

Shall we Safari ?

Contributed by Tony Unwin

On Tuesday 23rd March, the Around New Zealand Air Safari 2010 began at Ardmore. Over 10 days, participants weaved their way around New Zealand, to finish at Queenstown just in time for Warbirds Over Wanaka. Run by Flying NZ, in part to help attract new members to Aero Clubs around the country, this very well organised event received a great amount of local support everywhere it went. It also attracted a fair share of international interest, with pilots from Australia, England and Germany participating. Defined routes accommodated both GA and Vintage / Microlight aircraft of all types. One of the more unique (and unexpected) entries was Tony Unwin from Tauranga, who led a squadron of five autogyros on the event. Tony contributed this report on some much enjoyed aviating.

I HEARD ABOUT the plan to hold a 'Flying Safari' some six months before it happened although the organisers at FlyingNZ had been working on it for over two years. This is a big budget event for general aviation, with around 65 entries and 160 pilots and crew. Considering entry fees, accommodation, food, fuel, maps and merchandise, most participants (of two people and an aircraft) would have invested about \$6000 in these 10 days of adventure. More if you start in Perth!

I was probably naive when I asked around for interested friends to join me but eventually we ended up with five aircraft and seven team members (three from Germany) departing Tauranga for Ardmore on 22nd March for registration and inspection by the scrutineers. For weeks leading up to this point I had been emailing and faxing documents to and fro with the daunting figure of 'Mother Goose' who lives and breathes the event organisation. Being microlights and in particular open cockpit gyroplanes, it was going to be difficult to comply with all of the rules - the practicalities of map folding and even carrying a Vol 4 of the AIP needed to be considered in a tolerant light!

Checking In at Ardmore

With some trepidation we arrived at the check-in to be sat down in front of 'Mother Goose' to explain ourselves and show that our licences, medicals, insurance, permit to fly, maintenance documents etc. all matched the checklist we had been given. Then on to the 'Scrutineers' who needed to see the large Safari numbers correctly attached to each machine, not to mention the correct lifejackets and locator beacons, suitable

GPS and up to date navigation documents. Somehow we passed muster and could attend briefing for the event. 160 entrants gathered and the tensions were released by a bit of gospel style hand clapping and body swaying while various topgun exploits were performed on a large screen. 'Mother Goose' has a human side!

cut off the section up Ninety Mile beach and around Cape Reinga. With rain showers spoiling the view of the Bay of Islands we skirt down the coast before heading straight across to the top of the Coromandel Peninsular and a night stop at Whitianga. The local Aero Club laid on a meal in great style at the Airfield and we all relaxed with a beer and buffet in a warm atmosphere of camaraderie which became a feature of the days ahead.

Day Two dawned damp. To be honest it was pre-dawn and raining! We were in a back-packers hostel right on the beach and a good 20 minute jog into town. However some aviator's mum was running it and what a star she was, loading pilots in shifts into a small saloon and dropping them outside the local bakery. There was no hurry but briefing was scheduled for 7.30 as usual, so with muffin and take-away coffee we loaded onto the duty buses and headed to the airfield.

Our home patch in the Bay of Plenty was not where we expected weather issues, so when we heard the decision to scrap the programme for the day we kept a low profile and did our own thing. Five gyros hugged the coast and slipped into Pauanui for coffee and then over the pass to Thames and the Waikato with a plan on making Raglan. One look over the misty plain of Thames and we quickly executed a diversion back to Tauranga via the Waihi Gap to avoid a soaking from the incoming showers. The Aero Club again provided a meal and indeed a cooked breakfast next day in time for the 7.30 briefing. On to Taupo for lunch and (after some grief with weather) on to Gisborne for dinner and a night-stop. The gyros were again ahead of the pack and slipped through the gorge



Clockwise from top: 65 aircraft ready to go at Ardmore; The weather on Day One proved this Safari was not for the faint hearted; The crew of 16 can be an asset when checking over a Catalina; Lining up for food and fuel at a stop over; The gyro squadron; Trojan admirers and a Gisborne sunset.

Days One to Four

Day one started with what was to become a regular event, the 7.30 briefing. Not a brilliant day for flying and when we were asked to give our ETA at lunch to the nearest second we knew we were in the wrong league. 25 knots from the northwest was OK and we launched first keeping low along the coast below Whenuapai airspace before sliding into Parakai for a fuel top-up. This was a rare chance to uplift Mogas for our Rotax engines and we took all we could carry. Without delay we headed north for Kaitaia in formation, battling turbulence and headwinds over some huge forests. No drama and we arrive in time to join the 60 other aircraft for lunch, refuel and briefing.

After a welcome break we look at the schedule for the afternoon and decide to

from Opotiki into a lovely East Coast evening which produced a glorious sunset. Day four started well with the main pack on task, but we enjoyed a fantastic scenic tour of the coast in glorious weather. Lunch was at Hastings with the usual Aero Club hospitality and then more competitive events for the afternoon. We tucked down to Dannevirke and on to rejoin the group at Masterton just as the Catalina was touching down. This team was different, sixteen on board the aircraft all intent on ensuring a high level of social activity was enjoyed throughout!

A rest day and some wind

A rest day was scheduled in Masterton but we were honoured to be invited to the 80th Anniversary of the Wellington Aero Club. Up and away with a warning of a windy Wellington arrival. Yeah right! The northwest flow at 35 knots turned the journey into an epic with white caps on the waves and white knuckles on the stick, the ground speed varied from something over 70kts to 22kts as we turned towards finals. The gyros handled it brilliantly as did Air Traffic Control. We were delighted to appear on TV and radio and threw in an impromptu demo flight for good measure.



The Club President briefs crews on the Wellington Aero Club's 80th anniversary celebrations.



A Gyrate Eagle gyro on climbout from Wellington Airport despite 35kts from the northwest.

To the South Island

Next day it was more of the same as we crossed Cook Strait for Omasaka and a tour of their great heritage display. The lunch stop at Motueka had to be scrapped due to low cloud in the sounds and the Aero Club there had some 160 meals available for the crowds who were awaiting us! The very few who did make it there however, had a marvellous time!

On to the South; we tracked via Kaikora to Rangiora for lunch and then Ashburton and Rangitata Island to Timaru. The Safari proper were navigating to the second and identifying features and photographic landmarks with great skill. Many teams had surprised themselves with their own

abilities to complete the 'navigation to the second' challenges and were now putting great effort into what was becoming an intense competition - the aces of the Airforce were being hard pushed by mere civilians!

Timaru offered another much needed rest day and then on via the hinterland towards Invercargill. We were overtaken through the McKenzie pass but by staying low kept safe from the high speed metal above. Once, the shape of a Trojan flashed by but radio reporting worked well and separation was not an issue. I had in mind to offer a gyro flight to Gavin Wills who is CFI at the Omarama gliding field which worked out well.

This ride had been promised two years earlier when we were displaying at Wanaka.

Racing with the weather

The arrival at Invercargill was a race against rain and the Safari won. The next day however, went to the weather and we had to abandon the aircraft and continue to Mandeville and Queenstown by bus. What a treat there is at Mandeville. The collection of de Havilland aircraft displayed in pristine condition and the restoration workshops are

unbelievable. Can this really be happening on a lonely rock in the middle of the South Pacific?

Celebrations at Queenstown

With low cloud brushing the roof of the bus we pass a Tecnam pilot wishing he had come by road with us - shortly afterwards he completed a precautionary landing! To collect the aircraft we bussed back to Invercargill and enjoyed an interesting flight up the Clutha River to Alexandra, on over the Roaring Meg pass, down the valley past the famous bungy bridge and then slipped in behind a departing Boeing to yet another warm welcome at Queenstown.

Dinner and prize giving happened in style, with a great celebration as the team from our local Tauranga Aero Club proved victorious!!



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