



Where eagles dare

The sport of paragliding is literally taking off in Hong Kong, with pilots from all walks of life leaping into the skies

Since the dawn of time, man has dreamed he could fly. For centuries our ancestors would look up at the birds that were majestically spreading their wings and flying high over the mountains. They wished that one day, humans would be able to do what the birds do.

Others had tried, but it was America's Wright brothers, Wilbur and Orville, who made the breakthrough that 19th-century experimenters could not. Having finally discovered the last piece of the flight puzzle, the Wright brothers succeeded in giving mankind the first powered "flying machine", launched on December 17, 1903.

Before that, though, they had to test the theory for themselves. As aviation historians note, "it was one thing to design a set of wings for a small kite, quite another to build a large, heavy glider, climb aboard, and launch oneself into the air".

Their gliding theory worked, and the rest is history. But while today's modern aircraft can take hundreds of passengers to the four corners of the globe at lightning speed, the lure of unassisted free

flight still remains. And perhaps the closest way that man can become like a bird is through the sport of paragliding.

In paragliding, the pilots, tied to a special harness, hang beneath a huge nylon wing. Their body becomes like a pendulum in the air. By shifting their weight in the appropriate direction and taking advantage of the rising air currents, pilots can control the glider, rising to a height of up to 1,300 metres.

In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Paragliding Association, set up in 1992, has several hundred members and about 50 active "pilots" who spend their weekends doing what the birds do. They come from all walks of life: office staff, service personnel, construction workers, airline pilots, nurses and retirees.

Depending on the wind conditions, they will head to one of eight designated paragliding sites – including Ma On Shan, Shek O, Tai Po and Long Kee – don their gear, and leap off the side of a mountain.



Above: A compass (left), global positioning system and altimeter are essential equipment for pilots.
上：指南針（左）、全球定位系統和測高儀，都是飛行員不可缺少的儀器。

For safety, pilots carry all manner of sophisticated navigational equipment: a GPS (Global Positioning System), compass, wind instrument, and a two-way radio. But for all this technology, it is the cue of the birds that is trusted most. As one pilot explains: “Where the birds of prey soar, you know there’s a thermal up there. I follow them, they are the best information for me.”

In some places, such as the United States, paragliding sites are so accessible that pilots can drive right up to the launch area, alight from their car and jump off. In Hong Kong, the terrain is more challenging. It requires a half-hour hike or more, carrying a pack weighing up to 18 kilograms.

Still, it’s worth it, says Yuen Wai-kit, a policeman, who has been paragliding for nine years. He says the feeling is indescribable.

He loves being at one with nature. “I feel like an eagle – I fly with eagles,” says Mr Yuen, explaining that curious birds, in full flight, will often come up and glide alongside him. Once, when flying over an ocean in America, a pod of whales breached below him and “spurted water towards me”.

Remarkably, depending on wind conditions, a paraglider can stay up there for hours. At Shek O, where the wind is strongest, eight hours can be achieved. They can travel at speeds of up to 40km/h, but usually restrict it to no more than 30km/h – using the brake – because, up in the air, there’s no reason to rush.

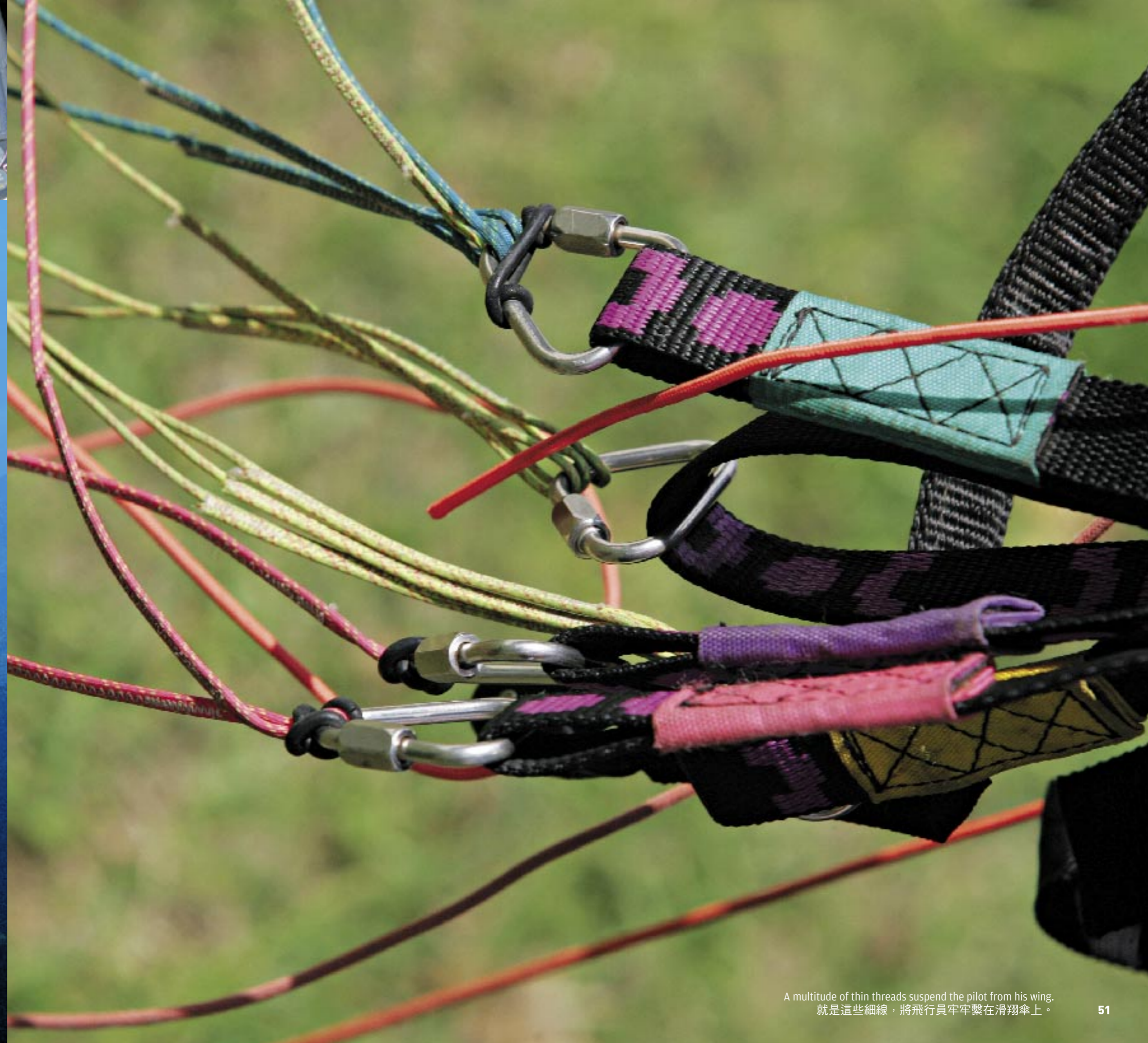
To become a pilot, learners must undergo training at Long Kee, inside High Island Reservoir in Sai Kung. They learn about their gear, and how to take off, fly and land. Once a learner has passed their written exam and has completed 12 successful flights, they become qualified. The course costs about HK\$6,000, and if they choose to go on, the flying kit – including wing, safety gear and navigational instruments – costs about HK\$25,000.

The “wing” is made of nylon, like a sail on a yacht. Through a series of air pockets, it inflates with the wind. When fully inflated, the pilot runs off the side of the mountain, and just like the kites we flew as children, the wind simply carries them away.

In the past century, flight has advanced more than the early aviators could probably have ever imagined – even putting a man on the moon. Yet, in an interesting turn of events, flight purists are returning to the original dream of being able to soar like an eagle, unencumbered by mechanical aid.

Paragliding, in its modern form, has only been around for 30 years. In that time it has become an international sport, and a World Cup event with an international governing body. It was characterised as an Olympic sport in 1985, but has not yet been included in an Olympic Games programme.

Technology has its place, but we can’t do without dreams, either. Today, the sport of paragliding is there for everyone who has ever dreamed of flying.



A multitude of thin threads suspend the pilot from his wing.
就是這些細線，將飛行員牢牢繫在滑翔傘上。

翱翔天際

翱翔天際已不再是遙遠的夢想，即使身在香港，也能參與滑翔傘活動，享受箇中樂趣。

多個世紀以來，人類夢想有朝一日可以跟鳥兒一樣，跨山越海的展翅翱翔，但屢試屢敗，直至美國的韋爾伯及奧維爾·萊特兩兄弟打破人類不能飛行的宿命，成就創舉，於1903年12月17日，成功駕駛一架裝有引擎的飛機，一飛沖天。

在引擎飛機落成之前，萊特兄弟曾進行不少飛行實驗，有飛行史學家就曾指出，將風箏放上天空看似易事，但建造雙翼讓人得以於空中滑翔，就不是紙上談兵般容易。萊特兄弟的滑翔理論最終成事，就此成為人類飛行史上的里程碑。

雖然現代客機能以音速載著數百名乘客飛到世界各地，但非引擎飛行仍然深具吸引力。人類要仿效飛鳥，仍以滑翔傘最為接近。

滑翔傘飛行員需穿上與傘翼相連的吊袋。飛行時，他們的身體一如吊鐘般垂吊於空中，靠擺動身體來轉變方向，並利用上升氣流進行爬升。飛行員靠控制傘翼，最高可爬升至1,300米。

1992年成立的香港滑翔傘協會，至今有數百名會員，其中約有50位是活躍的飛行員，常於周末練習飛行。飛行員來自不同背景，有白領、服務人員、建造業工人、飛機師、護士以至退休人士。

香港現有的八個特定滑翔傘起飛點，分別位於馬鞍山、石澳、大埔及浪茄等地方，起點通常視乎風向而定。飛行員一般帶備多種導航儀器，以策安全，其中包括全球導向系統、指南針、風測計及雙向無線電通話器。不過即使身懷最先進的設備，身旁的飛鳥仍然最深得飛行員信賴。一位飛行員稱：「若果見到有雀鳥向上爬升，即表示該處有熱氣流，我會隨即跟隨，在空中牠們能提供最可靠的飛行訊息。」

在部份國家例如美國，到滑翔傘起飛點相當方便，飛行員甚

至可以駕車直達起飛點，泊車後穿上裝備便一躍空中。香港因地勢所限，飛行員通常要背著重達18公斤的裝備，徒步30分鐘始能到達起點。不過，正如擁有九年飛行經驗的警員Yuen Wai-kit所言，飛行所帶來無與倫比的體驗，令再艱辛的準備都變為值得。

他喜愛與大自然融為一體的感受，飛行時有如飛鷹一樣，其他好奇的雀鳥有時亦會飛近，與他結伴同行。他憶述一次在美國飛行，飛過海洋時，水中一群鯨魚突然跳出水面，向他噴水！

飛行員視乎風向及風力的強弱，可在空中逗留數小時。石澳的風力較強，連續飛行八小時也不難。飛行速度最高可達每小時40公里，不過飛行員通常會利用制動器，將速度維持在30公里，畢竟在空中也無趕急的需要。

要成為滑翔傘飛行員，先要於西貢萬宜水庫的浪茄訓練中心接受飛行訓練，學習器材的使用、起飛及降落方法。當學員通過筆試，並累積12次成功飛行的經驗，便可成為合資格的飛行員。課程費用約港幣6,000元，至於飛行工具，包括傘翼、安全裝置及導航設備，則大約港幣25,000元。

傘翼是以帆船風帆相近的尼龍為材料，翼面分為上下兩層，兩層翼面之間由薄膜分割為數十個連通的氣室，當氣室充氣之後，飛行員便可從山上一躍而下，一如風箏般利用風力持續飛行。

過去一世紀，飛行有長足的發展，人類甚至已經飛上太空在月球漫步。不過追求單純飛行的愛好者，仍然夢想可以如飛鷹般，在不靠機器幫助下在空中飛翔。現今的滑翔傘雖然只有30年歷史，但已成為一項世界性的競技運動項目，並已成立一國際認可的管理機構推動其發展。滑翔傘於1985年成為奧委會認可項目，可是至今尚未能躋身於奧運比賽中。

科技雖然日新月異，但夢想才是人類向前邁進的推進力，滑翔傘就令我們兒時一飛沖天的夢想成真。

As the sun sets, a pilot lands and brings his exciting flight to an end.
日落時分，飛行員的滑翔傘徐徐降落，結束刺激的旅程。

