Learning to fly a sailplane is a great adventure, whether you are 16 or 60. In fact, it never stops. I went up to Lake Keepit with a gang of others to do a gliding course. When we arrived at the busy club-house, we introduced ourselves and said "We're here to learn to glide." Every person in the room replied, "So are we…" And they were experienced cross country pilots and instructors!

Learning to fly a sailplane is full of rewards, set-backs and successes, often in very quick order. The better prepared you are for a course in gliding, the easier you will find it. These notes cover some of the background information to the courses at Lake Keepit Soaring Club.

What to Bring.

Clothes. Learning to fly a sailplane is perhaps 90% practical and 10% theory and you will be spending a lot of time outdoors in the sun. So bring sunscreen and a hat or two.

The importance of sunscreen cannot be stressed enough. With a good hat and sunscreen, you can stay out all day with no sunburn, so buy the highest rating sunscreen you can find. In fact, sailplane canopies will filter out a lot of UV, so it is when you are outside the aeroplane that you need the sunscreen most.

Wide brimmed hats are not good in gliders since they restrict your vision, but they are good on the ground. Those silly hats glider pilots all wear are the best thing for flying because they cover your head and allow you an unrestricted field of view. Baseball caps are not so good, and hats with a hard button on top can easily scratch glider canopies. So a choice of hats might be the best idea especially since they are something people lose.

Many people like to fly gliders in long sleeved shirts and trousers to keep the sun off their arms and legs in the cockpit. Light colours may reflect the sun, but can also reflect on the inside of the canopy which hinders your look-out. In summer, whatever you wear needs to be lightweight.

Be aware that you may be walking more than usual! After landing the glider, it will need to be taken back to the launch point. If you landed really accurately, this may only mean a short push. If you landed further away, the glider will be towed back to the launch point with someone walking alongside, supporting a wing-tip. Probably this will be you!

Big boots like Aussie work-boots can be really comfortable, but can get in the way when your feet are on the rudder pedals, so look for narrower soled shoes. In some gliders, you almost need ballet shoes.

Sunglasses are essential. There are a few schools of thought here. Some people swear by polarising lenses in their sunnies. They can increase the contrast between clouds, the atmosphere and the sky making thermal spotting easier. Other people swear by rose tinted or blue-blocking

lenses for the same reason. Since lookout is very important when flying, don't skimp on cheap sunglasses with bad lenses.

A lot of pilots like to wear gloves. The most popular types are white cotton gloves (normally the palms seem to be worn through), fingerless sailing gloves, or plain thin leather work gloves from the ironmongers.

Munger. Lake Keepit is around 40 minutes from anywhere like a town, so you need to be fairly self sufficient for food. There is a kiosk at the caravan park where you can buy the basics, but they will be basic! There's a good kitchen in the club-house and you can get fridge space for things that need it.

You can buy softdrink, beer and wine at the club for very reasonable prices, so you don't need to bring lots of these. You will undoubtedly be drinking heaps of water. The best water to drink at Lake Keepit comes from one or two rainwater tanks. Tap water comes from the lake and may be brackish. You'll need a bottle or camelback to carry your water in. See the notes on losing things above.

You'll need to bring sheets, a pillowcase, a towel and so on. The rest of your bedding can be found in the rooms at the club. In the summer you won't need much in the way of blankets, but in the winter, nights can be cool.

There's a good washing machine at the club, and on most days, clothes will dry in a few hours, even at night.

The Day. As mentioned above, learning to fly a sailplane is perhaps 90% practical and 10% theory. You won't be spending lots of time in a classroom.

At Lake Keepit, normally the day begins with the 9.30 briefing. Here, pilots, tug pilots, visitors, instructors and students get together and sort out the day. This involves checking the weather, sorting out who is flying what, who is going cross country and so on. Yesterday's weather and gliding will be discussed, if only to prove that even if the weather appears identical, the gliding conditions will be quite different. Often a pilot or an instructor will give a short talk on some point of interest, but in the early stages of training especially, this is unlikely to last long.

Training has two main phases. Upper air work and circuits. In the upper air phase, you learn to actually fly the glider. This means learning to coordinate the controls… the elevator, ailerons and rudder. Because gliders have comparatively large wingspan, you'll need to use a lot more rudder than in a powered plane. Another thing to learn is to judge the speed the glider is flying by the distance between the nose of the glider and the horizon… called the "attitude" of the glider. Once you have got these techniques fairly under control, you'll start circuit work.

Upper air flying is usually thermal soaring, and will normally start when the thermals do… towards the middle of the day. So after the briefing, it will be time to get out the gliders and pre-flight them.

However, if you are doing circuit work, the briefing may be skipped and first flights flown as soon as the gliders are down at the launch point.

A circuit can take as little as 6 minutes from a low winch or aerotow… less if you are practising launch emergencies. How hard you work is up to you! Some people will want to fly until they drop, and others will choose to take it a little easier.

Possible problems. One thing to be aware of is air sickness.

Sailplanes do a lot of turning compared with powered aircraft, and the angle of bank is normally quite steep… say 45º. In summer, when the thermals are strong, the air can be a bit rowdy. 99% of glider pilots don't get airsick because they have got used to the motion, but for people learning to fly, the unfamiliar motion can initially be a problem… even for people who have flown aeroplanes, hang gliders or paragliders. It was for me, and it took a few days to get used to it.

So here are a few things to remember.

It is very unlikely that you will have any problems long term. So stick with it.

Some pilots take herbal and other remedies which have no side effects, because they love gliding.

Don't fly when you don't feel like it! Tell your instructor that you would like a break… even if you are airborne. Just ask if it is possible to fly straight for a while. (I did!)

Fly more in the morning or the evening when the air is calm.

Think about doing a course outside the summer months when the air is going to be smoother.

While we're on this topic, here's another one. Fear of heights. A lot of people are afraid of heights, me included. I cannot look over the edge of a cliff or tall building. (And I've been hang gliding 30 years without any worry.) One person I learned to fly with can't climb more than 2 metres up a tree without freezing up. But he found he had no problems inside a glider cockpit.

If you have a fear of heights and think you want learn to fly sailplanes, give it a go, It may not be a problem at all, so don't be nervous about giving it a try.

It's a good idea to organise get up to Lake Keepit the afternoon before your course starts. If you arrive later, be sure to bring a torch! Out in the country, without the glow of city lights in the sky, it can get very dark.

Background Reading.

As part of your course fees you will get a book published by the GFA called Basic Gliding Knowledge. This should be sent to you after you pay the course deposit. It is a very good idea to read this before you start the course. Basic Gliding Knowledge covers all you need to know to do the course. However if you are the reading type, you may want to look at some other books.

How do gliders fly? A knowledge of basic aerodynamics will be useful, probably essential if you want to carry on flying. One of the best books around is written by Martin Simons. He lives in Adelaide and has written many books on vintage sailplanes, but this is a little different. It's called:

Model Aircraft Aerodynamics. Twenty years after its first publication, this book continues to be regarded as the standard work on model aircraft, attracting worldwide interest and approval. It has been recognised as an excellent introduction to to aerodynamics, not only for model flying enthusiasts, but also for people concerned with full scale light and ultralight aeroplanes and sailplanes.

Books by Derek Piggott. Derek Piggott is probably the best known gliding instructor in the world and has written piles of books. Two which are worthwhile are:

Beginning Gliding. This book is intended for budding and improving glider pilots and as a resource for gliding instructors. It views the whole process from the perspective of a beginner tackling all the difficulties and concerns experienced by them head on, including the fundamentals of gliding, how to learn them and how they should be taught. This book is slightly showing its age, but is still has a lot to offer.

Gliding. A handbook on Soaring Flight. This book will tell you everything you need to know from basics to the more advanced part of flying a glider. Easy to understand and with detailed diagrams this book in the gliding circle is classed as a "bible" to glider pilots, from the more advanced pilot to the student.

These two books are somewhat orientated towards pilots in the UK, with bad weather, winds blowing the wrong way and lots of slope soaring. However, reading Basic Gliding Knowledge and one of these books back to back will teach you a lot just from noticing the differences.