

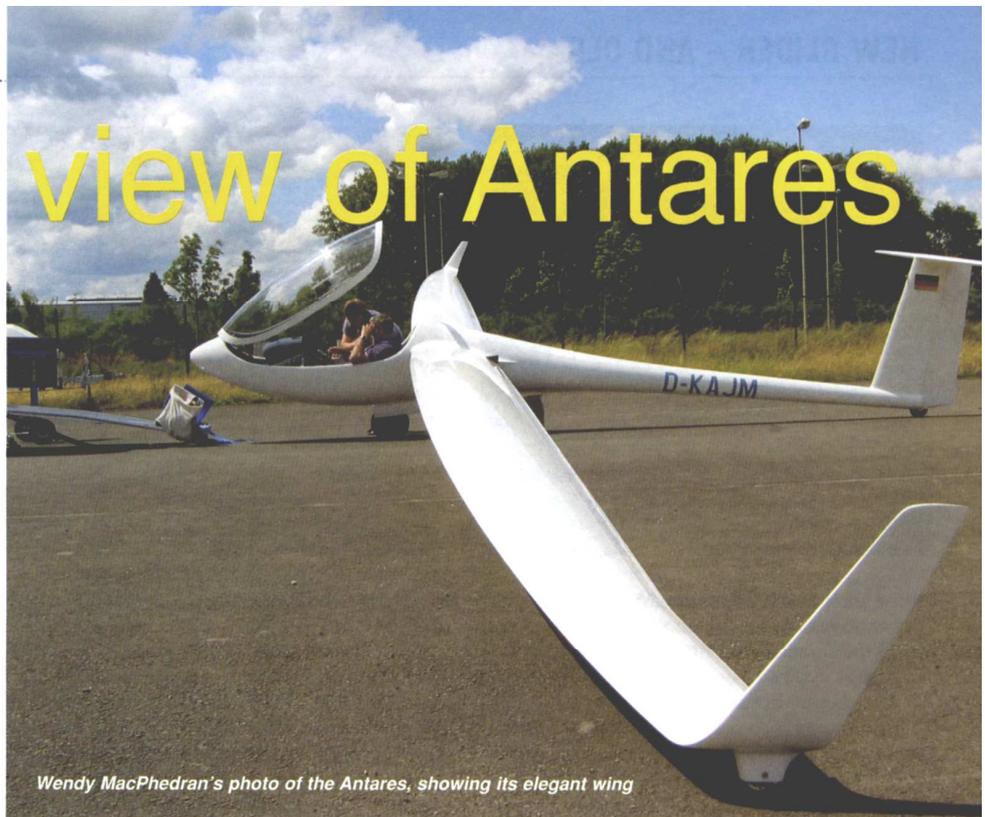
Another view of Antares

When John Williams tried out Antares his non-flying partner, Wendy MacPhedran, came along – and became fascinated by the people who build it

I KNEW nothing of Axel Lange or his Antares motorglider when my partner John Williams unexpectedly asked me: “How would you like to fly to Germany so I can sit in a specially fitted large cockpit in a newly conceived electric motorglider? Oh, and fly out Monday and back Tuesday night?” I tried to be enthusiastic but try as I might, this was tough. I silently expected the highlight of the trip to be standing around for eight hours in a dirty boring smelly old Nissen hut of a factory with people who spoke a language I didn’t understand (quite apart from the fact that they spoke German and I did not).

Being the supportive partner I like to think I am, my initial revulsion gradually evolved into reluctance – and then I realised that Zweibrücken was close enough to Trier to allow a visit. I determined that I could withstand hour after aching hour of knee/hip pain standing on concrete floors in an all-male environment if this was followed by a delicious dinner in an open-air 4-star restaurant on the streets of Trier. Fine wine, gentle breezes, flower boxes on every window, children playing in a small city park across the street. Yes, I could do this. So my conditions were set – excellent food, fine wine, luxurious hotels, ancient history, and perhaps some shopping for things you can’t get anywhere near Portmoak.

On approach into Frankfurt’s Hahn Airport, I was struck by the thought that it was probably an ex-World War Two airfield, much like those near Portmoak. I felt slightly disturbed as we left, wondering how many young men drove on these very roads 60 or more years ago to jump into airplanes that bombed Scotland, and how many are now lying at the bottom of the Channel or the North Sea. I shook off the discomfort and tried to enjoy the countryside during our two-hour drive. As we approached Lange’s factory at Zweibrücken Airport (complete with more WW2 Nissen huts) the same uncomfortable feeling – of closeness to past conflicts – surfaced. Another irony was that we left Scotland as the G8 summit was starting at Gleneagles; I hoped politicians would work to avoid asking young men to kill each other in beautiful places like this. Of course, the whole reason we went to Germany during G8 was that airspace restrictions were getting in the way of gliding and John knew he wouldn’t get “the big flight” in. I feel big relief when we have a few days in a row that are obviously not “the flying day of



Wendy MacPhedran’s photo of the Antares, showing its elegant wing

the year”. His continual studying of weather charts and webcams somewhat abated, and the pressure was off both of us.

This was the part of the trip I anticipated having to “grin and bear it”. I was glad I had worn old, dark clothes so the grime and smell of the greasy old hangar/factory would not ruin any favourite clothing.

We pulled up outside a modern new building. Nice, but perhaps a bit too slick to be friendly. We walked in the front door and saw that the security door to the inner rooms was propped open with a wedge of wood. OK, so people are relaxed here – trusting, even. I started to LIKE this place. No nasty smells, clean floors, fresh air and lots of light. It might not be as bad as I expected.

We were met and welcomed by Ola Roer Thorsen. First glance put his age at about 16, but I quickly realised that he was in his 20s, even if he still had an “aw, shucks” face and demeanour. Ola was wearing a blue t-shirt and khaki cotton pants, and interacted with us in the same casual way pilots meet pilots on airfields. We walked from the office building to the factory. Imagine my surprise when I opened the door into a large, airy and bright room filled with large pieces of aircraft, wing moulds, all sorts of cutting machines, and relaxed (mostly) young men in t-shirts and jeans going about their work. They were friendly and openly smiling at me! It was very clear that they were enjoying their work. In fact, it was starting to look as though everyone liked working here. I began to wonder who it was that created this work environment. Why was everyone so happy? Why was Ola so relaxed and able to be himself instead of trying to impress us? Why did the finish guys touch the partly constructed sailplanes with what was almost tenderness? What’s going on? This felt more like an artist’s studio than a factory.

I have to admit I got bored listening to John and Ola discuss the relative merits of one type of epoxy compared with another and about how the cockpit absorbed impact so that the pilot didn’t have to. I wanted to know more about these people: how their experience of giving birth to these aircraft resulted in a more reliable, enjoyable glider.

As we stood looking at the crumple-able nose cone a pleasant-looking man came over and shook our hands and said hello. He didn’t seem to speak English so I just smiled and nodded, as you do.

Ola took us to where our test aircraft was being rigged. The view was stunning – a big-sky perspective of cumulus clouds with slightly greying bottoms, just the kind John likes (*actually I like them tightly rounded and pink – J*). As Ola and John were putting the final wing on the plane, I took one look at the size and weight of it and realised that, should we take one of these beauties home, there was no way I was going to be able to lift that and hold it steady as John positioned it. Then the counter-balanced rigging device emerged (comes as standard equipment) – it somehow twists and turns through every axis in an almost effortless way. This device was my friend! Even I could manage that.

We drove to lunch with the same pleasant man we had met in the factory. Ola walked us into the cafeteria-style eatery and we sat at a booth with schnitzel and fleischplanzl. The place was chosen because “it has decent food at sensible prices”. Again, I liked the style. The pleasant man smiled and listened as we exchanged questions and answers about Antares and gliding in the UK and Germany. I didn’t realise until later that he was the owner/founder, Axel Lange. Okay, so I have a preference for the non-fussy and an aversion for people who try to charm me with extravagancies but

NEW GLIDER – AND OLD



Above: owner/founder Axel Lange (Lange Flugzeugbau)
Right: John's smile after flying Antares, as Ola Roer Thorsen looks on. Below: John with Antares' propeller, inside the factory (both photos Wendy MacPhedran)



these people were genuine. And if I was right, it was Axel who set the tone and chose his partners to reflect his own values. Who *is* this guy?

After a very conscientious briefing by Ola, John was ready to fly. It was at this point that I realised one should not make assumptions about age and/or someone's skill based on the freckles on their face. Ola was brilliant – absolutely amazing. He knew this aircraft inside out and upside down. John turned on the engine and taxied to the runway. It sounded like a large room fan, a rhythmic "swoosh" with no hint of harsh two-stroke racket. The winglets perched delicately at the end of the elegant, long, sinuous wings. It's easy even for a layman to imagine how this contributes to silky, responsive handling.

Once John was airborne, I set my sights on finding Axel. My curiosity was at a peak – how did this unassuming man bring together such a strong team and enable them to work so well together? How did this engineer-by-trade accumulate the management skills to create a team capable of building the glider of the future? I found him in his office and when I asked why he started this project he told me that when he first thought of Antares back in 1996, he felt "this was my chance to do the right thing". He was familiar with the idiosyncrasies of two-stroke engines and he dreamed of reliable, almost silent, high-performance engines. He knew he'd need partner specialists to create a design that was inspirational – the embodiment of the future of gliding. Not being a man who does things by halves, he went to Loek Boermans to design the wings and an F1 engineer to design the crash-proof cockpit. By this time I was hooked. If Axel had asked me to work for him I would have signed up immediately. He has what many quiet leaders possess – dignity, genuineness, and uncompromising passion to create something beautiful. I asked him why so many pilots were buying his plane, since it was clear that his "good idea" had taken shape and the production line was at full capacity. "Some buy for the silkiness of the flight," he said, "Some for the sophistication of the engine, but most buy because this glider is smart".

I noticed John returning so went outside. As we unstrapped John the guys asked him

how it went. It wasn't necessarily the fact that John was smiling as they opened the canopy, it was the depth of that smile. It came from his toes. This was a happy man, and I realised that a sale was imminent.

The word John used for the experience was "exquisite!" and for those who know John, he uses big words like that very rarely, and always selectively. I wondered whether or not there would be big-sell pressure tactics at this point. I shouldn't have worried. These men make these planes because they love them, because it's the right thing to do, and because they can. The closest they got to trying to sell this state-of-the-art flying machine to us was a quiet question: "So what do you think?"

Purists may not approve of engines in gliders, and those who do may not trust batteries in place of a good-old-fashioned petrol motor. No one at Lange Flugzeugbau is going to try to twist your arm to buy one. However, I adore my pilot-partner and want to spend another 40 years with him. I trust these men and their glider, and if buying this Antares puts a smile on John's broad face each time he flies it and brings him home safely, nothing will stop us having one!

Footnote: yes – the order was placed and there is a new sight over Portmoak – anyone looking for a nice LS8?

Wendy MacPhedran has been working internationally for 20 years as a coach and facilitator with executive teams on leadership issues, with a special interest in sustainable development. John Williams advises that the Antares' propulsion system is certified and the glider itself is currently flying on a "permit" with full LBA/EASA certification expected in early 2006. Cost is c.130,000 Euros plus VAT, instruments and trailer. Delivery is about one year from order. John, offered a recently vacated slot, expects delivery this Christmas. Jochen Ewald reviewed Antares in *S&G*, February-March 2004, p18

