

Fairhaven Micro Alti 2 with Bluetooth

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Fairhaven, based in Derbyshire, entered the world of dedicated flight instruments in 1989, selling through UK shops and schools. About 15 years ago a new generation of small, affordable pressure sensors led to the Micro Vario, and around 12 years ago the Micro Alti Plus brought the diminutive wristwatch-sized form to the market. The Micro Alti 2 is their current paragliding offering; they also cater to parachuting, club gliding and paramotor markets. Although the form is shared with its predecessor, the moulding itself is new and component parts are all replaceable. It's a complete redesign with new circuit board, sensors, processor and software.

The Micro Alti 2 is an audio-visual vario with an LCD display, packaged in a very compact case and controlled by just three buttons; there's also a USB-C port and a 3.5mm audio jack. The box contains the vario, mounted on a watch strap, a USB lead, a car charging adaptor, a lanyard, a stick-on Velcro fastener and another mounting strap for smaller mounts.

Extracting the unit, I immediately plugged in the USB charger. There's a very comprehensive manual, and a cheat-sheet to get you started. This is the first piece of genius – you can get started quite quickly. What becomes apparent as you read through is the huge range of pilots this could work for: as a first-and-only instrument, as a barometric sensor for a phone running XCTrack, XC Guide or FlySkyHy, and as a backup for your main instrument. Here is an instrument that I could have used as an out-of-school pilot, yet would be happy using now after more than three decades of flying. It can be worn on your wrist, clipped to a riser or mounted on a flight deck.

With any new vario, the first thing to try is how good the default settings are. I have my own favourite settings but, rather than dive in and change things, it makes sense to see how the vario would help the just-out-of-school pilot who may not have a long list of preferences.

The defaults are really good, so you only really need to know how to turn the vario on and how to set your two altimeters to be in business. The instrument scores very well in this respect. Firstly I flew with it on my wrist, later on the left-hand riser. Four screws on the mount allow you to rotate the instrument on the strap by 90 degrees to fit to the riser (two additional clips on the strap make for easy attachment). It's worth fitting it low down so that lines don't catch on it when ground handling.

The audio signal from any vario is paramount as it frees your eyes for wider lookout. The default audio starts at a low threshold on the very edge of lift (its sensitivity can resolve from 5mm per second), and is very helpful for finding and maximising marginal UK lift.

I found the audio very intuitive and didn't ever bother looking at lift/sink numbers on my initial flights, with only the very occasional glance to look at altitude. The numbers for altitude, as seen on the default screen – are very clear. There's also a bar-graph representation of the climb rate you are hearing.

The Micro Alti Vario 2 covers all the bases as a first vario, and is the sort of thing you could turn on if you had an instrument failure in a competition task.

The last role it can offer to free flyers is as part of a combination with a phone running a moving map and flight computer.

Whilst some premium phones can offer a high-quality pressure sensor, sealing against water and dust can limit its ability to react quickly, necessary to give the sort of responses a vario needs to be good at. Pairing the Bluetooth version of this instrument with your phone for the app to use it as a precision sensor gives you the next stage, but with something very familiar as well.

For paramotoring you can feed the audio to a Bluetooth-enabled headset, or to an earpiece under your headset. For those with specific hearing requirements, a device plugged into the jack is also an option.

The unit has very low power consumption, at just over one milliamp when it's not beeping, leading to a possible 70+ hours between charges.

This instrument won't date, and it works straight out of the box. My first paragliding instrument had roughly the same facilities, was ten times the size, and cost £300 in 1992. The Micro Alti 2 is stunning value for money, packed with features and weighs just 28g. Thoroughly recommended!

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Fairhaven Micro Alti 2 (reprise)

THE BILL MORRIS VIEW ...

Fairhaven have a long and noble history. On my shelves sits one of their first Maplin-boxed analogue alti-varios, and their simple, reliable blue Micro-Vario beeper from 2013 is a permanent fixture on my helmet. Their trademark strengths have always been good battery life, sensitivity and vario tone.

The new Micro Alti 2 has the same look, in black, as previous models, but the case plastic and screen are improved, and I'm told that this means parts are replaceable. There are no external switches, all functions now being controlled by three buttons. The charging/comms port is now the standard phone type, and there's a versatile external socket to output sound to headphones, etc. There's an on-screen voltage check, but battery life seems like forever. A car charger and cable allow topping up en route to the hill, and it charges quickly.

I would recommend some quiet evenings studying the manual to get both normal and in-depth functions going. It works straight out of the box, but there is so much more through the sub-menus. Functions can be customised, with helpful scrolling, labelling and directions on screen.

Functions start with clock, alarm and stopwatch for flight times. There are four possible alti settings on top of standard QNH (see pp237-240 of the *BHPA Pilot Handbook: Using an altimeter*), plus a barograph and a record of pressure trends.

Any units can be set, even for those of us who climb in metric and fly imperially! For several days I did take-off and landing settings on site, very quick on Altimeters 1 and 2 with a simple long press, and these are retained even if you switch off. You can also zero your max lift, max alt and even G to look at afterwards.

The three small buttons take a little practice because of the wealth of features to go through, but no worse than a watch.

And the ability to just hold down the middle button to shut it off and start again when totally muddled is a must!

In flight the vario gives accelerating beeps. It is very responsive and loud, but volume, thresholds, damping, pace of tones and sensitivity can all be customised. There is a different, chirping weak-lift sound and a period-adjustable averager. A petal display gives a visual read for lift/sink; the screen is non-pixelated and good in every light, in the air or on the sofa.

The upgrade option for a Bluetooth link should, I think, become standard. I used this with the ubiquitous XCTrack app on my phone – the Micro Alti 2 has better sensors and you can design the screen to suit yourself. If you know this system you'll understand; if not – get it!

Testing the new unit alongside my awesome AIR3 I was very impressed, especially in terms of cost – £119 or £139 with Bluetooth. This is a game-changer for such devices, a real step forward.

The Micro Alti 2 is definitely not a toy for beginners, nor a backup – it's too sophisticated in features and too well made. True, it will go down really well with hike-and-fly pilots, and as a first alti-vario many pilots will never need anything else. I flew many hours with it on my wrist, then phone-linked, and it was a great setup.

Sometimes my flight deck can look like CeX's front window, but this device does a job way beyond its small size and modest look. You could happily get by with little else, and I think many pilots will.

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