rick Maddy of Colorado launching Dry Canyon, October 2019. White Sands National Park is in the background to the west. Photo by Robin Hastings.

Southern New Mexico [contributed by ROBIN HASTINGS]

Sampling the offerings of southern New Mexico

Ask someone to name every state in the country, and if they can only get to 49, odds are that New Mexico is the missing number 50. If that person does remember to include the state, they probably don't know that anything exists south of Albuquerque. I'd like to illuminate this geographic darkness with specific information for the flying community. My goal here is entirely selfish. Our community wants more pilots to fly with! I hope to entice you with a rundown of a few of the southern New Mexico sites. With luck, a few of you will come down here for a visit!

New Mexico is vast. If you want a whole lot of not much, man, we have it! But it's beautiful. The common misconception is that it is simply one gigantic, flat desert—plus Santa Fe, Taos, and Albuquerque, where, indeed, the crown jewel of New Mexico soaring, the Sandias, loom over the city. It is a land of rattlesnakes, coyotes, and scorpions, and a couple of old prospectors remembering the gold strike they almost made. There are also some amazing mountain ranges (a few even have roads to the top) full of forests, and abundant wildlife. Though the majority of the population lives in the northern part of the state, there are also a few of us down south in Las Cruces, Alamogordo, Deming, Silver City, and Roswell. El Paso, Texas lies just across the

Texas border, 40 miles south of Las Cruces. Down here, the Rio Grande Soaring Association is the local flying club, and we would love to welcome you into our crew! Is there flying in this area? Oh, yes! We have everything from thermal and ridge soaring sites to hike-and-flys and towing. Plus most of our sites are great for either paragliding or hang gliding. Keep in mind, given New Mexico's mild winters, you can get out almost any time of year.

The first site to visit is Dry Canyon, probably the best known to pilots outside the region. This is a H3/P3 site in Lincoln National Forest, 2,400 feet above the town of Alamogordo, where twice a year, in the late spring and early fall, the Rio Grande Soaring Association likes to put on a fun fly-in. We launch in any wind direction from due west to south/southeast. You can have a sled run from Dry, but it isn't common. Almost everyone soars here on almost every flight. The launch, in the foothills of the Sacramento Mountains, is about 7,000 feet above sea level, and thermalling up to 10,000 feet is routine. Reaching 15,000 feet is not out of the ordinary. It's a ridge soaring and thermalling site, with a concrete ramp for hang gliders and a smooth, clear slope for paragliders. The designated LZ is a grassy 10-acre field,

but going XC to the north will present you with a wealth of alternate landing spots. The road to launch is kind of rough (4WD with good clearance is recommended), and the glide to the LZ is a bit far (about 8:1), but you don't want to miss this site if you are coming through the area. I recall watching Rome Dodson, a visiting pilot, waiting out a thermal at the LZ and then instead of setting down, taking it up from 300 feet and landing 30 miles to the north. That happens here.

Southwest is the prevailing wind direction in New Mexico, so it should be no surprise that Magdalena Rim, northwest of Las Cruces, faces that direction. This is a ridge soaring and thermal site about 500 feet above ground level, with, again, about an 8:1 glide to the landing zone though you can also top land at the site. The launch is smooth enough to take a stronger wind than at Dry Canyon or La Luz, and it doesn't require 4WD to get there. Access requires a 700-yard hike from the road, so most hang glider pilots bring a driver and plan on a flight to the LZ (which is about eight acres in size), rather than top landing and hiking the wing back to the car. This is one of the most benign sites in New Mexico. Rated a H2/P2, it is easy to soar. But benign doesn't mean it doesn't work! During one of my flights here, I made a low save and wound up going from 5,500 feet to 11,000 feet and setting the current XC record (only 12 miles, but it's still a new site).

About 50 miles west of Las Cruces looking down on the town of Deming, New Mexico, is the Little Floridas site. This west/southwest-facing site is 5,500 feet above sea level and 900 feet above ground level and is rated H2/P2. Want to fly cross country for the first time? This is the place. Want an easy place to test out your skills for a first mountain flight? This site is one of the best. Run off the portable ramp, soar the ridge, thermal up, and easily go over the back to Interstate 10 and follow it downwind. Or make the 4:1 glide out front to the limitless landing fields; either way, you're going to have fun.

The paraglider launch is a smooth, grassy slope a few hundred yards further north. The road up is definitely 4WD, but the rewards for making the drive are outstanding. A few years back, Bill Cummings launched the site in his Sport 2, got a mile or so over launch,

soared east back to Las Cruces, packed up the glider, and pulled it on the wheels up the street to his driveway. On another occasion, while I was flying, I rounded a ridge right after launching to see a herd of a dozen ibex taking off, fleeing the biggest "eagle" they'd ever seen. New Mexico is full of pleasant surprises like that.

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Though these are three of the more popular flying sites, we have something for almost any wind or conditions. About 5 air miles north from Dry Canyon is the H2/P2-rated La Luz site. Like Dry Canyon, it is a ridge soaring and thermal site, though its LZ is several times the size of Dry Canyon's. Another site, located west of Las Cruces, is a lot of fun when the wind comes in north or northeast. Volcanic Peak was discovered many years ago by our club president, Terry Cummings, but she and her husband Bill rejected it as having far too nasty a road. However, a few years back while out exploring, Bill and I discovered that somebody had graded the road to access the communications tower on top. Launch may be only 375 feet above ground level, and facing an uncommon wind direction, but it sure does work well when the winds are north.

BELOW The landing zone for Dry Canyon, on a fly-in evening in May 2015. Photo by Robin Hastings.



SITES



ABOVE LEFT Bill Cummings relaxing on the portable ramp at the Little Floridas site. The landing zone is straight out from the ramp. Photo by Robin Hastings.

RIGHT Wyatt Lines flying the Little Floridas, November 2019. The Big Floridas and the Dragon's Back are in the background to the south. Photo by Robin Hastings.

BOTTOM Jon Dempster launching his PG at Dry Canyon, October 2019. Photo by Robin Hastings.



Right on the New Mexico/Mexico border, close to El Paso, you will find a sandy, 200-foot mesa called Anapra that faces east. Access is easy 2WD, the LZ is huge, and you can launch pretty much wherever you like along the half-mile ridge. This is a great place for a first foot-launched altitude flight, and not bad for soaring either if the winds are 10 to 20 mph.

There are two mountain sites near El Paso—Agave Hill and Nelson's Launch—that take west/southwest. Both sites are rated P3/H3 or P2/H2 with an instructor. Though a couple of hang glider pilots have launched Agave Hill, it is more of a site for paragliders. Each site requires a bit of hiking, but as both are located at the foothills of the Franklin Mountains, pilots can bench up and top out thousands of feet above launch.

Kilbourne Hole, another interesting paragliding site, is located out in the desert some 20 miles northwest of El Paso. This is what geologists term a "maar," which is a crater created when magma hits ground water and causes a huge steam explosion. As you might guess, most maars are circular lakes, but not this one. It is a 400-foot-deep, mile-wide empty crater, floored with sand, and launchable in almost any wind direction (though it works best in west and southwest). Finally, a distant site for most of us, but still in southern New Mexico, is Guadalupe Rim, northwest of Carlsbad, New Mexico. This site is 1,500 feet above ground level. Launch faces west on the rim of a vast valley, floored by grazing

land with (again!) infinite landing zones to choose from within easy reach of the smooth slope launch. You can ridge soar and thermal 20 miles north or 20 miles south, top land, and walk right back to your campsite. This place is remote but really fun, and is home to an annual get-together that happens in February, hosted by the Rio Grande Soaring Association, which we encourage all of you to come to!

Are you ready to visit RGSA country now? We are ready to welcome you! Southern New Mexico has some of the best, and least crowded sites of any place in the country. We want more pilots to fly them! If you're looking for your next flying destination, why not give us a try? The weather is nice, the cost of living is low, the quality of life is good, and the soaring can be exemplary. Do come visit us here, or best of all, make this place your home. We'll be waiting to welcome you! Contact me at RNHastings@zianet.com for more information. 🇺🇸



ABOVE The author flying Magdalena Rim in February of 2017. The view is to the south. Photo by Shelley McKinlay.

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