

# Flying Scenarios to Avoid? (2)

*While it is clear that in many situations hang gliders and paragliders could legally fly in cloud, the fact remains that this would be extremely foolhardy. Maintaining control without visual reference to the horizon is virtually impossible, as is avoiding other traffic and keeping track of your position. Exploit the freedom to fly right up to just below cloudbase if you wish — but leave it at that.(Official line)*

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**The first time you make it to ‘base’ is a pretty memorable and exhilarating moment.** You’ve probably spent the past 15 minutes battling your way up through the lower scraps, then getting firmly centred on a nice core and finally enjoyed the upward ride. It’s all great fun – until it all starts to go rather murky and your view of friendly fields and villages disappears, but for brief glimpses. Welcome to the white room ..... or perhaps more accurately a damp and grey place with unseen forces taking on a more aggressive nature. I’d like to go down now thank you – but this



claustrophobic world seems to have other ideas.

During all my years hang gliding I never went fully into cloud.

Without instruments providing an artificial horizon you could soon be in big trouble. Horror stories of the consequences were often told, sufficient to fill

you with enough dread to stay well clear– speed was your only escape; no big ears, B lining or spiralling – just get away soon enough and fast enough. What paragliders lack in speed they make up for in rapid descent options and pendular stability so ..... cloud flying is a more normal and regular occurrence whether by design or poor judgment. I think in my own case my assessment and healthy respect for clouds stems for my hang gliding background ..... with time I’ve become a lot more at ease with going into cloud on a paraglider, but subject to a strict set of guidelines.

I’ll look at some of the fundamentals of clouds, cloud flying and staying safe.

**The nature of the clouds on the day .** It's very much about the clouds, what they look like and their potential for trouble. Check the forecast for the day and learn to read the clouds against that forecast. Too much instability and the clouds may start to grow tall. You need to watch clouds over time to see if the day is changing and be aware that things can happen quite fast. A well-known rule is the 60% rule – that is the angle between the base and the cloud sides – some put the angle less, especially if they fly in mountains. Be wary of clouds that grow steeply or start to show signs, including longer life spans or very dark bases even to the point of precipitation . If unsure ask others – you get to know from experience those clouds that are pussies and those that are tigers.



**Approaching cloudbase.** As you approach cloudbase check out your cloud against the lift you are getting. If this is the first trip to cloudbase for the day then pull off to one side or towards the upwind side and approach it conservatively, especially if the lift starts to strengthen. Make a note of cloudbase for future reference. Once at or near cloudbase your cloud will not appear like the nice, fluffy, well defined piece of innocence it did from the ground. You will lose that view of a well-defined sky-map unless you look down – the cloud shadow patterns now provide a good indication of the sky. On a good looking day above 50% of the ground will have sun on it to indicate plenty of escape areas and clouds that are developing as singular entities. Once clouds grow bigger or merge towards over-development then the amount of sun able to get through to the ground decreases and the escape avenues also become more limited. Whilst the day may be heading towards a shutdown period there can also be less well defined pockets of embedded strong lift but with less obvious escape routes.

**Entering cloud.** If you have thermalled up with others, even one other , then entering into cloud is not an option – although flirting near the edges may be OK. You need to keep reasonable visual clearance so you can see others and they can see you. On a lone flight, being sure you are the only pilot in the vicinity and being sure the cloud is a benign, then maybe the extra few hundred feet is worth it - if only for the buzz factor. Flying around the edges is also fun and some of the most dramatic flying can be experienced drifting in and out of the edge of a nice cloud. Allowing yourself to go for full-on cloud immersion is only for the brave, bold and foolhardy. You now have the added pressures of navigation and wing control – clouds are often damp to wet places and all that moisture loves attaching to wings and lines. Your wing may now take on a flying life you never knew it had! At

the same time you may need to navigate and GPS units have delayed and not always accurate compass readings (hence I prefer the zoomed in map screen) – better is a ball compass and that you know how it works when you have no other reference (turn towards the turn – needle).

**Descent techniques.** The usual, most common action tends to be ‘big ears’ plus some speedbar ..... avoid full bar as you may hit some rough air around the edge of the lift. Although generally only a short period of straight-line flying without big ears will escape the strongest lift and see you away from most clouds. Even if you get fully drawn into cloud then a straight course is still often sufficient, but the inclination of most pilots is to want to get down as opposed to away. Use only techniques that you have practised and are comfortable with. B lining seems to have disappeared with the advent of three line gliders and spiralling in my view simply adds increased stress to a stressful situation for both you and the glider. However, in extremis it will provide very high rates of descent. A few pilots have an anti G drogue which seems to work well, but a trick from SIF2 was to spiral against a single big ear – not tried it, but it seems worth practising. The idea being to reduce the G forces by decreasing the speed of the spiral but retaining the high sink rate.



**You and clouds.**

Your first direct experience of entering cloud can be quite scary and is often unintentional. As long as you have assessed the clouds before take-off and decided they are quite benign, then things feel a lot worse than they are. A common feeling

once embarked on escape is that you are in cloud for longer than you are – time distorts where 10 seconds feels like a minute. Then the moment you pop out into sunshine you wonder what all the fuss was about.

Regard the clouds as stepping stones across the sky, most are friendly helpers, just treat them with respect. On a blue day the sky is a more lonely and more difficult place to fly – you’ll miss them. I haven’t touched on reading the clouds from the point of view of the different types of lift they suggest or how to assess them from a XC point of view. This column was simply trying to take some of the irrational fears we have when near clouds, or drawn into clouds – most don’t deserve to be feared, but always keep your senses awake to the ones that do – some have claws!

