

# Pilot Interview

Thermal Flyer interviews Gill Couto

**TF:** Give us a little background on yourself and your flying.

**Gill Couto:** I was 12 years old when I got a glimpse of a few hang gliders flying off the sand dunes at Kitty Hawk, NC. A passion for birds at the time turned into a mesmerizing desire to fly like a bird myself. It was a lasting impression that would grip me forever.

One day 10 years later, during an afternoon bike ride, I rode by a small man-made hill and saw a few hang gliders going down the slopes. I was captivated. I watched for a while and approached the guy teaching the others how to fly. There was an overwhelming sense of thrill in everyone and when they were done for the day, the instructor let me try out one of the gliders on flat ground.

That was all I needed to get hooked and start taking lessons the following weekend. There was no doubt I had discovered something very special.

Several months of lessons at the hill followed, I sold my car, bought a hang glider and gear, and I was realizing my dream. There was nothing I wanted more than to fly through the sky. The more I flew, the more I wanted to fly. Motivation to stay in college fizzled and dropping out seemed inevitable.

So out I went, really out. Out of the classroom for a whole year, out into a new circle of friends, out of a car, out of my mind. I went back to living with my parents who had just moved back to our hometown, and everything in my mind said soaring. Just seeing a hill, ridge, sand dune, cloud, or bird would captivate all my attention. There simply wasn't much else on my mind.

**TF:** You changed your equipment. What led your decision to head down this path?

**Gill Couto:** Experience and desire. I learned a lot flying intermediate gliders and with experience came the longing for better soaring. High performance gliders can be challenging for beginners but I felt I was ready for some serious airtime on a new wing. I got lots of great advice from experienced pilots which made me realize how much there was for me to learn in this great sport.

Then I got a chance to test fly one of the hot ships called a UP TRX. The TRX was the state-of-the-art in hang gliders, the Ferrari of hang gliders. A whole new world suddenly opened. It was mid-October when I chose the colors for my new wing and placed the order. By Thanksgiving, it was ready and I was at the factory doorsteps trying to hide my enthusiasm without success. Specially when I got to meet hang gliding legend John Heiney. He test flies every glider out of the factory and today I would get to watch him performing tests, known as loops, on my shiny, new wing. Boy did I feel special that day. After his second flight, he landed and said to me: "It's a sweet one." I was speechless.

The TRX has very smooth handling. It has a very neutral response to pilot input and is very stable throughout its speed range. It thermals very well, you can park it in the core of a thermal and maintain precise control for slight corrections and aggressive handling when the air gets rough.

**TF:** Do you have a favorite site?

**Gill Couto:** I like many sites but Mingus

Mountain definitely stands out. Over the years, the club has made Mingus a great place to fly. It is a lee-side site, which makes it primarily a morning site. On a typical day, there will be lots of activity in the morning and all the pilots are usually flying by noon. The launch ramp is absolutely perfect and the air is true big air, not for the faint of heart. Mingus has many moods: it can be a gorgeous blue sunny sky one day and another it might be covered with thunderstorms. Fog will often dance with the ridge on humid days and there can be several feet of snow in the winter.



photo by Jim Afinowich

The flying is simply spectacular at Mingus. The cross-country routes are full of picturesque scenery. The route over Sedona in particular is out of this world. It is followed by nothing less than the Mogollon Rim, Meteor Crater, and the Painted Desert. I've reached my greatest altitude ever right over launch, flown my longest flights from Mingus, and had the best time around the campfire when everyone gets together as pilots return from a day of awesome soaring and prepare for another.

**TF:** Do you have any secrets for predicting the day's conditions for XC or for a particular site?

**Gill Couto:** I wouldn't call them secrets, they're just subtle signs that you normally would ignore but are very significant for soaring. The first thing I always look for are clouds forming between 9 and 10 in the morning. These small puffy clouds tell you everything you need to know about what a day of soaring might be like. When they're smooth cottonball-like in shape, I look for vertical development. When they remain nearly flat at the top, the thermals are mellow. When they extend higher than their width, the thermals are strong. One thing to look for is the edges: smooth edges mean smooth air, shredded edges mean turbulent air and it might not be a lot of fun up there.

**TF:** Got any safety tips for us?

**Gill Couto:** I sure do. The most important factor in hang gliding is your personal judgment. Each pilot must know his or her own abilities and their limits. Accidents due

to equipment failure are very rare, most accidents are a result of pilot misjudgment. You'll often hear a pilot who just broke his glider say "I thought I could make it". Well, thinking is not enough, you have to actually KNOW before you commit to an action.

In general though, I found carrying a safety kit in your flying harness very useful. I've used it on myself many times and to help other pilots after a bad landing. When flying in the desert, one of the most useful things to have is a tiny pair of folding scissors and a pair of pliers for pulling out cactus needles. Out of all forms of desert vegetation, nothing stands

out to avoid more than the cholla cactus. Chollas will eat you! Hit a big saguaro before landing on a cholla.

**TF:** Tell us about the AHGA web site.

**Gill Couto:** It's cool! I use a lot of photography to emphasize what hang gliding is all about. We were lucky to get the ahga.org domain name when the idea of a web site turned reality two years ago. New things get added every week. We recently started putting Kim's awesome edition of the Thermal Flyer, our monthly newsletter online.

There's a lot more content we want to add over time. It's a great way of sharing information between members and with anyone curious about hang gliding. The latest addition is the collection of pilot interviews and stories. The photo gallery and site guides are the most popular sections. It doesn't take a whole lot of time to put together, it just grows a bit a time.

*Note: Gill Couto created and maintains our AHGA web site. He continually works to improve the content and design of our web site and would appreciate any suggestion or contributions you have. Gill is also a talented photographer and enjoys taking photos of us launching, flying, landing etc. while he heals from knee surgery and biking accidents. If you haven't met him, he is behind the lens you see quite often at the end of the launch ramp. He would love to post your photos instead of his but for now he is the only one contributing.*

AHGA Web Site  
[www.ahga.org](http://www.ahga.org)

pilot interviews  
<http://www.ahga.org/assoc/pilots/index.html>