

matt jones

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Model citizens

Matt Jones pays a flying visit to Dubai RC Club for an encounter with its magnificent men – and lone woman – whose passion is to hurtle bits of balsa into the great blue yonder.

It's 10:10 hours on a Friday morning in April and the bobble-hatted pilot of the De Havilland DH60 Moth biplane is looking a little wide-eyed after his landing in a stiff desert crosswind. The last four letters of the plane's registration, AAAH, suggest what might have gone through his mind, if he had one; what our intrepid flyer might have uttered on the final approach, if his lips hadn't been sealed for more than 30 years; the exclamation our mustachioed air ace might have screamed, kamikaze-style, if he wasn't a six inch doll in the cockpit of Nigel Rittey's model aircraft.

Towering over his DH60 Moth like Gulliver in Lilliput, Rittey pulls the top wings off and begins to pack it away until its next outing at Dubai RC ("Remote Control") Club, whose members meet every Thursday and Friday at a purpose-built landing strip, complete with wind sock, near Nad Al Sheba's camel racetrack.

Rittey, 61, a financial consultant from Zimbabwe, has been flying at the club since he arrived in Dubai three and a half years ago, but he bought this particular aircraft as a wreck in 1970 for five Rhodesian dollars.

"It's the same model Amy Johnson flew to Australia in, the precursor to the Tiger Moth," he says. "This particular model dates back to 1959. It's an amazing old aeroplane, a real beauty to fly, but quite a challenge, especially in crosswinds.

"It has various idiosyncrasies. If your landing approach is at low speed you must use the rudder only, not the ailerons, otherwise it will tip into the ground."

Overseeing the Friday morning display of aircraft old and new is Ray Canasa, a 50-year-old biomedical engineer from the Philippines.

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“Actually the proper name for what we do is airplane radio remote control, but we say remote control or RC for short,” he says. “The club was formed a year ago, but people have been flying model planes in Dubai for nearly 20 years. I began here in 1985, when there were 10 people. Now we have between 100 and 120 members who come in two groups, morning and afternoon.”

The golden rule of RC flying, says Canasa, is to stand with the sun at your back – that way flyers can always see their aircraft. Hence the club has two pit and spectator areas alongside its 250 metre landing strip – one positioned for the morning session when the sun is at a certain angle, and the other for the afternoon session, when it has moved.

The second golden rule is that model aircraft, like their larger versions, must always take off and land into wind, hence the club’s orange wind sock – a common sight at any real airstrip – which indicates where the wind is coming from and roughly what speed it is (around 20-25 knots if the sock is blowing horizontal). “Whatever real airplanes do, that’s what we do here,” says Canasa.

Club membership costs just Dhs 300 per year, but members are expected to have their own planes, and a learner plane will set you back Dhs 1,600. Powered by a Glow Fuel engine, which uses a mix of methanol, industrial castor oil and nitro-methane as fuel, you’ll have fun flying it at speeds of between 80 and 100 kph.

Once you’ve gained plenty of experience, you might consider investing in a turbine jet model, which can shoot across the sky at speeds of up to 322 kph. One such model is flown at the club by a real jet pilot, a pilot with Emirates. The cost? Dhs 40,000-50,000.

Dubai RC Club can have as many as 10 aircraft in the air at the same time, so the first thing arriving members do is check the “Frequency Board”.

“If two members are planning to fly with the same radio frequency one should approach the other because their model planes can’t be in the air at the same time,” Canasa explains. “If they are, one or both aircraft could crash.”

For South African husband and wife Andre and Minky Botha one of the appealing features of Dubai RC Club is its cosmopolitan make-up. Members hail from the UAE, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, France, Germany, the UK, Croatia, Greece, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

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“Having lived in Dubai for almost five years I can honestly say that the most locals I’ve met and developed friendships with have been at the field,” says Botha, who started flying models in 2001. He and his wife have a total of eight models, airplanes and helicopters, which they maintain in a specially-converted workshop/hobby room in their Greens apartment. Only three are currently flyable, however.

“It’s fun, exciting, demanding and heartbreaking all in one,” says Botha of his hobby. “Fun and exciting when you’re building and setting up a model; demanding when you fly it, because it requires full concentration, anticipation and awareness of your surroundings and the other models in the air; heartbreaking when a new modification doesn’t work; and very heartbreaking when the model crashes.”

Hussain Al Nahla, 27, a HSBC relationship manager from Sharjah, has only been flying model planes for a month, but has already experienced one crash. Undaunted, the UAE national salvaged the engine, bought a new airplane body and his Tiger Mk II trainer is now back in the air. Al Nahla has even invested in a helicopter, a Shuttle Scedu Evolution, which is much more challenging to fly.

“Only buy what you need, don’t be tempted to buy nice-to-haves,” Botha counsels those who may be thinking of taking up the hobby. “Go down to the local field and see what’s being flown. Speak to flyers. Most will only be too happy to advise you or warn you of possible pitfalls.

“Don’t try it on your own and don’t buy on your own. If you’re a first timer, ask a flyer to advise you or, even better, accompany you before making your purchase. It will save you a heap of money, countless frustrations and get you flying a lot quicker.”

For information about Dubai RC Club, log on to www.dubaircclub.com.

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