



Skydiving over Queenstown, New Zealand



Tiger Moth over Wanaka, New Zealand



Microlight flying at Mysore



Flights of fancy

Want to feel the wind beneath your wings? Here are three trips to whet your appetite

Text and pictures by Rishad Saam Mehta

WITH the high degree of automation in the commercial airliner of today, the pilot often has time to gush niceties through the public address system to the people he's carting from one airport to another. "Hello...blah blah blah...Hope you're comfortable (some more)...blah blah blah...we have just reached 15,000 feet." "GET READY TO JUMP!"

Imagine the state of sheer panic that would surge through the plane!

But in a little single engined plane 15,000 feet over Queenstown, New Zealand this statement was matter of fact and greeted with whoops of joy. Quite natural, because sky diving planes are the only aircraft in the world that take off full of people, but land only with

the pilot.

Now, willingly positioned at the open door looking out into the blue yonder, poised to jump out with the cold wind slapping my face, I wondered why I'd taken this flight.

I mean, there were scenic flights on offer where the insides of the plane were a reassuring sight throughout the entire flight path.

On this flight though, I was hanging out of an open door of an aeroplane in flight as nonchalantly as a suburban stockbroker on the 10.07 am Virar-Churchgate local.

On each of my shoulders rode a projection of the turmoil going on in my mind.

On the left, dressed in white, resplendent with wings and a halo around its head, rode logic and sanity, telling me to go back inside and later take an appointment with a doctor to cure the insanity that has possessed me.

On the right, with a devil-may-care grin and a forked tail stood its

diabolical counterpart, impulse and lunacy, urging me to take the plunge, goading me on by telling me that out there lay the crispiest adrenaline rush I'll ever know, there in the blue yonder lay the thrill of a lifetime, a chance to convince myself that courage courses through my veins and it told me that the slimy snake of fear that had started uncoiling in my stomach was defanged, sedated and docile.

The devil had the upper hand of course, because he had an ally in the jumpmaster to whom I was attached for this tandem sky dive — and before I could get too involved in sorting out the difference of opinion that sanity and lunacy were having through my ears — he flung us out of the door.

I remember flipping over and looking up at the plane and seeing it rapidly diminish in size as if it was pulled away towards the stratosphere. The sheer thrill of plummeting to earth at 200kph in

the one minute free fall made taking that flight worthwhile.

Today, thanks to the burgeoning private airlines industry we all have wings.

But flight has fascinated me from the time I made my first paper plane and launched it towards the bountiful backside of my preparatory teacher. And over the years, whenever there has been an opportunity to take an unusual flight I have grabbed it.

This is why I found myself hanging out of the aforementioned plane.

And it is also why I found myself at a hangar in Wanaka, New Zealand, doubtfully staring at a wooden biplane that looked as if it had been stolen from a museum.

Peter Hendriks took this joke about Grand Theft Aero amicably adding that his red Tiger Moth flew as sweetly today as it had in 1941 — 65 years ago.

He was going to take me for a

joyride. In preparation for flight he handed me a leather jacket, the kind I'd seen swashbuckling pilots wear in war movies. In fact the much loved de Havilland Tiger Moth was produced in large numbers for WW2 service as a basic pilot trainer and remains one of the most famous biplanes in the world.

Peter helped me kit up in the jacket and an ancient helmet and wind goggles that could have belonged to Lawrence of Arabia and I climbed into the forward cockpit.

The 130 horsepower engine roared at Peter's second go at the two blade wooden propeller and settled into a confident and mildly musical burble.

Everything about this flight was from a different era, there was no automation involved and flying was by sight and by instinct. The instrumentation was delightfully analogue, a feature fast disappearing from even motorcars today. In fact we even took off at a



speed slower than I usually drive at — and that too over a grass field. Over my ears were headphones from the 1940s connected to the radio by twisted electric wire. The minute we climbed to a

1,000 feet I realized that the jacket was more about practicality than just photo ops. The biting cold and the open cockpit would have done me in hadn't it been for the that sheepskin and leather.

We were cruising at 2,500 feet at 140kph and down below the blue Wanaka lake and the mountains that surround it added to the visual feast. Despite its old world design the Tiger Moth was fantastically nimble and Peter ended my joyride in a 360 degree loop where I briefly remember seeing the sky where the earth should be.

The Tiger Moth spin whetted my appetite for more such joyrides where the sense of flying is unadulterated and neat like a fine single malt.

Some online searching yielded Audrey Mayben who offers micro light flying at Mysore.

When I pulled up in front of Audrey's hangar at the Mysore airfield, the air was heavy with

moisture and the sky thick with cloud.

I sprang out of the car ready to jump into the plane and catapult into the air. Audrey reined me in with a smile and a cup of tea. "There's no way we can fly in this weather", she smiled, "so relax, admire the plane and savour the tea." She pointed out to the Chamundi hills in the background and explained, "when the hills shake off their cloud cover we can take off."

So I turned my attention to the plane. The Xair is a high wing, two-seater and conventionally controlled microlight aircraft with a 2.2 litre Jabiru engine. It has full dual controls which make it an ideal trainer plane. Parked on the grass it was dainty and demure.

By the time Audrey had given me a walk around the plane explaining flaps and trim and pitch and roll, Chamundi had overcome her shyness and was preening in the

morning sun. Clouds above the airfield were rolling out like tarpaulins being pulled back to uncover the blue playground that was the sky.

It was when the Xair's engine roared to life that the plane's character rapidly changed as the propeller built up speed. She went in half a minute from the shy pallu loving bahu to the tantalising and sexy Lara Croft. Her wings and fuselage shuddered with urgency to leap into the blue that was her domain.

Audrey opened the throttle and taxied onto the runway and gunned her ahead. A slight easing back of the control stick and the plane took to the air as if it was the most natural thing to do. The clear cockpit gave an unrestricted view of the Chamundi hills and the shimmering lakes below and my first impression was that off sitting in an armchair in the air.

Audrey was flying by instinct

looking out at the sky and the clouds. One hand on the throttle and another on the stick, she'd just give the stick a hint of a nudge along with the rudder pedals and the plane would follow her gaze. She explained the basics to me and encouraged me to have a go at the controls. To turn the plane smoothly it is important to use both the stick as well as the rudder. It is a manoeuvre that comes with practice but a go at the controls made me wish I could fly it. This was therapeutic flying — lethargically unwinding at a thousand feet just for the pure unadulterated pleasure of flight. The sensation of being in the air in a microlight has to be experienced to be believed. If driving an enthusiastic car on a smooth mountain road is nirvana, then flying a microlight for recreation is like an out of body experience.

Back to earth, I continue to seek out flights of fancy like these...