

British pilot gets rare Russian nod to fly across Bering Strait

Story and photo
by Keith Conger

"About six years ago I knew I'd be in some town, and this is the town. I knew I would be in some building, and this is the building. And I knew I'd be sending emails and messages to the Russians," said Colin Hales, 45, as he sat in a Flight Service Station office at the Nome Airport on Tuesday, August 16. The English pilot had nearly finalized preparations for an uncommon flight to the Siberian city of Anadyr later that day.

Hales, who has flown almost halfway around the world, arrived in Nome on Monday, July 11 in his diminutive homemade KR-2 aircraft. He used the established border crossing procedures and protocols set up by the International Civil Aviation Organization, or ICAO, to travel from his home in Oxfordshire to Iceland and Greenland, then to Canada, and finally the United States.

In an interview with the Nome Nugget, Hales said he knew the crux of his trip would entail an extended amount of time sitting somewhere in western Alaska talking diplomacy because the Russians are known for not honoring the ICAO agreements.

"I specifically flew all the way from England to be here, to talk to Bering Air, and see what they have to say," said Hales. His strategy for gaining acceptance by the Russians to fly across the Bering Strait was to study and mimic the profile used by the local Nome flight service.

Hales expected to "be laughed out of the building" and braced for the possibility that the only option would be to disassemble the airplane and send it past Russia and China. He was, however, pleasantly surprised when Bering Air told him he might be able to pull the border crossing off.

Nina Wideman, the Russian Charters Coordinator for Bering Air Inc., put Hales in touch with Universal Aviation, the agency her company uses for its ground handling needs. Hales would use Universal to help secure an Airport Slot Confirmation, which would lead to him receiving a formal invitation to land in Russia. "Everything is very detailed," said Wideman. "If one thing is incorrect they will deny (passage)."

Hales spent two weeks assessing the situation prior to submitting his official travel request. In that time, he followed the plane modification advice of local air traffic controllers, and through the help of Ravn Alaska, installed flexible bladder gasoline tanks to extend the flight range of his craft to 1,000 miles.

During his initial contact, Hales discovered the aviation controllers in Russia wanted his plane to be capable of flight to 20,000 feet. "I can't go above 12 [thousand]," said Hales. "For some reason the Russians came back and offered for me to use their domestic airways, which only Russian operators can use at a lower level."

Hales believes that it has been at least eight years since any light or general aviation aircraft has been allowed to fly through Russia. A friend recently spent three and a half years in Japan trying to get permission from the Russian authorities. That friend could only complete a trip around the world by shipping his aircraft to Seattle.

"I don't know how or why, but

they are letting me go through," Hales said.

The level of generosity shown by the people at Bering Air, Ravn Alaska and the FSS impressed Hales. "They've really helped me beyond the call of duty. None of the people needed to do this. They've done it out of the kindness of their hearts," he said.

The introduction to the idea of air transport came from Hales' father and grandfather, who both dabbled in model aircrafts. At the age of 16, the third-generation flight enthusiast had the opportunity to soar in a glider, and fell in love with flying.

Hales later chose airplane mechanic as a vocation, but he really wanted to become an airline pilot. To obtain a British Commercial License, he needed 700 hours flying time. The two paths he saw to achieving that goal were being hired by an airline, or by obtaining the hours on his own.

In 1995 British Airways was recruiting pilots, but Hales was not one of the 400,000 applicants to get a job. Option two didn't work either. "I couldn't afford to hire an aircraft for 700 flying hours," he said. "So I thought, Ok, I'll build my own plane."

Hales' love of flying might be matched by his love of travel. This wanderlust, however, hampered his ability to collect the necessary reserves to plunk down \$30,000 for an aircraft kit. Instead, he settled on the KR-2, which is a "plans built," or "scratch built," aircraft.

In 1996 Hales received his set of KR-2 instructional drawings for 50 United States dollars. He chipped away at the project over a four-year span, going to supply stores to purchase materials as he accumulated funds. When the wood, foam, and fiberglass aircraft was complete, he had put in about \$15,000. That included an old Volkswagen Beetle motor for the engine.

"That engine is a four-cylinder air cooled engine," Hales said. "It's a very similar engine to bigger aircraft engines, so you can just convert it for a small aircraft."

"Itzy", the name Hales chose for his small plane, is fitting. The overall length of the plane is a mere 14 feet, six inches and has a wingspan of just 20", 8". Its weight empty is 580 pounds, and it has a useful load of 320 pounds. When Hales stands next to "Itzy", the tail only comes up to his chest.

"I used to race (go) carts, which are two dimensional," said Hales of his background at the controls of small craft. "Flying just gives a third dimension to play with."

The idea for Hales' first big test flight came about from "bar talk" at the local pub when a friend asked him how far the plane would travel on a tank of gas. Soon after, he found himself at home pouring over maps, and determined he could make it to Australia since there was a string of airfields within the craft's 400-mile range.

In 2001, Hales, along with a friend from Belgium, completed the trip from his home to Australia. The eight-month journey was made in 66 segments, and they visited 21 countries.

"I'm not doing these trips for any reason other than I like traveling. It's a great way to see the world and meet people, and get to strange, obscure



WORLD TOUR— Colin Hales of Oxfordshire, England spent a month in Nome sorting out paper work for his flight to Russia. Hales is at the half-way point on his flight around the globe, and says his homemade plane "is probably the smallest aircraft you will ever see." He left Nome on August 16 and landed in Anadyr later that day.

places," said Hales. "On the way to Australia we landed in Qassim, and the Prince of Qassim came out. We met the Saudi royal family."

The challenge for Hales is less about the flying as it is about being away from his country for long stretches. "To get your businesses, to get the infrastructure, and to get the logistics of being able to just leave home for three or four years takes a lot of sorting out," he said.

One of Hales' messages is you don't have to be rich to go around the world. "It's like backpacking with an aircraft," he said about his low cost approach to air travel. "Right from the word 'go' you have to start watching your money." He often sets up camp next to his plane. "The first airport I ever left they said, 'This guy's going around the world, yet he's sleeping in a tent? Has he got no money for doing it?'"

Hales started his current World Tour in June of 2014. His first major destination was Oshkosh, Wisconsin. There, he attended the Experimental Aircraft Association's AirVenture Fly-in Convention along with over a half million fellow flight enthusiasts from 80 countries around the world. "If you build your own aircraft, it's almost like a pilgrimage," he said. "Itzy" was one of 10,000 crafts to land in the place that for one week in July becomes the busiest airport in the world. "It's everyone's dream in Britain or Europe to fly to Oshkosh."

In August of 2015, after flying around the states visiting various airshows and seeing many of the country's sites, Hales made his way to

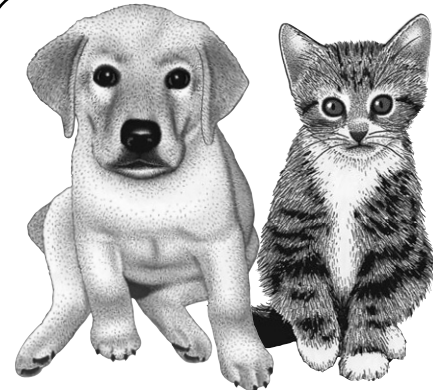
Alaska. Flying through Siberia during November did not sound appealing, so he parked his plane for the winter in Palmer. Hales came back to Alaska in May of 2016 and flew to Fairbanks before heading to Nome.

According to the GPS tracker on his website www.kr2worldtour.com, Hales left Nome around 2:15 p.m. Tuesday, August 16, and mostly followed the Seward Peninsula coastline. He began his Bering Strait crossing south of Cape Prince of Wales, passed within five miles of the Diomed Islands, and was flying over Pooten, Russia just after 4:00 p.m. Hales partially followed the Russian coastline for another four hours, and landed in Anadyr around

8:00 p.m. Alaska Time. He was still there when the Nome Nugget went to press on Tuesday, August 23.

If he makes it through Russia and China, Hales will return to England via the route he used 10 years ago on his Australia trip. That will be sometime in 2017.

"The journey is almost alive. It's cheeky, it gives issues and problems to resolve. And it's almost as if it has its own conscience," said Hales before departing across the International Dateline. "That's why I always say that I am 'trying' to fly around the world, because if I ever say that I am doing something, I think that's when the journey will bite back."



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