



The author (seated) and her pilot

No Fear of Flying

Two women glide through the Hawaiian skies.

By Gillian Kendall

A 23-year-old woman with boy-short hair and cut offs was strapping me into a four-point harness. Even though it was my first time, Original Glider Rides pilot Meagan Nauman gave me the front place in our two-person sailplane.

"See those things by your feet?" Nauman pointed to pedals that looked like the clutch and brake in a car. "They're the rudders. Don't let your foot touch them. And don't let your legs brush against this." She tapped the long, straight shaft with the rounded knob sticking up between my thighs. "This is the control." I refrained from pointing out the obvious, and I think she was relieved. Flying planes since age 19, Nauman has probably heard too many stupid jokes about control sticks.

I remembered to keep my knees bent and legs apart, fighting my femme tendencies to cross and tuck. "But if I'm sitting here," I said, "how are you going to steer and everything?" I was trying not to sound nervous, but I needed to know how she meant to keep our aircraft up and away from the cliff.

Hopping into place behind me, Nauman said, "I've got dual controls in back. Don't worry—you're gonna love it." Over our

heads, she lowered a clear plastic "bubble top," which was like the visor on a motorcycle helmet. Then the orange tow plane ahead of us started its propellers, and soon we were skimming down the runway, pulled by a thin, frayed nylon rope.

"Feel that?" Nauman called over my shoulder. "We're already in the air! The glider's so light, it's floating before the plane even takes off." As I tried to figure out the aerodynamics, the tow plane lifted off and then pulled us skywards at a gentle angle. Soon I could see all of Dillingham Airfield, and then roads, houses and the top of the cliff. And since we were gliding over North Oahu, Hawaii, half the view below us was Pacific Ocean: a vast mosaic of sharply defined pockets of blue.

"We're heading for that hole," Nauman instructed, and for a second I was afraid she meant a deep turquoise pool I was gazing at, but then she pointed out a break in the cloud cover.

I couldn't take it all in at once, and kept turning my head to see the fields of sugar cane, ragged cliffs, and the palm tree lined stretches of pale sand. The Waianae Mountains rolled into the distance, revealing the little town of

Waiialua, and up the coast lay the famous surf beach, Pipeline, and Waimea Bay.

As we rose, Nauman chatted about the dials in front of me: An altimeter and some indicators for air speed and vertical height. When we'd reached 3,000 feet—the perfect height for sightseeing—Nauman released the line that held us to the tow plane. Having been told to expect a sharp drop, I braced myself, but the glider stayed level and then slowly gained altitude as we rode a thermal, a rising bubble of warm air. Nauman told me later that she'd done a "soft release" since it was my first time, and she didn't want to make me nervous.

And amazingly, I wasn't nervous. In the little craft, which weighed only 970 pounds, I could feel the strong air currents buoying us up, and I was no more afraid of falling than if I'd been floating on water. With the tow plane gone, our glide was as quiet as riding a bike.

"Do you want to make a turn?" she asked.

"Go for it!" I said, expecting her to take us inland.

"No, you make it. Move the stick gently to the right," she said. "It's really sensitive."

Not wanting to slam us to the ground, I applied two fingertips to the control.

"No, go ahead and take hold of it. Don't be scared."

I edged the stick sideways an inch, and the glider smoothly rotated. Nauman did something to keep our wings even, and then we were heading back the way we'd come.

Too soon Nauman pointed the nose down to start our slow descent. "See how that feels?" she asked. Even at a few feet above the asphalt, the uplift was sure and steady. "We could keep going all the way down this runway and then get back up again," she said. "We could stay up all day."

"Let's do it!" I said.

Nauman laughed. "Nah, sorry, that was almost an hour. I'm going to put us down on that X, right there." Seconds later, she did. We taxied in and climbed out, and I stood on the empty runway for a while, not ready to leave. Thrilled by gliding, I was also moved by the ease and skill of the young woman who, having just taken me for the ride of my life, was then cheerfully pushing her aircraft into its hangar. My first glider ride had been even more stunning than I'd expected, and as in other things, it was nice to have an experienced lesbian pilot at the helm. ■