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◆FEATURE: Paragliding: the best way to cross the Alps

GENEVA, Aug. 20 KYODO

Tired of long queues at busy airports and trains? Looking for a cheap, environmentally friendly alternative to travel across Europe's highest mountains almost hassle-free? Try paragliding.

When friends in the Swiss paragliding team Alpsfreeride had the idea of flying from Switzerland to the Mediterranean in July, they decided to take 15 days off. In the end, Reynald Mumenthaler, 30, and Martin Muller, 40, with the help of their friend Damien Tuvo, 32, for weather forecasting and route planning, touched down in Nice on the French coast in one single week. They covered 330 kilometers of the 520-km trip by air.

"With better conditions they could have even done it in three or four days," Tuvo said. He was proven right, as it took Muller only two days and one hour to fly back the 500 km to his native Geneva.

"The aim was to reach Nice, not to break a leg, so we took it easy," Mumenthaler said. He and Muller took off in Nielsen, above Interlaken, on July 2 with a third companion, Jeremy Weber, 28. But Weber had to turn back after three days because of unfavorable weather conditions.

Paragliding is strongly weather dependent, and the pilots never knew in advance how long they would spend in the air or what distance they could cover. On the first day, they only came as far as Lenk, 20 km away from their starting point, instead of the 100-km leg they had planned.

But after taking a train to Chamonix after a short turbulent flight on the second day, Muller covered 140 km in one go and got to Grenoble on July 4. But the next day again, it was too windy to fly.

It is not the race, however, that is important. "The pleasure of paragliding is simply to be flying. Today we can cross the Alps without an engine," Mumenthaler said. "And with no fuel, we are carrying a real airplane in our backpacks," three-time Swiss paragliding champion Muller, who has experience flying above 5,000 meters, added. Their 30-kilogram equipment also included a safety parachute, a harness, two T-shirts, a couple of pairs of clean underwear and a toothbrush.

"Short flights can also be fantastic. Pleasure cannot be measured in kilometers," especially above the Alps' idyllic peaks, Tuvo said. The two flying partners spent the fifth day circling above the hill-top sanctuary of Notre Dame de la Salette, built after the Virgin Mary appeared to two child shepherds there 160 years ago. It is now the second pilgrimage site for the Virgin after Lourdes. "It was a beautiful flight through the clouds above the sanctuary. It had a very spiritual feel to it," Mumenthaler said.

"A paragliding race is like life, with its pleasures and difficulties," Tuvo said. Walking in the mountains shouldering their heavy bags in search of a good place to take off from can be tough, but the gliders can always rely on friendly locals for a car ride or a glass of warm milk.

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People come from all over the world to paraglide in the Alps, but of all countries "Switzerland is for paragliders like Hawaii" is for surfers -- a paradise spot. "There are roads, trains or cable cars to take you up anywhere. The network is fantastic," Mumenthaler said.

The team made further steady progress southward, and when they reached Nice on July 9, they could not wait any longer to dive into the sea. "We really needed it to get clean!" Mumenthaler said. They also enjoyed joining a vibrant French crowd watch their team play neighboring Italy in the football World Cup final.

Spring and summer are the best seasons for paragliding, as heat allows the wing to rise. Pilots can ascend up to 3,500 meters or 4,000 meters in the Alps in the summer. But Muller did better than that when he was the first man in 2003 to fly over Mont Blanc, the top of Western Europe, reaching 4,900 meters. "I did not expect to fly over Mont Blanc when I started above Annecy, 60 km away." That summer's record heat wave helped him to soar upward, and Muller got to touch the peak's virgin snow. "At this altitude, you have to breathe deeper, concentrate and be careful at every moment. But that day, I didn't even have a headache."

The longest distance covered paragliding was a 400-km straight flight over a U.S. desert. The longest flight made in the Alps covered 290 km, and Muller's personal record is 170 km in eight hours.

The Alpsfreeride team, based in Geneva, Switzerland, was created by five friends as an exchange forum where gliders, skiers and snowboarders can share tips, experience and tales of their adventures. The novel idea -- paragliding associations are rare -- became hugely popular with 10,000 visits to their website, [www.alpsfreeride.ch](http://www.alpsfreeride.ch), every month.

In addition to having their site translated into Japanese, the team's projects for the future include flying around the Matterhorn and continuing to travel around the world. "Asia is very interesting, there are many places to go to. We would like to make a big trip there," Tuvo said. Some of them have already flown over the Great Wall of China or in the Himalayas.

Japan has already hosted paragliding world cup events, which take place every two years.

"But only the top three pilots in the world can live from paragliding competitions, and they are not even rich. This is why we need sponsors to carry out our projects."

Mumenthaler is an engineer currently working for Caterpillar, Muller is a watchmaker and does work for leading companies including Patek Philippe and Cartier, and Tuvo is a machine tool engineer. They have been flying for 13, 16, and 12 years, respectively.

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