

APUS RS HIKE 18

Snowdonia in North Wales is one of only a handful of places in the UK that has the terrain for hike and fly adventures. Its dramatic and rugged landscape provide a complex and beautiful environment for paragliding and always feels much bigger than it really is. The hills are generally not much more than 3000-3500ft and are surrounded by the sea on two sides. This strong maritime influence generally provides us with strong winds, frequent rain, low cloudbases and the notorious sea breeze. Paragliding days are few and far between and the addiction demands more airtime!

Recently my local distributor of Swing and Gradient gliders, Brad Nicholas of Snowdon Gliders, mentioned he had a new hike and fly miniwing, the Swing 18m Apus RS Hike, and said it was special. I thought nothing of it because I couldn't imagine what I'd use it for. The seed was sown however....

Maybe it would be fun to go for a run up Snowdon and fly back to the house. Maybe it would be fun to go scrambling without suffering the knee pain of getting back down. Maybe it would be nice to soar something playful and agile on the coast.

Brad has seen quite a few wings in his time and when he is impressed I tend to listen, so I decided to try it out. I didn't want to like it because I had decided a mini wing was a luxury I didn't need and would end up just being a very expensive fad.

So, let's give it a test that it'll probably fail.

It was a very strong, unstable and windy day with the mountains cloaked in big low clouds, totally unflyable with my normal paraglider. So, me and my housemate, Tom, decided to go and solo Amphitheatre Buttress, an easy classic mountaineering rock route in a remote part of the mountains. I took the Apus with me to see what rock climbing with it would be like, expecting to find it frustrating and cumbersome. We hiked for over an hour and quickly climbed the 300m route with no problem, and I forgot I even had it. Damn, I need a harder challenge for it! I then tell Tom that he can head home in his car without me; I'll try and make it back home on my own. A total distance of 20km, not too much, but with my bad knee it would be impossible if I couldn't fly across valleys and down the hills.

After another hour of hiking in cloud I set-up for my first flight to get across Ogwen valley. The unfamiliar wing, the lack of any reserve/protection and the clearly demanding conditions were making me nervous. Thankfully it was effortless to launch in the strong wind - smooth, slow and steady - leaving me feeling in control. The RAST doing what it promised. I immediately stomped on the speed bar to get myself to the middle of the valley and away from the big sucking clouds. The bar is effortless to use and gave a dramatic increase of speed, even into the strong wind. It felt really solid. When the pulleys were hard together I did notice the wing pumping span-wise, not ideal, but easing off it a small amount stopped that.

The glide was quite remarkable and I reached the other side with no loss of height, so decided to play a bit. It quickly gives big, fun and solid wingovers. Spirals felt like they could develop aggressively, so I kept them gentle. I was surprised to have so much fun in the worrying conditions and landed easily on the path with a big grin.

After another big hike back up and along the summits with the clouds whipping past I had to sit for a while, waiting for the wind to ease. Again, I was reminded of the importance of an easy launch behaviour in difficult conditions. When you have no back protection the extra margin the Apus gave

in rocky terrain was reassuring. About 300ft above Llanberis I sense a thermal, so hook into it and keep the turns tight. I was blown away to find myself rapidly climbing back to the clouds – this is supposed to be a descent wing!! More wing-overs and spirals to get down. Thermal back up again. Repeat two more times.

Well, that didn't go to plan – the wing was absolutely brilliant, confidence inspiring and had performance that massively exceeded my expectations.

I then became poorer.

Within a couple of weeks of owning the APUS I have run up Snowdon to test its glide home. Surprisingly I made it back with loads of height to spare, so I got nerdy and found that over a 5km section, where I went straight at trim, (shallow ridge with a light headwind) it was gliding at 9.5:1?! How?! I have taken it to soar on the coast - it is agile, playful and very responsive. I have climbed several grade 3 scrambles in the mountains and flown it back down to the car. I had reservations about how the RAST affects light wind launches but it launched as easily as ever. I have been out in wave conditions (very stupidly) with incredibly messy air and found myself being thrown about in a way that would ball-up a regular wing. It did collapse asymmetrically and I looked up to see the leading edge fold under until it reached the RAST valve, stop, and immediately pop back out with no drama. Exactly as it was designed to. Big ears and bar were very effective and stable and got me out of there quickly.

One observation on launch is to not mess around with it too much because when the trailing edge fills with air the RAST makes the back half like a balloon that when resting back on the floor falls over annoyingly. It is very minor and easy to avoid. I have also melted a small ring of holes caused by a brake line cinching around the fabric on take-off – what can you expect from lightweight fabric?

For rock climbing I'd prefer it to be lighter and more compact, but I have realised from actually using it that the subtleties that can't be quantified, like RAST, which does remarkable things to stability at launch and during flight, can count for a lot when put in tough situations - especially when the wing is more likely flown with no reserve or back protection. Not only that but the glide performance seems exceptional for a mini wing. I'm sure I could find something with a few grams shaved off but now I don't want to compromise on what makes it special.

The APUS 18 feels sporty at my loading of 86kg and isn't really a beginner wing. The in-flight behaviour is fast, solid and the wing surfs rough air efficiently without any excessive pitching. It can be a little twitchy at times, but it doesn't feel wild or uncontrolled at all, and generally I like that such a small wing can still transfer useful information. Of course, its nature only really shines in stronger conditions. It can be slowed down and turned reasonably flatish for finding lift but after a certain point you can quickly notch up the excitement and the turns quickly become very dynamic and fun. Take it much further and I felt the energy develop quite aggressively (I haven't been brave/high enough to get into a proper spiral). For me the controls are just right - direct and predictable all the way through the full range of travel. They don't feel vague or too firm at any point and don't allow you to do inappropriate things without telling you first.

It is a strange niche that this wing seems to fit into and based on the written specs it doesn't really stand out. For me though, it has hit a really sweet compromise that makes it incredibly versatile. I struggle to think of another wing that manages this whilst being so fun? I don't imagine I'll be doing big XC flights with it, but it has opened a realm of new adventures/conditions for me, and my mind is always wondering back to it - thinking of what I'll use it for next. I am lucky to live in a place that allows me to push the potential of the APUS RS Hike and in return it just keeps delivering exactly what I want from it, with no disappointment.

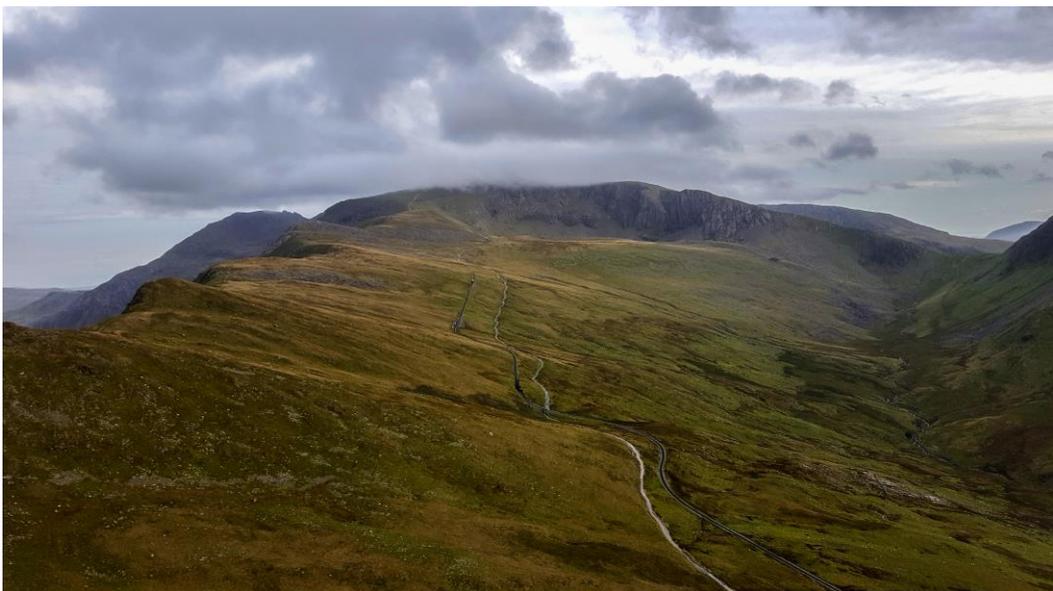
Dougie Swanson-Low



Taking a glide across a brooding Ogwen valley in strong conditions. Photo: Tom Butel



After running up, Snowdon provided a launch with a view



A much better view looking back at Snowdon on the glide home



Tom and Darren just as we get to the top of a grade 3 scramble in Ogwen Valley.



The summit of Glyder Fach at the top of the scramble, with Glyder Fawr and Snowdon in the distance.



Gliding back to the car after the scramble. Photo: Tom Butel

