



FLIGHT AND FRIGHT

A work trip over the desert in your father-in-law's homemade plane. What could possibly go wrong? **Ricky French** decided to find out.

THERE ARE SEVERAL reasons to be nervous about flying in the plane my father-in-law built in his back shed, but here's a particularly good one. Consider that there are many official classifications of planes in the world. General aviation, commercial, trainer, military, and many others. Peter's plane is classified *Experimental*. It doesn't exactly fill you with confidence, does it?

Peter's plane is small. Very small. It fits two people and you sit side-by-side with the snugness of five people crammed onto a two-seater couch. Peter's plane is light. Very light. You can push it along the ground with about the same force it takes to walk a bicycle. It's called a Sonex, and it's bright orange and sleek and quite beautiful.

The first time I flew in the Sonex the turbulence was so bad I was sure the wings were going to snap off like a block of balsa wood karate-chopped by God. Peter reassured me that in reality this was "unlikely" to happen.

"Unlikely?" I repeated through the headset, as the plane dropped 10 feet and our skulls clanged together. "Surely you mean *impossible*?"

"Oh," replied Peter, weighing up the competing traits of honesty and tact. "It would take a really, really nasty bump." He paused for a moment and then added, most unnecessarily, "Like the one I had the other week."

Recently I had to go to a place called Arkaroola – a wilderness sanctuary in the northern Flinders Ranges, to do a story. I assumed it was just over the back fence from Adelaide, but in fact it was a 10-hour drive. So I asked Peter to fly me there instead. To my horror he said yes.

We left our home airfield of Kyneton, just north of Melbourne, on a perfect, cloudless morning and tracked north to Wentworth on the Murray River. Farmland sprawled below us and sunlight reflected off lakes. Flying a plane is more than just flying a plane. Peter monitors temperatures, works out fuel flow, anticipates weather, makes radio calls and tries to fulfil the saying that "a boring flight is a good flight".

Because Peter was doing all that important stuff, someone had to fly the plane. Being at the controls of an ultralight aircraft riding air currents at 4500 feet and 240km/h wakes you up far better than coffee. You hold a stick and rest your feet on rudder pedals. The slightest pressure sends the plane hurtling, which your brain responds to by stimulating all your fear receptors.

From Wentworth we keep going north, following the string line of the Silver City Highway to Broken Hill. Once leaving the Murray River, the population centres shrivel up and the outback takes hold. Dry lakes from the air looked like raindrops on hot concrete, about to evaporate.


The 287km stretch from Broken Hill to Arkaroola was the danger leg. We would be flying over the Strzelecki Desert, a barren swathe of nothingness without roads or anywhere to land in case of emergency. We flew high to get above the thermals that were rising off the heated ground and hammering the plane. Being high also gives you more gliding distance if your engine cuts out. Again, Peter assured me this was "unlikely".

The massive expanse of Lake Frome slowly materialised out of the haze; it's a salt lake so blindingly white that NASA use it to calibrate their satellites. Landing at the tiny airfield in the Flinders Ranges – circling the ancient, craggy peaks and lining up at a strip of dirt with mining hardhats for markers – was unforgettable. We spent a wonderful three days there.

We picked out a different route for our return, via Port Pirie and Mildura. Cloud began to gather on descent into Port Pirie. It might be a good time now to tell you what will happen if you fly into cloud in Peter's plane. You will die.

Not from the cloud, of course, but from being so disoriented you inadvertently fly the plane upside down or put it into an uncontrollable spin, all the while thinking you're flying straight and level.

If there's scattered cloud you can pick the gaps and fly above. But you have to hope like hell the cloud doesn't thicken underneath and become a solid layer,



shutting you out like a locked door. It's very tempting to fly above the cloud because the air is a lot smoother up there. Fly under cloud and updraughts from the ground can knock you into wings-fall-off territory. Leaving Port Pirie, we tried flying under the clouds but the plane got tossed around like a dinghy in a Southern Ocean storm. We took a calculated risk and went above. I steered us towards Mildura; slowly but surely the gaps were getting smaller. "I don't like the look of this," said Peter. "We've got to get down."

Peter launched us into a tight, spinning dive for safety. The G-forces pushed us back into our seats as the plane spun tighter and tighter to get through the gap before it closed. Finally we were spat out, and we came face-to-face with the Murray River again, which coiled languidly below, like a benevolent guiding path.

The relief was quickly replaced with sudden whacks and shudders as the plane was walloped by air currents, and I settled back into my customary, indivertible mindset of fretting about the wings falling off. The slow grind to Mildura ended and we taxied to a park not far from a Qantas Bombardier loading passengers. I felt a pang of jealousy for their carefree passage.

We refuelled and taxied to the end of the runway for take-off. Suddenly there was a noise and the plane started dragging itself along like a limp animal. "Flat tyre," said Peter. Almost immediately an officious man driving an airport security ute pulled up next to us.

"You can't leave it there," he said, by way of introduction.

Peter is a gentle soul but has little patience for fools making obvious remarks at a time of urgency. We got out and pushed the stricken plane off the runway and onto the grass. After telling us that it was not nearly far enough off the runway – "Regulation 27.2 states all parked planes must be 7.5 metres from the runway edge" – he turned his engine off, put his feet up on the dash and reclined in relish. Luckily Peter carried a spare tube and a homemade jack. He quickly and skilfully changed the tyre – which peevd the security guy no end.

We took off for the final leg home. The weather was getting worse. There were rain squalls ahead. We started looking around for airfields in which to make an emergency landing. I amused myself by thinking about things like my family, and pondering the existence of free will. Menacing clouds encroached on both sides as Peter set course to make our dash for home. The Kyneton airfield slowly materialised from the gloom. Peter made the final approach and as the plane touched down and came to a merciful halt a flood of relief pulsed through my body.

This was flying as it should be. I felt a small kinship with the pioneers of aviation, before flight became mundane. There's nothing mundane about flying in Peter's Sonex. A boring flight doesn't exist. It's exhilarating and it's elegant. But maybe the reason it's so special is because it lives up to its class. It's experimental.

» *Ricky French (@frenchricky) is a Big Issue columnist, every fortnight on p12.*

