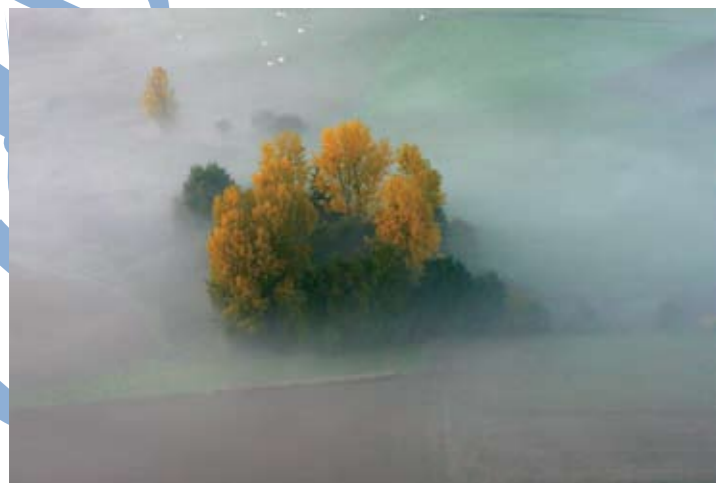


“The stars came out and we burrowed deep into our sleeping bags next to our engines”



# Autumn Mists

Sometimes, what you're looking for is right outside your front door.  
Jan Schäfer goes for a cross country bivouac flight close to home



**“We were lucky again – above the deep inversion we found a soft westerly tailwind.”**

We had been waiting for this day, the day it was supposed to work. The forecast was right and the constantly blowing strong east wind had backed off in the evening to exactly the right level. We could at least start comfortably, still with enough wind to take off and enough light in the day to be sure of a good flight and a sunset landing.

I ran with the glider, astonished that the engine could get everything into the air and flying. On the ground the weight of it had forced me onto my knees. Unwillingly, the glider slowly left the ground and it needed a good breeze out of the motor to get it into this game and slowly climbing. Finally, after a big effort from pilot, motor and wing combined, I was in the air and going higher. This was what we had come for. Me, Till Middelhaue and Maddien Deutsch all flying towards the sun, our harnesses packed for an overnight trip. We had camping mats, sleeping bags and all the overnight stuff we needed to make a night under the stars as comfortable as possible. We climbed higher, and headed west. It was as if we were three buoys out at sea, being blown by the wind and the currents. I felt like a small kid on my first night in a tent, only this was no back garden.

Our destination was a small, grassy airfield near the town of Bechersbach in the area of Hunsrück, 65 km away from

Darmstadt, an industrial town in mid-west Germany.

We quickly crossed the slow-moving expanse of the Rhine, the wide fields of the Rhine Valley leading us towards the first hills of the Pfalz region. The low sun cast long shadows on the ground, and we raced against our own, watching as we blimped over fields, hedges, cottages, roads, cars and back into the fields again. We coasted past many small windfarms, testament to Germany's commitment to clean energy and a low-carbon future, and edged around beautiful forests until we reached the Roßberg mountain. Here, as the sun dropped further towards the horizon and the end of the day drew closer, we could see the airfield. It sat on top of the mountain, waiting just for us, it seemed.

We landed and were warmly welcomed by some local pilots. They were kind and fortunately had a supply of petrol for all of us, otherwise it would have been a long, long ride to search for an open petrol station somewhere nearby.

Darkness came suddenly, and with it the temperature fell and it got cool. We found an old used grill, got some wood and gathered around the fireside to cook our very own specially flown-in sausages. The stars came out and we burrowed deep into our sleeping bags next to our engines, camped in the lee of some bushes. Looking forwards to

the next morning, I took one last view of the clear sky and closed my eyes.

#### CLOUD FLYING

The next morning started early. The humidity and cold had crept into our sleeping bags, chilling us and making movement slow. We looked at the sky for early signs that the forecast was correct and that we would be able to fly home without any headwind. But it wasn't to be, our forecast was incorrect and the wind came from the northeast. This was going to be a long way back home.

Still not really awake, and with only one banana each in our stomachs – we had decided to forfeit breakfast supplies as space demanded it – I ran forward, tripping fully-loaded across the wet grass, until finally the glider carried me into the air.

Once in the sky the view opened onto a gorgeous, befogged landscape. All around us the valleys were sunk deep in the morning fog; the small hills that broke through looked like wet stones in the middle of a giant, misty river. The early morning sun gave everything an almost mystical light and sent ribbons, shadows and fingers of dawn shooting across the countryside.

It was a stunning panorama. Buildings and houses

seemed to float like small islands, and windmills reared up from the fog looking like futuristic giants; like nothing from this world. Then we were lucky again. Above the deep inversion we found a soft westerly wind – our longed-for tailwind. We searched for a safe way above the foggy fields. For a long time it seemed as if the Rhine Valley would stay fully covered in fog, but time was on our side and the closer we got to home the better the view became. We flew on, not believing our luck as the landscape took shape before us, revealing it as we had never seen it before. Only with a wing, a motor and good friends can you get this lucky, can you get this feeling. What started as adventure enough had turned into a magical flight above the clouds. We landed close to Darmstadt at 10 am, happy and almost drunk with such an overload of impressions. We went for breakfast: orange juice tasted like champagne, and each bite felt like the feast of kings. We laughed, looked at the pictures in amazement, and promised ourselves we would do more of this, this type of homespun expedition. This truly had been an unforgettable adventure, right outside our own front door.

**Pilots: Jan Schäfer, Till Middelhaue and Martin Deutsch**