



History of Paragliding

How Paragliding Began

Paragliding has its roots in the 1950s, when engineers started developing steerable parachutes that could actually glide forward—a big departure from the old round parachutes that just dropped straight down. Around the same time, NASA was researching ways to recover spacecraft. This work led to two major breakthroughs: The Rogallo wing (which became the hang glider) and the ram-air parachute—the direct ancestor of what we fly today. Ram-air canopies work by filling pressurized cells with air to create a proper wing shape, completely changing what was possible with a fabric wing.

In the 1960s, people in the UK started towing these new canopies behind vehicles for fun—they called it "parascending." At first, pilots stayed on the towline, but it didn't take long before someone figured out that releasing at altitude and flying to a target was much more exciting.

The real game-changer came in the early 1980s. Better materials and smarter designs finally made it possible to launch a wing on foot from a hillside—no tow, no plane, just you and the slope. In 1984, Swiss companies (UP & SWING) started making wings specifically designed for flying, not just falling with style. Those early wings were revolutionary, though by today's standards they barely glided at all!

What made paragliding explode globally was simple: it's easier to learn than other flying sports, the gear is light and portable, and compared to other aircraft, it's relatively affordable. It quickly became the fastest-growing air sport in the world.

How Paragliding came to Kenya

The Early Days (1990s)

The first person to actually fly a paraglider in Kenya was a French-Canadian pilot named Thierry Dubus, who launched from Kijabe Hill, in the Rift Valley. His flights inspired some local Kenyan business owners and artists to bring in proper instruction. In 1995, South African instructor Rob Manson came to Kenya and trained our founding group: Simon Cox, Gavin Bell, Mark Lukini, Philippa and David Marrian, Greg Tallot, Vincent Boulanger, Tom Chambly, Jamie Vernon, and others. Bob and Elon Karstad also got winch-towing started around this time.

Thierry became the unofficial leader of Kenya's small pilot community from 1995 until 2005, when he moved to France. He eventually retired from paragliding in 2012. During those ten years, this pioneering group explored and opened up sites like Kijabe Hill, Kibini Hill, Timau Hills, Chyulu Hills, Shimba Hills, Katelembu, Ulu, and the spectacular Kerio Valley.

These pilots laid the foundation for everything we have today. Some of them—and even their children—are still flying with us.

Of all the sites they discovered, the Kerio Valley became internationally famous. Its 200-kilometer cliff face attracted competitive pilots from around the world chasing personal bests and world records. Today, several FAI world records in both paragliding and hang gliding are held at this site.

Every year from December to March, the quiet town of Iten (already famous for producing champion runners) transforms into a paragliding hotspot. Hundreds of international pilots come to enjoy our reliable weather and world-class flying conditions.

A Critical Turning Point (2018)

In 2018, a tragic accident killed two pilots and one passenger. This brought Kenya's paragliding under intense scrutiny from aviation authorities who had previously paid little attention to our sport. There was serious talk of banning paragliding entirely.

To save the sport in Kenya, local and international pilots came together and formed the Paragliding Association of Kenya (PAK). We created safety standards, set up pilot registration, and built a working relationship with the government to prove that paragliding could continue safely under proper regulation.

Recent Growth (2020–Present)

In 2020, commercial tandem operations started at Kijabe Hill, just an hour north of Nairobi. This created real jobs for trained Kenyan pilots and made the sport much more visible to the public. Thanks to PAK's safety systems, this growth has been both safe and sustainable.

Where We Are Today

Paragliding in Kenya is now thriving:

- Kijabe Hill is our main training and flying site
- PAK has over 60 members from all over the world—Kenyans, Europeans, Americans, and other Africans
- We host annual competitions that draw regional and international pilots
- PAK is the official governing body for the sport, working directly with Kenya's aviation authority



Coveted paragliding destination

In the early 2000s, Kenya gained international recognition as a world-class paragliding destination when visiting foreign pilots discovered that the local conditions and landscapes were ideal for long-distance world record attempts, particularly in the Kerio Valley.

Gregory Knudsen (USA) became the first to achieve a solo paragliding world record in the Kerio Valley in 2013, followed by Hunter Marrian (K), who set a new tandem world record distance of over 200km in the same location in 2015.

In recent years, Titi Marquet (FR) has flown several world records on his tandem together with his wife, while the solo distance record has been pushed to an impressive 340km by Ondrej Prochaska (CZ) in 2026.

Kenya has also witnessed numerous other outstanding flights, including Nikolay Yotov's (BUL) remarkable 200km+ journey from the Kerio Valley into the Rift Valley basin, and Shaun Mousely's (K) 100km+ flight from Kijabe Hill toward the Maasai Mara. A particularly notable achievement is the female site record for the Kerio Valley, set by Esther Deliesen (NL) at over 200km.

As pilots worldwide continue to push the boundaries of distance and altitude, records will inevitably be broken at sites around the globe—including right here in Kenya.

You can view all Kenyan National Records on our 'Wall of Fame' webpage:

<https://paraglidingassociationkenya.com/flying-spots/kenyan-site-records/>