

## **Bird's eye view of God's Own Country .....**

An invitation from Gopa and Vinyl for a paragliding festival in God's own country got my imagination going. Thoughts of Jirisan mountain region and the thickly forested Korean countryside where we flew in the last Asian championships reminded me about those precise landings in rare riverside beaches or narrow roads. Yet the possibility of flying in a new site was challenging and offered me a break after a mundane period of six months of no competitions nor any cross country flights worth mentioning.

After two weeks of frequent phone calls and follow-ups we were able to organize a group of 16 pilots to leave on the 4<sup>th</sup> April and return on 9<sup>th</sup> April. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> evening after the flying at Kamshet DC broke the bad news that Gopal was in Vagamon and no flying was happening since 5 days, only clouds and rain. The news had the potential of sabotaging our trip but some checking of weather prediction sites and a report from the Indian army weatherman revealed a not so bad weather prediction for the week.

With the thoughts of dark clouds and raging thunderstorms weighing heavily on my mind I left on the journey. But the group of pilots was a wonderful mix and the best recipe for laughter and fun. A short Mumbai Pune flight and four long hours later we were at Vagamon.



Arrival on takeoff next morning revealed a grassy takeoff, the best I have seen in India. Takeoff was about 1100 mtrs and landing was a two acre field at 100 mtrs

and 4.5 kms away. Weather looked good and as we were told it's a rare window after days of waiting we all took off one by one for a 15 min top to bottom flight. We encountered some weak thermals on the way and most of us arrived over the landing with 400-500 mtrs of height. A narrow strip connected to the landing offered an opportunity to loose height above the strip and an easy glide to landing. Landing amidst hordes of excited spectators and thereafter a thorough detoxification of the body by sweating in the humid heat overwhelmed us with a sense of enchantment by this strange land. The drive back in itself was an achievement on the part of the local drivers in their inconspicuous four-wheel drive Mahindras which transported us through terrain which looked impossible to negotiate by anything on wheels. The lush green forests, humungous rocks sitting on top of the mountains, the crazy cliffs and the hidden dark water bodies ..... God's own country!



The next day brought in some strong winds and the weather was volatile as usual. One just had to wait for the low cloud base to go higher as the day progressed and windows of better conditions opened up now and then. Ground handling on the take off was enjoyable and as the conditions got better one could soar and top land easily after a few minutes of Waga. The name of this place is most appropriate – Vagamon (Wagaman). As I watched the clouds that day, I longed to get underneath them and go for a cross-country flight. The mist comes in towards the evening and as we drive back to our 400 acre eco resort after stopping at the coffee point, a must stop - for the most enjoyable coffee in this place actually famous for its tea estates.

Friday morning we arrived on takeoff. I prayed for good weather. Christoph – the Wagaman had arrived and thrilled the crowd as usual and mystified them with his short disappearance in the clouds. Cloud base 100 mtrs above takeoff was great weather by Vagamon standards and I took off and headed straight for the next ridge crossing a large bowl followed by Vijay. Loosing a 100 mtrs in sink got us worried as the 4.5 km faraway landing made it necessary to head out without loosing much height. Coring the small thermal kissing the cliffs got me at cloudbase after 10 mins of work. The cloud lift was nice between 4-5 mtrs per sec and did not throw me around too much. Heading with big ears towards an open patch in the sky easily identifiable with the sunny patches on the ground would bring me down in a couple of minutes and time to head back to the ridge again. Vijay had landed but since there was no confirmation of his safety, I searched repeatedly in the valley, heading towards the ridge to gain height everytime till finally Vijay responded. He had landed safely on the tree and got away without a scratch on his glider and received a hero's welcome by the ever enthusiastic crowd below. With two hours of airtime I had nothing more to ask from the almighty that day. The surprise party by the hosts that evening in a clearing surrounded by 80 ft tall, 100 year old trees granted us all an exciting evening.



The last flying day was again a boon and I chalked two and a half hours of magical flying. I flew where none had flown before. The cloud lift was everywhere but at times I lost altitude and went a few hundred mtrs below takeoff but found some weak thermals to go up again. The greenery and humidity had the effect of weakening the

thermals inspite of the scorching heat. I had 800 meters above landing and flew back to a smaller ridge where I had seen an eagle go up in what looked like a 6-7 mtrs/sec elevator. After a 10 minute search I finally went for the landing actually looking forward to meet the friendly folks and the detoxification. After an excellent meal in a local joint there I was on my way back enjoying every moment of the drive to takeoff.



Indeed Gopa and Vinyl have discovered the paragliding jewel of the South and I have no doubt in my mind that Vagamon will become one of the top flying sites of India.

..... Dilip Kotecha