

flight test

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: AVIAN RIO 2

Joe Schofield reports

Avian's original Rio has been around since 1999 and was reviewed in these pages in April 2000. A very nicely-made intermediate glider, it has stood the test of time while many of its rivals, which it outflew at the time, have faded away. Back then it had much better performance than any Skyfloater and very light and refined handling; Avian called it a sports glider. A mylar leading edge, speed bar and aerofoil uprights were all optional extras. At 15m² it weighed only 25.5kg



ALL PHOTOS: AVIAN

Avian have recently done a lot of development work on the Rio and it now appears in Rio 2 form in 15 and 17m sizes with a number of interesting improvements. Avian has always been a byword for top-quality fittings and construction and a lot of exquisite parts have trickled down from the balls-out Cheetah Evo topless, notably a very clever outer batten/sprog and neat batten ends. The laser-cut sail with increased double surface is all new, as is an optional VG, and the end of the keel can be removed for power use.

I was up in the Hope Valley on a different mission when Avian boss Steve Elkins offered me a go on the Rio 2 15. Having just dropped off a fast and heavy topless I was keen to see how far the Rio had been developed. A very light wind and a small ridge, with plenty of paragliders in attendance, would be a suitable challenge.

Rigging is very easy even when you don't know how – I was in a hurry to get off because I suspected the lift was going to vanish and just threw it together in no time. Only six battens a side were a shock after stuffing in twelve earlier, and the outer "washout batten" simply folds back from the leading edge to be located by a zip. The tip strut is very light and tensions, like the battens, with Avian's clever folding ends – no pesky elastics. The tension is easy to pull on, then stuff in four undersurface battens and you're ready.

Ground handling is perfect and the glider is very easy to control. Even in the light wind I only

needed a few steps to get airborne and then... wow! I'd hardly got around the corner onto the ridge proper when I began to feel an idiot grin coming on. The Rio 2 turns on a sixpence as soon as you think about it, with absolutely no effort and in perfect harmony. Weaving around amongst the evening paragliders, I very soon found myself taking liberties. Scratching close to the hill, 360-ing in small bits of restitution lift and drifting over the top at no more than 50ft, still turning. There seemed to be nothing it wouldn't do; the experience was completely confidence-inspiring.

The sink rate seemed pretty good, but when I hauled on a yard of VG the Rio seemed to accelerate upwards. This all-powerful feeling was cut short when I tried to maintain direction in some rough bits, but dumping the VG brought the smile back immediately. And pushing out from the hill, outgliding and outclimbing the paragliders, wasn't half as much fun as turning and turning and turning again close to the hill. With this glider you can venture close to the terrain and to other gliders in complete confidence. If you get tipped into the hill or the other guy turns towards you, the Rio 2 will do your bidding, no matter how much or how little airspeed you have. It flies like a butterfly!

Pitch feedback was very light but positive, stiffening up gently with speed. Slowing down produces only an increasing mush with no clear stall break, and no hint of a wing drop. Flat out it seems to run up to a fair speed while still very much going forward rather than down.

Thermalling in light lift required no high-siding and constantly adjusting the turn was effortless.

And so to land. It was getting dark and I was on a promise. Steep turns, perfect positioning – a doddle with such a manoeuvrable wing – and an easy flare ended my flight, leaving only that idiot grin that I hadn't been able to shake off for an hour or more. Absolute fun from start to finish!

In an era when gliders are becoming ever heavier, faster and more difficult to control, here we have a machine that is light, utterly controllable and plenty fast enough (Steve Elkins says the top speed is around 80km/h). It's customary to regard such wings as suitable only for a stepping stone to something exotic, but in truth its blend of sheer fun and performance *is* exotic. It seems to me a true 21st century machine, absolutely nimble and really fun to fly.

Retained from the original are the lightness, exquisite detailing, superb rubber-backed uprights, rapid rigging and great ground handling. At a shade over £4,000 it's not much more than half the price of a wing with performance few of us will use. For some time I have been toying with the idea of trading up; this brief encounter left me wondering if I hadn't completely misled myself. Who was it said the best pilot out there is the one having the most fun?



specification

Model	15	17
Sail area (m ²)	15	17
Span (m)	9.8	10.1
Nose angle (°)	120	120
Aspect ratio	6.4:1	6.0:1
% double surface	61	61
Packed length (m)	5.7	6.1
Short-packed length (m)	3.60	3.66
No. of battens	16	16
Airframe material	7075-T6	7075-T6
Flying weight (kg)	26.5	30.0
Optimum pilot weight (kg)	70 - 110	90 - 130
Max clip-in weight (e.g. with power unit)	120	140
Certification	pending*	BHPA 0111174
Price	£4,112**	£4,154

* BHPA test-rig pitch and load testing is complete

** Base model without VG: £3,931. Heavy-duty side wires and other options are available for power use.

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