

World

FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT

With 41,000 private pilots, France is a haven for “la petite aviation”, but is also at the cutting edge of aero technology

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PARIS



In flip-flops and shorts, Benoît climbed out of the cockpit and said: “She’s all yours.” With feet twitching on the rudder pedals, I pushed the throttle and lifted the little old plane off the grass with the sun on the distant Eiffel tower. Wheeling into the downwind leg of the circuit, the huge runways of Charles de Gaulle airport came into view a few miles away.

There are few places where you can indulge the pleasures of flight so close to a big capital as Moisselles, an airfield on the northern edge of greater Paris. Benoît, the club’s young chief pilot,

was checking me out last weekend on the Super Émeraude, a sporty two-seater with Spitfire-style wings built in old wood and fabric. The popular type was developed at Moisselles in the 1950s when private flying was all the rage.

You have to respect the Super Émeraude because its classic tail-wheel undercarriage calls for a delicate touch when taking off and landing. With its nostalgic feel and rustic controls — rather like a postwar MG roadster — the little plane symbolises the passion for flight that has long made France the European heaven for “la petite aviation”.

In a time of ultra-regulation and high security, it is a privilege to fly out of a grass field with its 1930s clubhouse, iron hangars and its cat named Hélice (propeller).

We ply a corridor through the closed Paris air space out over L’Isle-Adam, a haunt of 19th century painters on the river Oise. Charles Lindbergh flew the route when he came into nearby Le Bourget non-stop from Long Island

in the *Spirit of Saint Louis* in 1927. You can motor out over Normandy to the coast on a summer’s day, or down to the Loire, not even talking to controllers if you choose.

Time it right and you can drop in for lunch at one of the inexpensive restaurants that distinguish France’s many aerodromes — attracting flocks of British weekend pilots. Of course, around Paris it is not just a case of aiming for the Eiffel Tower.

If you go astray, a military interceptor is likely to pull up beside you and the gendarmes will want an explanation.

Overpriced and increasingly regulated, amateur flying is in

danger across most of Europe and even in the US, but France, with its 475 airports and aerodromes, is trying to keep alive the spirit it forged when it was the cradle of aviation.

The Wright brothers were the first with powered flight, in 1903, but the Montgolfiers took off from Paris in the first balloon in 1783 and the Belle Époque pioneers were mainly French. Who, after all, coined the words aeroplane, aviation, aileron, fuselage, parachute and helicopter among many “termes aéronautiques”?

Few writers have inspired aviators as much as Antoine de

Saint-Exupéry, the pilot author of *Le Petit Prince*.

Although their numbers are declining, more than 41,000 active pilots benefit from a club network encouraged by an aviation-minded state and which trains beginners and largely regulates itself. With their comradely atmosphere and fleets of French Robins, Cessnas and Pipers, the non-commercial *aéroclubs* make the costs of flying a little less steep than elsewhere (For that reason, I reverted last year to club aircraft after giving up the 30-year-old Robin that I owned there for 13 years.) There are popular events such as the annual *Tour Aérien des Jeunes Pilotes*.

The clubs are also exempt from some EU rules. They retain, for example, their quaintly-named tradition of “baptêmes de l’air” — joy rides for the paying public. And since even Air France pilots talk to controllers in French, there is no nonsense about using English in the air, as long as you do not fly across the border. That can cause confusion, though, when Britons bowl into non-controlled aerodromes, announcing their approach in the style of wannabe RAF pilots which no one understands.

If this all sounds like an ode to a fading pastime, France is also home to the future. The world’s first commercial electric aircraft, the two-seat twin-motor E-Fan, was on show at Farnborough last month. It is being developed by Airbus engineers in Toulouse and, the French hope, could pioneer the rebirth of “la petite aviation”.