

shouted back something encouraging in return. We waved and photographed each other until Miha decided to go for another set of wing-overs and spirals.

Although this meant some heavy loadings and we finished each of these sets breathless and tired, we both agreed that we must hurry down. Our theory was that in the event of an oxygen system failure, we could probably get down safely from an altitude of 7000m, but from 8000m, where we were at that moment, we might make it, but only with severe problems.

So down we went! Our weight shifting was perfectly co-ordinated with the wing making powerful swings left and right and dropping into extreme rates of bank. Every other turn seemed almost like a loop, with the wing all the while perfectly shaped and heavily loaded and never even collapsing a tip.

The high wing loading, which we were almost afraid of (hook-in weight 230kg), seemed to help Miha and soon we came rushing down to 7500m where we paused to recover our breath.

After a few sinister moments of silence Miha said: "Primož, my oxygen is dead!" "What?"

"Oxygen is gone, it's dead!"

"Shit, tell me if you need mine, it's still working!"

We would come out of this just fine, albeit with the complication of sharing the remaining mask, if we could only lose a little more height, quickly. Flying level, we were trying to gain some strength for another fast 500m descent when my mask stopped working too. There was only one option left: get down as fast as possible!

We were rushing earthwards in wild spirals until we almost blacked out, right on the edge of our abilities. Spiral and wing-over, then spiral again, and again ... The altitude seemed to fall very slowly and it was only at 6000m, when we knew that we'd safely escaped, that we were again able to shout with joy, once again beating each other's hands, knees, legs and helmets.

Our state of health had worsened a bit, partly because of altitude, partly because of the never-ending centrifugal forces. I was worse off, since I'm not very used to the front seat. I could almost say that I was pretty sick at that moment and was focusing a large part of my energy and concentration into controlling these (bad) feelings. 5500m, 5000m, 4500m ... each metre crept past slimy, miry, perpetual.

Slowly we descended, and at about 1500m we were already looking for a landing field. We tried to guess where our friends would be waiting, since our communications hadn't been fully functioning for a long time now. I say not fully, because we could still hear them, but they couldn't hear us. From their incomplete hints we had to guess where they were: "... at the church on the swamp - Barje, just south of Ljubljana ..."

We were almost sure that they were talking about architect Plečnik's famous church on a swamp, since we couldn't remember any other.

"... shhshhh ... Crna vas ... shhshhh ..."

"I thought so, Crna vas is the place."

Slowly we recognized some cars stopping in front of the church. Everybody was looking at us. We threw in a wingover or two now and again, so nobody paid any attention to the parish priest, who protested that if somebody had organised sky watching in his own backyard, it was only decent to at least say hello!

After apologies and a short explanation he smiled as well. He was particularly interested, probably as a joke, in whether we had seen God up there or not. We

hadn't. But there was no doubt in our minds that it was as beautiful up there as it ever could be in heaven. Next time we'll go higher.

TECHNICAL INFO

The flight took place on June 4 and we used the Wings of Change Chinhook tandem glider. We have been jumping with this glider since the beginning of the project. We have performed four drops, and the first one, a year ago, must have been the first tandem balloon drop ever.

We noticed significantly higher true airspeed (around 76km/h) at 8000m. Part of this increase is definitely due to the high wing loading, another part to low air density. The trim speed at sea level is only 45km/h. We calculated that in steep spirals we must have reached speeds of 180km/h.

The problems with the oxygen system were due to humidity in the masks and condensation occurring with the temperature drop. The temperature was -37°C and we suffered from valve icing in the masks. Ice on the inner side of the mask probably disabled our microphones as well.

We used North Face one-piece Himalayan suits, three layers of gloves and Berghaus protectors over our boots. Our oxygen systems were taken from military aircraft and were of the diluter-demand type. We will need to work on the icing problem. Dr Brane Brodnik, president of aviation medicine in Slovenia, is working in this field.

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Descending hard with the Oxygen system failed



Finally back down to cloudbase



Relief, Primož (L) and Miha (R) back on terra firma

Competition **5**
Stratus



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