

STORY BY ANNE STRAUB

# Ultralight Adventurer

*DR. DAVID MALIS employs only his wits and the air to suspend himself under a wing over the Space Coast beaches*



*DR. DAVID MALIS takes to the air over the area's beaches propelled by powered paragliding, a form of ultralight aviation that uses a wing inflated only by air pressure to carry the paraglider through the sky. In powered paragliding, an engine, much like a small airboat motor, is strapped to the paraglider's back to provide the lift necessary to get airborne.*



**W**hen he describes his work as a surgeon, Dr. David Malis talks about the meticulous nature of his specialty and the reward of serving children. When he describes his favorite off-hours pursuit, he compares himself to a pelican. "That's as close to what we do as anything else," Malis said.

He's talking about his hobby of powered paragliding, a form of ultralight aviation that uses a wing inflated only by air pressure to carry the paraglider through the sky.

The sport is a lowland version of paragliding practiced in rugged areas, where paragliders launch themselves from cliffs to become airborne. In powered paragliding, the engine on the paraglider's back replaces the need for the cliff.

The sport has been in the news recently in Brevard County, as the Palm Bay Police Department has pursued using officers on powered paragliders in search operations.

Malis, a pediatric ear, nose and throat specialist in Melbourne, first learned of the sport about five years ago during a visit to Sarasota.

"I saw this guy land on the beach with a lawn mower on his back, and then take off again," he remembers. He pursued training and flew his first solo trip two weeks later.

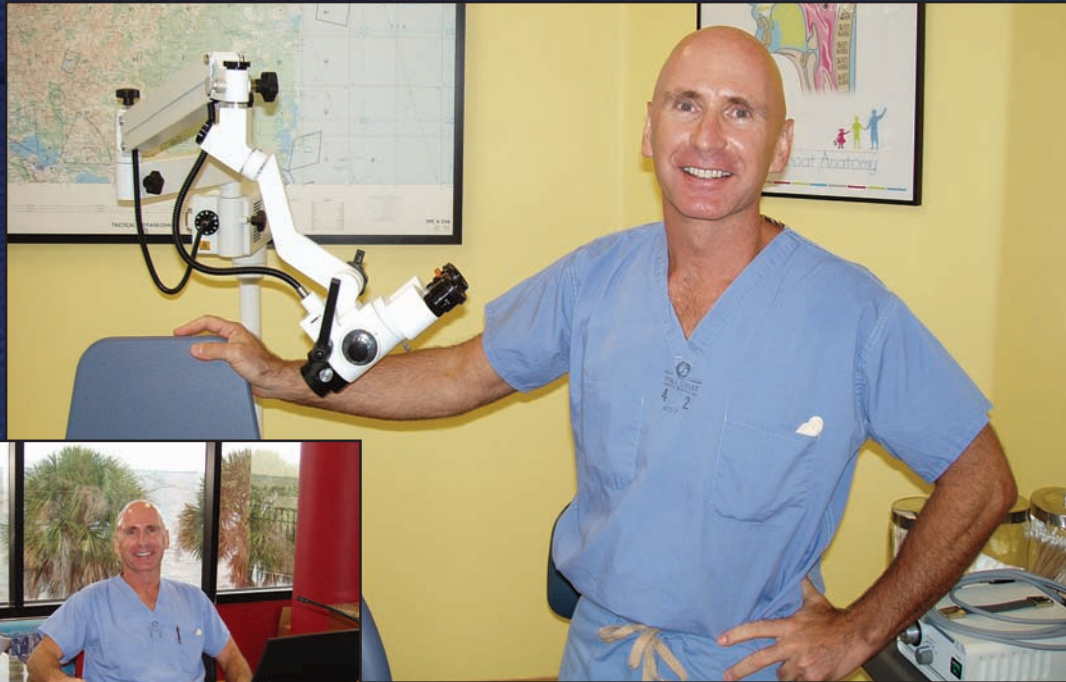
The sport feeds Malis' lifelong desire to fly, as well as his athletic bent. Malis grew up outside Philadelphia and played rugby as an undergraduate at Lehigh University. He soon realized that he needed to focus on academics if he were to reach his goal of becoming a doctor, so rugby fell by the wayside.

He later underwent airborne training in the Army, another attempt to fit flying into his life. He toyed with the idea of becoming a pilot, but found it impractical. "It's a huge time commitment," he said.

As things turned out, paragliding proved the



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better choice. He remembers going up for a ride in a friend's small aircraft and feeling like he was crammed into a Mini Cooper, trying to catch a glimpse of something interesting through a tiny window and while being assailed with noise. "I kept waiting for the exciting moment," he said.

Instead, he now employs his wits and the air to suspend himself under a wing along the beach. "It is incredibly peaceful, incredibly relaxing," he said. "If there's anything that will lower my heart rate and lower my blood pressure, and turn a scowl into a smile, this is it."

Malis has reached a height of 3,000 feet – a process that took about half an hour – but he prefers flying at much

lower altitude. He generally stays about 50 to 300 feet high and follows the surf line over the ocean. That's where he can enjoy the show, watching pods of dolphin, tarpon and sharks.

He's been up as long as two and a half hours,

with a typical ride lasting 90 minutes. Flying along the surf avoids the thermal activity that makes the sport more dangerous. Over the dunes in South Melbourne Beach, thermal currents can push a paraglider up 20 to 30 feet in a matter of seconds. "It's like getting into an elevator you can't see," he said.

To take off, Malis lays out the wing on the beach and allows the air cells to inflate. Then, he spins and runs into the wind, using the engine to provide the thrust to take off. Once he's airborne, he relies on the wing, which he controls using brakes in each hand, trim and throttle.

The nuances of anticipating and responding to wind conditions appeals on an intellectual level to Malis, who describes himself as detail-oriented. The same meticulous nature attracted him to his specialty.

"Some of these bones of hearing are like the tip of your pen," Malis said. Working with children also ups the stakes for his perfectionist tendencies. "In airway issues with kids, there's no margin of error," he said.

## FILLING A NEED

Malis graduated from The Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1989, then entered active duty in the U.S. Army where he trained as an otolaryngologist. He began practicing in Brevard in 2006, drawn in part

because he sees the county as underserved by pediatric surgical subspecialties.

Nevertheless, state-of-the-art technology is reaching the area. Malis is excited about a new device that offers a minimally invasive test for reflux, a difficult condition to identify in children.

The doctor inserts a probe through the nose, and the probe then rests in the back of the throat to test pH levels. Data is sent through a wireless transmitter, and parents log when the child eats and sleeps. The results can help avoid fruitless rounds of antibiotics or other drugs in response to educated guesses at a diagnosis.

Malis has also experienced medical care at its most basic, having traveled to Honduras multiple times to conduct clinics.

It's when he's soaring over the surf, rocking a wing back and forth, that the father of four can put all the cares aside. As a framed quote by Leonardo DaVinci on his office wall states:

*"When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return."*

Or as Malis puts it, "I'd fly every day if I had the opportunity." ■

