Two different route choices in a wide valley

As soon as the pilot decides to abandon one thermal and fly to the next, we can consider it XC flying. Here we describe two different choices:

First choice

The pilot flies from mountain shoulder to mountain shoulder (see illustration below).

Advantages are that he always arrives high enough to make it to the next west flank, where he can expect thermals to be coming up. Should no thermals be found he can glide down to land in the wide valley where he has plenty of landing options, instead of being forced into the high valley between the two ridges.

Disadvantage is that he soon finds himselve under the influence of the valley wind system, where the mere strength of the wind disturbs the thermals and makes them difficult to use. This can often make it hard to get up high again.

Second choice

The pilot makes maximum altitude at “A”, then follows the terrain up along the flanks of the main summit until he is above the main ridge.

Advantage is that, provided cloud base is high enough, he can remain above the main peaks, undisturbed by valley winds and with strong, consistent climbs. Our overall speed can be very good up here! Besides, the view is better than along the shoulders out near to the valley floor!

Disadvantages occur when he doesn’t make it to the next climb above the ridge – then he could be looking either at a landing up high, or in a narrow side valley, or at least a long detour around the next perpendicular ridge. Even if this detour works it takes a long time, also because he arrives lower than he would have, had he come straight there, and must thus battle it out even lower in the valley wind to get back up high.