



## ROUND-THE-WORLD FEMALE AVIATOR STOPS OFF FOR DUBAI AIRSHOW

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Flying across the world in an open cockpit vintage biplane might not be everyone's cup of tea, but for Tracy Curtis Taylor, it is a chance to "get a bird's-eye view or the view of gods".

The British aviator, 53, is part way through a 21,000 kilometres solo flight from the UK to Australia in a 1942 Boeing Stearman Spirit of Artemis aircraft.

And the adventurer, who embarked on the epic 12 to 14-week journey last month – taking off from Farnborough Airport in Hampshire, UK, on October 1 – has **stopped off** in the UAE just in time to showcase her antique aircraft at the **Dubai Airshow** at Al Maktoum International Airport. She landed at Abu Dhabi's Al Bateen Airport last week.

Her reason for the adventure, which is being sponsored by Boeing to as part of its centennial celebration, is more than just a passion for flying; it is to honour the British aviator Amy Johnson, who became the first woman to fly solo from the UK to Australia in 1930. Where possible, Ms Curtis Taylor is following Johnson's route to relive one of the greatest solo achievements in history, recreating history with an open cockpit, stick and rudder flying along with basic period

instruments and a short range between landing points.

“I have a burning desire to fly my airplane around the world in the freest way possible. This is what drives me, but I am just the messenger. I am not the pioneer,” says Ms Curtis Taylor, who will have made a total of 50 refuelling stops before she lands in Sydney in January.

“It took people like Amy Johnson to strap herself into a wooden fabric aircraft and risk her life to show people that it could be possible.”

The adventurer’s affinity for flying began at a young age. The daughter of a journalist who loved vintage cars and planes, Ms Curtis-Taylor inherited her father’s fervour for old machines, which she describes as “eccentric works of art”.

She took her first flying lesson at 16, later gaining her commercial flying licence before becoming a flying instructor.

But after watching Meryl Streep flying across Kenya in an open cockpit biplane in the 1985 movie *Out of Africa*, she set her heart on experiencing this for herself.

After working for air shows specialising in vintage planes, in 2012 she utilised her knowledge to buy the 1942 open cockpit biplane.

She describes the investment as her “dream plane”, but because it was an American craft, she set about customising it to make it more British.

“I wanted it in a racing green with cream wings. I wanted it to look more British and more feminine,” she says.

In 2013, after completing the restoration, Ms Curtis-Taylor flew the plane the length of Africa – from Cape Town, South Africa, to Goodwood in the south of England.

“You drive five hours like that and you can’t even speak, but it’s thrilling,” she says of the adventure.

Her African adventure was a tribute to the early female aviators, or “the pioneers” as she refers to them, the likes of Lady Mary Heath, an Irish aviator who became the first person to fly the length of Africa solo back to the UK in 1928, and Johnson.

Ms Curtis Taylor says the female aviators of that era, are not remembered “well enough” – another reason to remind people of their pioneering work.

The pilot’s 14-week journey to recreate Johnson’s journey will cover 23 countries. It has already taken her from Europe over the Mediterranean into Jordan, passing over the Arabian Desert to the UAE. From here, she will head over Oman to Pakistan and then India before flying over Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and finally finishing in Australia. A support group in a modern plane is accompanying her to document the journey.

However, she says her trip is 4,800km longer than Johnson’s because, unlike days gone by when most of the route fell under the British Empire, nowadays it is “more complicated”. She not only has to avoid flying over conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria, but she says navigating checkpoints, bureaucracy, political boundaries and air space have been additional hurdles.

Plus the Boeing Stearman is not a modern plane. It has a 300hp, nine-cylinder Lycoming engine,

which can only reach a top altitude of 10,000 feet and a cruise speed of 144kph.

“It is supposed to be simple flying a vintage plane, but it isn’t. I am flying an antique around the world,” she says. “Amy Johnson was flying a sports plane of her day when she did it. So in some way it was easier flying the plane in the 1930s.”

Ms Curtis Taylor’s next adventure will be to fly her biplane across America next spring. The trip is also being undertaken to celebrate Boeing’s centennial – the aircraft manufacturer will turn 100 in 2016.

So, does she ever feel afraid during her solo aerial adventures?

“No, no, I never want to land,” she says. “It is a heavenly experience. It feels like you are flying into infinity.”

09 NOVEMBER 2015

**SOURCE: THE NATIONAL**

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