

Rayan Akhtar

Virgin Atlantic Gliding Scholarship 2024

I can't believe I'm saying this: I've recently completed my gliding scholarship course from the Honourable Company of Air Pilots, sponsored by Virgin Atlantic!

I am extremely grateful to these organisations, as well as the London Gliding Club, for allowing me to have an unforgettable experience during the residential scholarship. I have dreamt of flying airplanes since I was 7 years old and I still need to pinch myself every time I realise I'm living that dream!

During my time at the London Gliding Club, I learnt all about the principles of flight and flying gliders as well as carrying out ground handling operations to keep the airfield running! I've had an incredible time since day one, and it's mind-boggling how much we've learnt and even more so how much more there is to learn!

Initially, I learnt about the importance of coordinated controls. Due to the adverse yaw effect, the aircraft has a tendency to "slip" or "skid" when using aileron input to roll the glider. This is inefficient and costs valuable altitude and airspeed, which is why using coordinated rudder and aileron controls is vital to flying efficiently and safely.

I then moved on to learning about the importance of airspeed control and flying in thermals! Thermals are columns of rising air that glider pilots use to gain altitude and are usually identified with a fluffy cumulus cloud above it. Circling over vast arrays of clouds leaves me speechless – I simply can't find the words to describe this feeling. It's an unimaginable and insanely addictive experience.

Soon, I began to work on circuit planning and landing. This involves airbrakes, descent planning and airspeed control as well as angle judgement between the glider and reference point on the airfield. This was a worthy challenge since there are lots of things happening at once during a circuit and landing, and you need to manage several things at once and prioritise where needed. The tricky bit with gliders is that you can't go around- you have one shot to put your aircraft on the ground! In tandem with this, I learnt how to fly the winch launch which is a fast-paced and exhilarating experience!

At this point, I was climbing up the learning curve of soaring the skies! The weather on most days was amazing which allowed us to stay up in the air and soar even longer! Also, at this point, I was able to fly the glider from launch to landing with my instructor monitoring – this is called a "virtual solo". I think if you told my 7-year-old self that I would be learning to fly an aircraft at 16, I would absolutely freak out!



I still have a lot to learn and improve on, but the learning never stops! This course has kickstarted my journey towards becoming a glider pilot and I am still taking instructed flights at the London Gliding Club whenever I can, and aiming to become a cadet at the club. I hope to go solo soon and continue improving my skills to a bronze and cross country endorsement and beyond – I am absolutely addicted to gliding!

Thank you so much to the Honourable Company of Air Pilots, Virgin Atlantic and my fantastic instructor Istvan for making this possible. Every time I climb into the cockpit, I think of how far I've come since first dreaming of flying as a child as well as my future as my life goal is to become a pilot, whether in the Royal Air Force or the Airlines! My entire experience at the London Gliding Club has been a blast and these were the most memorable weeks of my life! I have thoroughly enjoyed not only the continuous learning about gliding and managing the airfield, but also the experiences with the fantastic friends I've made during this course. I still remember when we all climbed the ridge at the club before the last day in an area called the "hill of doom" after dark and in terribly rainy conditions... It was a blast! The airfield is beautiful to see, whether in sunshine and in rain!

I will continue to make the most of this generous and invaluable scholarship and continue to seek opportunities to make my dream closer and closer to a reality. At the moment, I am starting to look for further opportunities to further my journey towards becoming a pilot such as the HCAP PPL scholarships and British Airways' Speedbird Academy. I have a lot to learn and I am super excited to see what the future holds!

