



KR2 World Tour

Fancy an unsupported trip around the world in a single-seat homebuilt? Just take off and go with the flow

Words & Photos *Colin Hales*

It's a simple title but touring the world in my KR2 is simply what I'm trying to do. I wanted to fly from A to B, have an easy crossing of the North Atlantic and continue westwards around the world. Since the aircraft is still snowed in at an Alaskan airfield, however, not everything has gone to plan and I've visited X, Y and Z along the way. Now, staring at the Russian border, my little plane and I feel quite overwhelmed and out of our depth, but as soon as the snow has melted we'll be off into the unknown.

Beyond the bounds of a small Cotswold gliding club, not that many people know of my journey. I have written articles for the LAA magazine and there is a blog and a website which detail some of the flights. In this Pilot article, I want to relate some of the background and events that surround such an adventure, as I see these as equally important to the flights. And I hope to bust some misconceptions about flying around the world, including planning, money, sponsorship, media and the equipment or type of aircraft that is supposedly required.

You might think there would be endless planning for such a journey and I have indeed spent many hours researching and gathering information from the 'Air Information Publications' of all the countries I would visit. I'm not averse to long trips, having taken some 66 flights to get to Australia in my KR with a Belgian friend in 2002. The experiences gained from that journey taught me an important lesson: if you plan early, you plan twice! This is because not many plans actually go to schedule. We had weather delays causing visas and permits to expire, forced



Main image: one for the record – Colin's achievement celebrated by posing his KR2 in front of the arch at Oshkosh when he arrived in 2014

Inset above: a big smile covers any anxiety as Colin cuts through valleys where the only force-landing option is to make the crash survivable

Right: typical baggage load, including the beloved mountain bike – it all has to fit in somehow!

changes of route that meant constant re-planning, and incorrect information that meant getting the necessary paperwork was often futile. It is far better just to set off, stay flexible and work out what is the best plan as you fly along.

There are always going to be hurdles – they shouldn't come as any surprise. For me, a common obstacle came from interpreting the somewhat vague requirements of flying an LAA Permit aircraft overseas. Outside the UK, my KR2's Permit to Fly is not valid and the LAA insists you have to gain the permission of

the country you are flying into, before you arrive. This is highlighted in bold on the Permit to Fly document.

Unfortunately, some countries won't give this permission. They don't have to, it's not their problem and they don't care. I'm not anti-establishment, but I am anti the 'you can't do that because a piece of paper says so' attitude.

Iceland's CAA is rewriting its AIP after I fell foul of this issue in Reykjavik. It took three of their employees fifteen minutes to find a sub-paragraph in an annex of their AIP regarding foreign permit requirements. The Canadians took over a month and four separate departments before someone could find a document that covered what was required by our UK LAA, by which time I'd flown through Canada and was halfway across America!

I think that some of my unsupported flights, the places I've been and the scrapes I've got into are on a par with many of the adventure shows I watch on TV. For me, being unsupported is a reality rather than a necessity. I don't like being on my own, but there is only me and my plane and a few teddy bears. No ground crew or chase plane, no film crew with canteen and medical support... just a tiny KR2 with hundreds of miles of freezing water at times.

I did want to film the journey, at least for posterity, and had meetings at a couple of well known TV production companies. We discussed what I was trying to do and the producers seemed quite enthusiastic about the concept, offering to loan quality camera equipment so I could record the flights visually. Then came the question, "So who do you know that's famous?

Who's the celebrity going with you?" With a shake of the head I explained that I knew no one famous, it was just me going on my own – and with that, I was quickly shown the door and dismissed for wasting everyone's time. What is this fascination with celebrities?

It was much the same with sponsorship, although one potential sponsor was honest enough to explain why they were not interested: they didn't think I could do the journey, I wouldn't make it and they didn't want their logo on my plane, sticking out of the trees or floating in the water. Fair enough. So I would like to thank my one and only sponsor – my family – for their support. *See Mum; I told you all this flying madness would get me in print someday.*

In the end I just set off to try to get as far as I could; 'try to' being the operative words. I have a feeling that if I ever say "I am flying around the world, it's what I am doing, it's what I will do!" the journey will bite back. Now in my third year of travel, it feels like the voyage has gained its own personality and mischief. If I'm too confident, the journey will put me in a field, in the trees or in the water. People tell me, "I'm sure you'll make it" – I'm not! With some 18,000 miles left to go until I get back to the UK and put the aircraft in my hangar, I won't tempt fate. Fate – and luck – have played a large part in all my journeys already. I'm not the best pilot in the world, but I'm good at making decisions: the right decision at the right time, making my own luck, I think that's quite important.

After the first leg up to Scotland, with new ignition parts from Jabiru failing on



From top to bottom: an oil river flowing inside the lower cowling – not what you want to see after four hours of flight over freezing water; some of Colin's mascots perched on the stone marking the end of the Wright Flyer's first, inspiring flight; waiting for an essential wardrobe item to emerge from laundering – "once in a while it had to be done," says Colin; and the KR" at the Cactus Fly-in where "all my crew made friends"

Right: Lockheed Constellation *Columbine II* – once Air Force One for President Eisenhower



No one nearby to say it looks funny – and "the only way to stop my nose burning!"

me (they were bogus), the journey nearly ended before it came alive and I used up a huge chunk of luck during the first flight. I also cracked an oil cooler and landed in Kulusuk, Greenland, after four hours over water, with no measurable oil left in the engine. I've had many close shaves so far.

Often people look at my plane and say, "You just don't have a safe endurance".

airfield will be and I know exactly how long it will take to get there. I will have watched my fuel reserves, or I would have turned back before the point of no return. It's safe.

And having a short range means I can't go that far and get myself into trouble. I'm never many miles from a rescue helicopter base. Crossing the North Atlantic, I was

Crossing the North Atlantic, I was only out of range of helicopter rescue twice...

But I like my life and don't want to put it at risk. With the short range, I may have to fly at minimal fuel on some legs, but GPS allows me to do that. Before, planes had to carry more fuel so pilots could get close to their destination, cater for increased headwinds, then circle for a while to find the airfield, in case it was difficult to spot. With GPS, I know the headwinds, I know exactly where the

only out of range of helicopter rescue twice and only for about half an hour of flight. To me, pilots with bigger aircraft and massive fuel tanks, with hours of endurance, who fly non-stop, straight across the Atlantic or Pacific – they are barking, not me! I wouldn't do that. If their engine quits, they are waiting a few days to be picked up by ship, if they are lucky. No thank you, I'll stick with my KR2.





KR2 'Itzy' meets *Planes* star 'Dusty's brother



From top to bottom: a selection of the natural and man-made wonders Colin has seen with his own eyes – looking like a section of Moonscape, Meteor Crater at Winslow, Arizona; midnight at Reykjavik; a bird's – or KR2 pilot's – eye view of the Golden Gate Bridge; one of the worlds biggest wooden structures, the airship hangar at the Tulamoché Air Museum, Oregon succeeds in not only dwarfing the diminutive KR2, but the Boeing Guppy transport parked alongside



Leaving Oshkosh, there was still only just room for a pilot

For me, travelling to other continents with my plane is something quite normal that I've always tried to do whenever the opportunity presents itself. I'm not special and I don't understand why other pilots don't do the same. But then pilots at Reno approached me saying, "Hey, you're the KR guy" adding, "You're crazy dude, I'd never do what you do!" and I wondered, why not? Personally I'd never fly at 300, 400, 500 mph, only a few feet from other aircraft, all belting round a track...

I was introduced to Bob Hoover at Reno. I felt awkward as I was made to sit next to one of my heroes for a public interview, but like a true gent he made me feel at ease. He even knew what I was doing. *Bob Hoover knew about my world tour – wow!* Of course I wasn't aware of all the things he had done. He explained that he'd once ended up in the water. I've crossed a lot of water and wondered why his plane had failed, so I asked him what had happened. He told me he'd been shot down! There were gasps of disbelief from the gathered crowd, distainful that I didn't know every single incident of Bob's distinguished flying career. Him being shot down was apparently quite a big one. Ground, please swallow me up.

At Sun 'n' Fun in Florida, a strange thing happened. I was approached by the Sun 'n' Fun media and EAA journalists. They bandied around words like, 'Adorable story, truly awesome, poster-boy of adventure, modern day Phileas Fogg, a pilot the public would love to hear about!' So I sat down and did an interview or two with them. Later I flew for some in-flight photography, possibly for the front page of the EAA magazine. Then it all went very quiet. It was as if my journey had been wrapped up or covered over, never to be heard of again. Nothing much was printed, nothing much was said. I could almost believe that commercial interests got in the way as I'm not carrying the latest GPS 10,000 or in a megabucks flying machine filled with TV screens. I'm showing that you can try to fly around the world in a tiny, £15,000 homebuild aircraft, using an old Pilot 3 GPS and some ancient analogue instruments borrowed from work. It was as if the commercial sales guys had said, "Go park that KR on the other side of the airfield, throw a cover over it and say no more!" That's some conspiracy theory I know, but I still wonder. It was strange.

Touring America was memorable and the journey itself was entertaining and



The KR2 looking quite at home in Alaska, where it overwintered from 2015

noteworthy, leaving aside the seventeen flights and 46 hours to Oshkosh and the 175 hours and 121 airfields visited across America. The flying plays only a small part in such a journey. Occasionally I get in my plane and head mostly westward for a few hours and look down on some amazing and ever changing scenery, then I land and the real journey kicks off again.

As I write, I'm itching to get back out there, yet I get homesick almost straight away. I love being around people, but one of my most memorable moments was landing at an abandoned strip out in the desert, when I screwed up the sunset times. That night I camped under the stars, listening to the coyotes howl. It's a journey of extremes: one day I am all alone, the next I'm among a crowd and winning the 'furthest flight' award by some 4,000 miles at the Cactus fly-in.

Fascinated by American mystique, I've rounded the White Sands Missile Range and flown over the 'alien crash site' at Roswell. I've surrounded myself with 70s technology at Houston, NASA's Space Centre and talked to sky gods or NASA pilots at Ellington Air Force Base. Flying over the Everglades to Kissimmee I've met Mickey Mouse and worked on Reno racer *Precious Metal* with Thom Richard and his Warbird Adventures team.

I was the poorest person ever to land at Key West and the only person standing on a tiny Island in the Bahamas. I was privileged to be allowed to line up on the Space Shuttle's runway at the Kennedy Space Centre and humbled at Kitty Hawk, my pilgrimage to the birthplace of powered flight. Simply amazed at flying down the Hudson to New

York, over Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty. Gratiated to meet Norman Surplus, flying around the world in his Rotorsport gyroplane. Honoured to see the *Memphis Belle* restoration at Dayton and walk over the first airfield where the Wright brothers flew their planes, and to cycle my beloved mountain bike to their bike shop. Overwhelmed when flying over the Golden Gate Bridge and up the west coast to McMinnville to see the 'Spruce Goose'. Quite alarmed when following the Alaskan Highway through the mountains to Anchorage. But it was all utterly stunning.

As I toured America I got asked to talk about my flights by EAA chapters. I was told there have been more people walk on the moon than build their own aircraft and fly it around the world successfully. So eventually it became the norm that I would land and explain to everyone where I was from and what I was doing in a 'German' registered aircraft. (Many Americans thought I was German because of my KR2's 'G' registration.) With that put straight, they asked quite personal questions to try and find out why I would want to take on such an adventure. Why was I trying to fly the smallest aircraft around the world and what was my motive? "Just because I wanted to" would never suffice. Being a gas guzzling

nation, they also asked if the frugality of my Jabiru engine was to make a statement about global warming. Occasionally I would say something like "I'm doing it for world peace and to save the whale!" which *sometimes* they believed.

No one seemed to understand that I'm doing it because I like the challenge. I love travelling by air, it gets you to places difficult to get to by other means and my KR was the only plane I could afford to build when I was a young lad. There's no more to it than that. Sometimes I wish there was. Is it the right aircraft to travel the world? Well no; it's too small and the lack of range does make planning slightly more difficult. I can't fly around troubled areas of the world as other pilots can. But then its diminutive size is also beneficial. People don't mind squeezing it in the odd hangar and they seem to come on board with the whole bizarre concept of trying to get the smallest wings around the world. If I was in a big shiny aircraft, I'm sure I wouldn't receive the same warmth and assistance that I have.

Sometimes I have to remember where I put my wallet. I may not have used it for several days as people insisted on paying for dinner, breakfast, lunch, to have my hair cut or pay for my fuel, all to be a part of the journey. I've met over 500 great individuals, I have a carrier bag of business cards and the plane has hundreds of friends on the beloved social media and I am seriously embarrassed at the state of my inbox.

There are about six groups of pilots travelling the world as I write, or at any one time. We all stay



Colin's KR2 meets one of the B-17s that during WWII crossed the Atlantic in the other direction



Majestic Knik Glacier, Alaska — best enjoyed from an aerial vantage point

in touch and share news about the condition of remote but vital airfields and the availability of fuel. There is a website, through which pilots flying around the world communicate. 'Earthrounders' is its name and any search engine will find it. I met four British pilots at Oshkosh 2015 who had used information that I gathered in 2014, and I used other pilots' reports to get to Alaska, but no one has been through Russia for many a year. The last person was a Russian helicopter pilot: he had many problems and he spoke Russian!

So we will just have to go and see how we get on. See if the KR's miniscule size entertains the locals. I don't think I'll be doing much

planning. How can you plan for the unknown? It is exciting though.

This journey has lived up to expectations and beyond, they always do, even if it turns home life in the UK upside down. It's very difficult to leave home for many months and have a ball, leaving precious and loved friends and family behind year after year. As for a career or my empire building – well, forget that. I still live in a caravan and run an old banger. This journey and the persistence and perseverance necessary to prepare and go, the intent and sheer stubbornness to complete the journey... well it might end

up being the worst decision of my life, especially if I don't get the plane back home. Few can put themselves in my shoes or see it from my perspective. That's why it's great to meet those other Earthrounders – just the eye contact alone can say it all. Only we know what we have been through to get this far. Yes the grass might be greener... but it's a close call. I've traced backwards and forwards for so long now, trying to make my journey happen, I've worn out my grass! I'm still on tenterhooks and I have to try to

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make it back home or it truly won't be worth it, believe me.

It's been a rollercoaster of a ride. Rollercoasters are fun, but not when you've been on one for many months, in fact it gets quite tiring. I arrived in Alaska to find that my guide to Russia had passed away. He was a good friend and this came as a real shock. Flying into Russia with him would have been a mighty event and built up an even greater friendship than we had already formed. I had to gather my own information from other Alaskan and Russian pilots about different avenues for heading west and flying through to Japan.

In theory it is possible but it was too late last year. So I left my little KR2 to shiver in a hangar in Anchorage, while I came home for the winter to earn some more money and to prepare in greater detail, making continued journey both safer and prospectively more enjoyable.

If I get my KR2 around the world, I personally will be amazed – astonished even. I'm a bit overwhelmed by what lies ahead and may need to ask the help of a few people. Even though I try to be self-sufficient in every aspect of the journey,

such as sleeping in my tent and doing my own maintenance, so many people have helped me on my way so far. I would

like to grow this good feeling and fellowship for everyone who has been part of the venture so far and who may join in the future. The journey is snowballing and building; getting the balance right and still staying in control of it may not be easy. If I can get through to Japan and continue on through Asia and get the little plane back to the UK, then there will be a big, big party and all will be invited. Fingers crossed! ■

For more stories and pictures, see Colin's website kr2worldtour.com and if you like, join in the media madness on facebook at [Krii Worldtour](#).