

Flying Planet Spirit

Report by Steve Uzochukwu. photos: Richard Haines



STEVE UZUCHUKWU

Flying Planet are a French company based in Annecy, part of the Parachutes de France Group. Gliders are manufactured at a factory in Mauritius from Porcher Marine Skytex, a material with a very long paragliding pedigree. Flying Planet's chief designer Michel le Blanc was with ITV up until about five years ago and was responsible for many of ITV's designs in the late 1980s and early '90s. The Spirit, only released in July, is aimed at the top end of the DHV1-2 market; it's also certificated as AFNOR Standard.

The glider is supplied with a large cordura rucksack, inner bag, T-shirt, ripstop repair tape, spare O-rings as line tidies for the maillons and a speed system. The standard of finish on the supplied glider was very high, with the trailing edge and wing tips reinforced with Mylar tape. A small clear window is provided in the upper surface to install a UV hour counter. The glider bag is large with one zip up the front and well-padded straps.

The speed system pulls equally on the A & B risers but the travel stops on the B-riser 2cm before the A. The C-risers are pulled down by half the amount that the As and Bs are. The pulleys are situated in between the A and B riser.

Ground handling presents no problem. Like other high-end 1-2s the glider needs only a gentle pull on the risers before it comes up and sits nicely overhead. Pulling too hard can result in the glider needing to be braked more than necessary which may lead to the pilot being lifted off the ground prematurely. Having familiarised yourself with the glider on flat ground, first launches in winds of some strength will present no problem - just guide the glider up, turn around and go. In lighter winds, if you have to pause with the glider overhead you may need to brake very deeply, but once you've done this a few times and become accustomed to it it's second nature.

The glider doesn't have split As - there are only three A-lines anyway - but big ears are easy. They don't stay in but come out slowly, although any movement or touch on the brakes causes them to pop out immediately. Controlling the canopy with weight shift while the ears are in is effective, and there is no big loss in manoeuvrability.

In the air the cell openings are very distinctive, and the sail is very wrinkle-free. The glider is very responsive although brake travel is quite long like all 1-2 gliders. Little difference is needed between left and right brake for a turn to be initiated. Once the chest strap setting has been set correctly the glider communicates what's going on well without being twitchy, and the marriage of brakes and weight shift results in very nice handling indeed. It's also easy to feel the glider pitching; it gives feedback without needing to be constantly controlled. Like many pilots I tend to take a wrap when thermalling, and the Spirit's brake pressure builds predictably to tell you when enough has been pulled on to initiate the turn. Combining this with some weight shift gave a very quick and well co-ordinated response into turns. Like other 1-2s at this level, some weight shift improves turn response but there is no point overdoing it. Opening up the chest strap wide doesn't improve weight shifting, but seems to increase feedback to the point where you feel you are being chucked

technical specification

Model	XS	S	M	L	XL
No of cells	55	55	55	55	55
Span (projected, m)	9.61	9.93	10.4	10.8	11.34
Area (flat, m ²)	22.9	24.5	26.7	29.0	32.0
Aspect ratio	4.4:1	4.4:1	4.4:1	4.4:1	4.4:1
Weight range (kg)*	60 - 70	68 - 80	78 - 92	90 - 106	106 - 128
DHV certification	DHV 1-2	DHV 1-2	DHV 1-2	DHV 1-2	DHV 1-2
AFNOR certification	Standard	Standard	Standard	Standard	Standard
Guarantee	One year				
Price	£2,100	£2,100	£2,100	£2,100	£2,100

Importer: Flying Planet UK, 2 Hospital Rd, Pontypridd CF37 4AH, tel: 01443 403531, e-mail: flying.planet@virgin.net, website: www.flying-planet.co.uk.

* Certificated all-up weights

about a bit. I found the best setting for me was 42cm - set in the air but then measured on the ground - exactly the distance the gliders are tested at. In thermals the glider just needs the angle of bank to be set and round you go, enjoying the view.

One of the reasons some pilots give for not flying a 1-2 by is that they don't have the sharp response of gliders in higher certification categories with shorter brake travel. The Spirit blows this notion away. Whilst having to have the longer brake travel to get the DHV1-2 rating (travel of more than 60cm before the stall is a requirement), the handling is sharp and very responsive, with the toggles just a bit lower than they would otherwise be.

Speed bar travel was smooth and communicative. Nothing out of the ordinary happened when the bar was slowly pushed to full extension and the Spirit accelerated smoothly to full speed. Checking the sail on full bar showed no signs of flapping or edginess. Even flying in strong conditions using the bar between thermals didn't reveal any little surprises.

Landing does require a good flare - the brakes need to be at the end of their travel to kill the glider completely. Getting the glider down in stronger winds, if done on the brakes, requires them to be pulled as far as you can to prevent the canopy reinflating.

As I became more familiar with the glider its 'nippiness' came more and more to the fore. It's just so responsive and easy to place exactly where you want it. It cuts into lift with just a slight movement on the brakes and a lifting of the opposite leg to put in some weight shift. The co-ordination of brakes and weight shift is very good: neither one needs to be used to excess to make up for deficiencies in the other.

At the moment top end 1-2s seem to attract two types of pilot: the relatively new flier upgrading from their first canopy bought whilst still at school, and the more experienced flier who likes a wing that is easy fly or is downgrading from an older wing in a higher certification category. From the upgrade point of view the Spirit needs a pilot who has learned to fly actively, because only then will they be able to get the best out of the canopy. It also needs a pilot with a sensitive hand who



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won't pull on the risers too hard to launch and who will be able to make the most of the very useful in-flight feedback the canopy gives. For pilots straight out of school Flying Planet build the Sirius.

From the downgrade point of view the canopy is great. Suss out your chest strap setting, get used to the slightly lower brake toggle position and fly! Enjoy easier ground handling, straightforward thermalling and stress-free speed bar treading compared to your old 2/3 glider!

Performance isn't measured as part of Skywings tests - establishing reliable polar-curve data requires huge sites, still air and lots of flights to complete. However there are sites on the Internet that will provide you with comparative polars such as Jerome Daoust's site at www.expandingknowledge.com (follow the links for paragliding). However performance, speed wise, for the Spirit felt very good - I was flying at 105kg on a glider with a maximum weight range of 106kg. Another good thing about the Spirit range is the small weight ranges used for the different models: as long as the pilot is within the weight range they will be only a very small amount away from the optimum weight. The theoretical difference in top speeds between the extremes of the 90 - 106kg weight range on this

glider is just under 4km/h. Contrast this with the difference in top speeds for a glider with a 95 - 125 kg weight range - almost 7km/h. Those claimed speeds don't look so good when adjusted for the bottom end of the weight range.

This might seem like a very complimentary review for the Spirit, but it reflects in part the fact that the upper end of the DHV1-2 class has become very competitive; there are just so many good gliders in this sector. The Spirit will compete with the Swing Mistral 2, Nova Carbon (this year's sales success) and of course the Apco Allegra, the original benchmark for this category. Pilots in the market for this level of wing are benefiting from the fact that it represents about

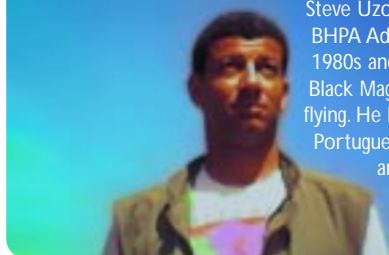
70% of the total paraglider market, and no manufacturer can afford to be without a competitive wing in this sector.

importer's comment

As Steve rightly mentions, the Spirit is not a glider for the pilot just out of school. It fits above the Sirius and just below the Whisper in our range. The Spirit is of the highest quality both in build and materials, and Michel has designed it to fit like a glove. Its exact weight ranges ensure that you always get the best performance from this exciting new wing that is set to become the class leader.

RICHARD HAINES, FLYING PLANET UK

about the author



Steve Uzochukwu has been flying paragliders since 1989 and holds a BHPA Advanced Pilot rating. He learned to fly hang gliders in the late 1980s and then began to fly paragliders too. After dabbling with a Black Magic he got an Edel ZX in 1992 and started cross-country flying. He began to fly competitions after finishing sixth in the 1995 Portuguese Open and now flies regularly in Spain and Portugal, despite an 18 month lay-off following a crash at St. Hilaire in 1998. Steve still flies both hang gliders and paragliders but prefers the ease and simplicity of DHV1/2s and sports hang gliders.