

DOWNTIME



Soaring Above

Attorney Steven Peretz straps on his parachute, jams into the cockpit of his 450-pound glider plane and takes a deep breath.

Clenching the controls, knuckles white and heart pounding, he checks the instrument panel and glances over the wings. A 200-foot rope connects his glider to the tow plane before him. Peretz flips the rudder and signals the tow pilot to begin the pull. Teetering on its wheel, the glider taxis down the runway picking up speed.

At 40 miles per hour, Peretz's craft is off the ground first, and he struggles to keep the glider low. Too high and it could lift the tail of his tow plane. Climbing in tandem to two thousand feet, Peretz finds the mass of warm air that will give the glider the lift it needs. He pulls the release knob, unhooks the line and exhales. Within ten minutes, he is soaring in utter silence at 12,000 feet.

"Most people say, 'You go up and it must be calm and relaxing.' But it's not. You are thinking so intensely. There's no autopilot. You're always using the hand

controls; constantly making decisions," says Peretz a founding member of the Miami-based law firm Kluger, Peretz, Kaplan & Berlin PL. "It's a real good thinking man's kind of sport. There is a real big intellectual component to it."

Glider pilots gain elevation by riding currents of air called thermals. When a glider pilot hits one, they circle inside the rising air to gain altitude then glide out in search of the next thermal. On a good day a glider pilot can soar for hours at a time.

"There's a thrill you get when you catch a good thermal," says the 48-year old Peretz. A self-described aviation junkie, he has logged 425 hours of gliding time. "The challenge is centering the thermal, getting right in the core where you can go up 10,000 feet in 10 minutes. You're going up so quickly your ears are popping. That's exciting. That's the adrenaline rush."

While soaring, Peretz says he also remains keenly aware of potential landing spots. "Ninety-eight percent of the flights that I've done I've landed at the airports that

were my intended destination," he says.

As a child, Peretz was fascinated with model airplanes, and has been flying aircraft for the past 17 years. "I went to flight school in south Dade and I used to fly every weekend." But South Florida weather is "too good," he says. Out in the western states the clouds are plentiful and high.

At least once a year, Peretz heads out with good friend and flying buddy David Bassett, the CEO of Fort Lauderdale-based

Amerijet International Inc. Their most recent cross-country jaunt took them to Montague, Calif., near the Oregon border, for 10 days of intense gliding.

"It's a big production," says Peretz, who makes

arrangements for ground crews, rental planes, and tows. Because clouds are in short supply in the morning, launches begin around 1:00 in the afternoon and they fly until around 5:00. "Sometimes we'll fly together as a team — maybe a mile away. We're in radio communication; sharing information. I'll say, 'Come here, there's a good thermal.'"

Flights can be exhausting, Peretz explains. The real thrill is when you are 30 miles away from your home airport and you have enough altitude to comfortably glide back to base. "We call that the final glide. You don't have to worry about any more lifts. You're just enjoying."

Peretz says that he finds that gliding has a way of "centering" him, providing a welcome relief from the office environment. "Nothing that I do in the airplane is remotely close to what I do as a lawyer. I'm thinking where is the best place to get my next lift rather than where is the next book I have to look at for a good case. It's totally miles away from the firm." — Barbara Perkins

