

RACER SWAPS LIFE JACKET FOR A PARACHUTE

Record-breaking sailor Dee Caffari tries gliding for the first time, and talks with Elaine Bunting about how sailing is changing socially and technically

PHOTOGRAPHS RON SMITH AND ELAINE BUNTING

It has taken more than a century since the first recorded glider flight to devise a way to fly on water powered only by natural energy. The principles have been well known but achieving sufficient lift to overcome drag, then achieve smooth, stable flight proved an impossible task.

The technology began to be seriously experimented with by French sailor Eric Tabarly in the 1980s, but only with the advent of modern lightweight carbon composite materials did foiling under sail really begin to – literally – take off.

The past couple of decades have seen a revolution, with the most rapid advances

in all the millennia of voyaging under sail. Speed records have tumbled – the fastest speed of 68.33kts has been held for over a decade by Sailrocket 2, a high-tech proa. Wingfoils featured in the Olympics for the first time last summer. Foil-assisted monohulls and multihulls have decimated round the world records. The AC72s in which teams competed for the America's Cup last autumn are fully foiling at speeds up to 50kts and kept flying upwind and downwind through every tack and gybe.

Despite the similarities, there are relatively few crossovers with gliding. Both are very time-intensive activities that



Dee Caffari Aviva westabout round the world challenge 2004 (OnEdition)



Main photo and above, Dee Caffari joins Lasham CFI Barrie Elliott for a flight in a Nimbus

compete for decent summer weather. Yet foiling technology and techniques under sail, and reliance on understanding and harnessing the weather, make cross-pollination an interesting proposition, as Dee Caffari found out last August.

Dee is one of Britain's leading ocean racers. She holds the record for the first person to sail single-handed round the world non-stop in both directions, and at the time of writing was preparing with an all-female crew to race a 103ft trimaran non-stop round the world in a bid to break the all-time record of 40 days, 23 hours.

MENTORING

Dee is also a founder of The Magenta Project, a highly successful lobbying and mentoring campaign designed to assist women into careers at all levels of professional sailing. In view of gliding's desire to recruit new people, and especially women, the BGA Women's Ambassador Yvonne Elliott and I arranged an exchange of ideas with Dee, followed by a maiden cross-country flight for her.

Here are her flying impressions:



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DEE CAFFARI SAYS:

Looking at wind and drag and generating forward propulsion is what I have been doing at sea for many years, from the darkest depths of the stormbound Southern Ocean to the frustrations of the becalmed doldrums. However, taking these experiences and transferring them to the skies was a completely new experience for me when I joined Lasham CFI Barrie Elliott for a flight in a Nimbus two-seater glider.

My first impression was just how small our cockpit was in contrast to the expanse of the wings. They were beautiful, long, elegant and so thin. Initially, Barrie took me through the instruments in the cockpit and the safety procedures. My 'lifejacket' in this instance was a parachute. Once briefed and fitted, we had a final check of the map together.

Take-off was bumpier than I expected as we crossed the grass, but as soon as we were away and landing gear stowed, serenity reigned. My expectation was that the cockpit would be noisy and that communication with the pilot would be via a headset – quite different from the reality.

Reading the clouds and the landscape to understand where air would assist us was interesting. I am used to looking at patches on the water surface to anticipate gusts and lulls when we are sailing. Here we were looking at what landform would offer heat, at cloud shapes and colours; whether to turn right or left.

With all this information being invisible, I had to get used to the sound of the vario. I soon realised that, along with the sound of the FLARM, my heart rate was matching the beeps. When I was offered control of the glider, my stress levels increased. There was a great deal to take in. If things go wrong up in the skies you fall out of them, whereas at sea you just get wet. I guess it is just what you get used to!

STRAIGHT AND LEVEL

Flying straight and level was not easy and the irony was not lost on me that I was being coached about driving. When I teach novice sailors about driving in a straight line, I tell them to pick something on the horizon, yet here I was making the same mistakes they do.

Although this is a very different environment, my sailing knowledge helped my comprehension of the gliding process. It's an environment where pilots must develop a strong sense of anticipation and foresight as decisions must be made well in advance. Similarly, the challenge in sailing often comes from the unpredictability of water and weather conditions, and constant adjustment and vigilance are required. In both scenarios you are considering the 'what ifs' and planning for the unexpected.

During my two-hour flight, we soared to 4,000ft and I had the chance to gain 2,000ft in a couple of thermals. Taking control as you thermal is quite disorientating. I quickly lost track of where we were pointing as we turned. No doubt that is something that takes a bit of practise.

The experiences of gliding and sailing are both serene and exhilarating, offering a unique blend of tranquillity and adrenaline. Gliding provides an unparalleled sense of freedom as the pilot soars silently through the sky, often at great heights. The lack of an engine means that the experience is peaceful, with only the sound of wind



FIGHTING FOR AN EQUAL FOOTING

Dee Caffari was a founder of The Magenta Project (*themagentaproject.org*), set up by the all-female Team SCA crew in the elite round the world Volvo Ocean Race in 2014-2015. It is a collective of passionate people committed to developing pathways and generating opportunities for more equity and inclusion in sailing, leading with gender.

A mentoring programme has supported the careers of 200+ women from 20 different countries with a nine-month plus curriculum designed to launch their careers in the marine industry. Mentees are both male and female and it is run on an application process. Today, there is a wait list of people wishing to act as mentors.

The Magenta Project partners with leading brands and events to offer clinics and workshops for training and recruitment of female talent, and partners can tap into the network for appearances, speeches and activations.

Major events have been persuaded to make changes to support this movement. The foremost crewed round the world race, the Ocean Race, has introduced a rule to ensure female crew are included in every sailing team. While this was not looked upon favourably by many women in sailing, The Magenta Project team realised that it was not going to happen naturally and the issues needed to be forced until people accepted that it makes no difference if the sailor is male or female; they just need to be good at their job.

At the pinnacle of the sport, the America's Cup is still predominantly a male domain. However, in 2024, for the first time in history a women's America's Cup took place in smaller foiling yachts alongside the Youth America's Cup. Dee comments: "That, for me, was interesting, as so many organisations (the Royal Ocean Racing Club included) seem not to be able to distinguish between a youth sailor and a female sailor. However, it is a consideration and an understanding that modern rules should reflect today's society – a step forwards, though we still have a long way to go."



Left to right: Dee Caffari, Yvonne Elliott and Elaine Bunting at Lasham

✈️ rushing past. The vistas from a glider are unmatched, giving a bird's-eye view of the landscape below.

The thrill comes from mastering the invisible currents of air and the challenge of staying aloft for as long as possible.

When I am sailing, it is more tactile; I can feel the resistance of water against the hull and the pull of the wind in the sails — unless I am lucky enough to be foiling.

The sensation of cutting through waves and harnessing the power of the wind is invigorating and calming.

NATURE

While gliding and sailing take place in the two different elements of sky and water, they share a fundamental connection to nature and a reliance on environmental forces.

Both sports offer unique challenges and rewards, requiring a blend of technical skill, environmental awareness, and a deep appreciation of the natural world.

Would I do it again? Well, I have already been asking about racing gliders and that is something I would really like to try my hand at next.



Dee Caffari MBE has raced round the world six times. Her achievements include leading a crew of 17 amateurs on the Global Challenge round the world race against prevailing winds and currents, then sailing the same yacht non-stop round the world alone. In 2009, she finished 6th in the 'world's toughest race' the solo, non-stop Vendée Globe and in 2017/18 skippered the first mixed gender youth team to compete in the Volvo Ocean Race. In her next project she has set her sights on a world record for the fastest circumnavigation of the planet with an all-female crew.



Elaine Bunting is a sailor, former editor of *Yachting World* and newbie pilot with Portsmouth Naval GC at Middle Wallop. Together with Dee Caffari, she wrote *Against the Flow*, a book about Dee's record westabout solo circumnavigations.