

Going Solo

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The widening horizons of flight and personal flying. For Pete's sake, do yourself a favour and learn to fly the old-fashioned way before it is too late.

Never before, except perhaps in the wonderful world of Popular Mechanics magazine, have so many people been about to launch so many new flying machines. Within the past few years, there have been propositions for single-seater drones, battery-powered airliners, hovering air taxi cabs, and several other heavier-than-air contraptions that the inventors hope will take the air transport world by storm. A fair slice of them are 'autonomous flight' vehicles, which means 'pilot not really required'; some are vertical take-offs; others need a road. What they all definitely share, however, is a magnetic attraction to money. They use a lot and they get a lot. There is apparently no shortage of investors willing to put their wallets to work in thin air.

At a time when many thousands of airline pilots were sitting on their hands waiting for the end of virus-restricted travel, these many-faceted private initiatives were about the only good news there was for aviation. They may also represent the last hope for ordinary folk like you and me to experience the utterly mind-blowing joy of learning to fly and going solo. I want to tell you about it, and take you on a bet.

While still a fresh young reporter, I was sent to cover a field day on the distant Limpopo River. We travelled by air in a small 4-seater plane. On the way back, the plane ran out of fuel and had to make an abrupt emergency landing in an old farm field. It was frightening and, at the same time, exciting, but most significant, it left me with a great desire to learn to fly. Time proved more of a barrier than cost, and so it was several years before I could get on and just do it. Finally, aged forty or more, I booked in at flying school and just did it.

For most student pilots, the great moment of truth comes when the instructor gets out of the plane and tells you to go by yourself – to take off, fly once around the airfield, and land. My kind fellow added that he would be waiting and watching me from the flying club pub, and I was to meet him there afterwards. If I did well he'd buy me a pint of beer, if not, I would have to buy him a gallon.

Taxiing the plane down to the runway threshold for take-off was quite the most thrilling experience of my life so far. For just a second, I wondered if I was up to it and felt strangely astonished that anyone would allow me to do this thing. But as I went through the serious business of pre-take-off checks I was filled with a different sensation, an almost other-worldly sense of joy and self-confidence, and I knew I would be fine. The rest of it – take off, circuit round the field, and landing – was over in minutes, but the elation remained and has never left me to this day.

There is something mind-altering about flight, and I highly recommend it. In fact, for a few years after my own liberation – which is what I call that first solo flight – I did more than recommend it to many of my relatives and friends; I gave them, as birthday gifts, a few free hours of instructed flight. Not all of them went on to become private pilots, but they all took up the offer and claimed to have enjoyed it. As for how I did on my solo, I need only recall that the instructor bought the beer. Some of the new flying machine promoters claim that flight instruction, of the kind I have just described, will not be necessary with their inventions and that anyone will be able to pick up the required skills in two hours. If that is even remotely true, then it can surely only mean that a computer will actually be in the driving seat, a computer loaded with all the things other than steering that a pilot has to know – air law, flight etiquette, navigation, radio communication, and the rest of a long list. Going flying would be rather like boarding a taxi at Piccadilly: you climb in, say a few words, and settle back to enjoy the ride without much going on behind your eyes. Stress-free? Perhaps. But it wouldn't be flying yourself, would it?

Before these dream machines can become a meaningful reality that is freely and widely available to us all, there is so much more to be thought of and done than the prosaic matter of getting the flying side right. For a start, the question of licensing to operate in the public domain will have to be addressed. Can anyone put something up in the sky? Can anyone fly without proof of ability and training?

Largely because there are no roads in the sky, the interests of public safety demand that aviation be subject to some controls, and that flights be reasonably co-ordinated. As things are, wherever they happen to be, pilots set their flying watches to 'Zulu Time' (GMT), which means the time everywhere in flight is the same. This one measure alone makes flying safer. With minor local exceptions, pilots are also all obliged to keep in touch throughout their flight with an internationally linked radio network of flight control. These rules are designed to keep aeroplanes apart in the air, yet still, there are occasional collisions. It could become utter chaos if there were as many planes in the sky as there are cars on the road and they were all doing their own thing. Even a small fleet of flying taxis in a single city could stretch air traffic control as we know it to breaking point.

Clearly, a new version of control and coordination infrastructure and protocols will have to be worked out and agreed upon internationally if even a tenth of the new flight projects are to reach maturity and turn their investors' dreams into the promised bonanza.

It is going to take time, so there's more than enough for you to book and take an instructed flight with your own good self at the controls. I bet a gallon of beer you will love it.