

CONNECT

Nomad /// Paraglider

BY JENNICA PETERSON
PHOTO BY JUSTIN FANTL

NAME: Nick Greece **AGE:** 33 **BIRTHPLACE:** Dayton, Ohio **MONTHS PER YEAR ON THE ROAD:** 7

NICK'S TOP PLACE TO PARAGLIDE: "The part of the Aravis range in the French Alps that connects Le Grand Bornand to Chamonix is one of my favorite ranges to fly. It's just spectacular scenery. Plus, when you land you can have delicious bread, cheese, and a café au lait."



Nick Greece's life is up in the air. Dangling from a parachute-like glider, he soars through skies around the world for his job as editor of the United States Hang Gliding & Paragliding Association's magazine. He also participates in international paragliding competitions and sits on the boards of two nonprofits: AblePilot, which helps people with spinal cord injuries and paralysis learn the sport; and the CloudBase Foundation, which assists children in communities where hang gliders and paragliders fly. In between trips to Africa and Europe, Nick touched down in San Francisco to chat with Jennica Peterson about his adventures.

JP: Where do you go paragliding?
NG: I'm going to Greece next week to compete in the Paragliding World Cup. I'll be in Turkey and South Africa in the next few months competing and writing stories. And last year I was in Nepal, Spain, and Mexico. It all starts to blend together—and it's not always great. Living in a storage unit isn't that easy. But I feel like if I were stagnant, I would miss out on so many opportunities.

JP: What sorts of opportunities?
NG: Every year, the Ghana Tourist Board brings paragliders over to Ghana to fly tandems [flights with one pilot and one passenger] as part of the Easter celebration. I went last April, and it was incredible. Some of the local people wait for years to get the chance to fly, and then they camp up on the launch site all night to get in line for their turn for a 30-to 60-minute flight. When they get to go, they're so excited.

JP: Do you talk with the passengers while you're flying?
NG: Yeah, you're chatting away. Some people are just petrified. My last passenger was a Ghanaian who had been waiting three years to go up. He was shaking like a leaf before we launched. I said,

"Hey, you don't have to do this if you don't want to." He said, "No, I do." When we launched, he was still shaking. But after about 45 minutes he said, "Can you taste the clouds?" I said, "Let's find out. You want to go check it out?" Near the end he said, "Yes! Let's do it! Let's go up into them!" So I spiraled him up until we reached the clouds. It was the best thing he'd ever done in his life. To bring someone who has never flown to the "white room" was a privilege.

JP: When you're on the road, do you meet up with other paragliders?
NG: It's a very big community, actually. It's reminiscent of surfing in the '50s. You can go anywhere in the world and tap right into a group of friends. They'll give you a place to stay and show you where the best flying sites are. Everybody's really friendly.

JP: What's the best part of paragliding internationally?
NG: Some of the most amazing interactions happen when I land somewhere I didn't intend. When you fall from the sky and enter little villages, you immediately become a part of the locals' shared history. You're not just a tourist who drives by in a car. All of a sudden you appear, and it's

almost unfathomable. Hundreds of kids come out of the woodwork and start playing with your glider.

JP: Where did this last happen?
NG: In Pokhara, Nepal. I landed in a big rice field about 30 or 40 miles from where I started. The local kids were psyched. I sat them in my harness and held them up in the air. One of the kids, who spoke pretty good English, said, "You have to come over." I went to his house, and his family brought out oranges and tea. We sat for a while and talked. The grandmother looked ancient. She was laughing and telling jokes. I asked if I could take them to get a bite to eat, but they said, "No, no!" They wanted to host.

JP: Is it hard to travel with all your paragliding equipment?
NG: I once spent six months hitchhiking from Morocco up to Slovenia with my 40-pound paraglider. Most people would chuckle when they saw me wearing this huge backpack: "What the hell! Where are you from?" One time someone stopped to pick me up, and he asked, "What are we going to do with this glider?" He opened the trunk, pulled out a live sheep, put it on the roof, and then put the glider in the back. I said, "Well, that works!"

JP: It seems like you really have to rely on the kindness of strangers when you travel.

NG: That's the impetus behind the CloudBase Foundation. My paraglider friends and I thought we should give back to these places and people that have given so much to us. We started the foundation last year, and already we've built a classroom in Ecuador. In Ghana, we've raised funds for a water tank for an orphanage and sent three kids to school. We also just began a bunch of projects in the United States.

JP: How does paragliding give you a different perspective on the places you visit?

NG: When I competed in Peru, we flew all over the Sacred Valley at 22,000 feet. It was spectacular to get the bird's-eye view of the mountains and the ruins. You just feel so small when you're so high. After the competition, we rented motorcycles and drove through the Sacred Valley for two weeks, passing chickens and dogs, and families having tea on mountain passes. You have this surreal, very personal, solitary experience in your paraglider, and then when you return to land you have this incredible interpersonal, connective experience with people. It was one of the most complete travel experiences I've had.