

New Zealand strait crossed for first time by electric plane

1 November 2021, by Nick Perry



The ElectricAir plane is on approach before landing at Wellington Airport in Wellington, New Zealand, Monday, Nov. 1, 2021. Seeking to highlight the potential for green aviation as a pivotal climate change conference opened in Glasgow, New Zealand pilot Gary Freedman made the first-ever flight over Cook Strait in an electric plane. Credit: Mark Mitchell/New Zealand Herald via AP

As he made history by becoming the first person to fly across New Zealand's Cook Strait in an electric plane, Gary Freedman thought it only fitting that the first thing he saw when approaching the Wellington coastline was the rotating blade of a wind turbine producing renewable energy.

Freedman's 40-minute solo flight in the small two-seater came 101 years after the first person flew a conventional aircraft over the body of water that separates the South Pacific nation's two main islands.

Monday's flight was aimed at drawing attention to the possibilities of greener flying and timed to coincide with the opening of a pivotal U.N. climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland.

Wellington International Airport officials believe it

may be the longest distance flown in an electric plane across any body of water.

"It's a very exciting day for the airport. A world-record-setting day," said spokesperson Jenna Raeburn.

Freedman said the day began badly with pouring rain at his departure point near the town of Blenheim. After delaying the flight for 15 minutes, the weather cleared just enough for takeoff and soon improved to sunny conditions over the ocean.

Freedman said he was ecstatic when he landed, and the technology worked better than he'd hoped.

"We still had 40% left in the battery," he said. "We could have almost flown back again."



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Freedman, 49, who founded the company ElectricAir, said he's long been passionate about the environment and the idea came as he thought about the incongruity of driving an electric car and flying a gas-powered plane.

He took a trip to Slovenia to buy a Pipistrel Alpha Electro plane, and then jumped through various hoops with New Zealand aviation regulators to get the plane cleared.

It weighs less than 400 kilograms (880 pounds) and is much quieter than a traditional aircraft. For the 78 kilometer (48 mile) trip, Freedman flew it at just 1,000 feet (305 meters) above sea level and at the relatively slow speed of 130 kilometers per hour (81 mph) in order to preserve its charge.

Freedman said it takes about one hour to fully charge the [plane](#). The maximum [flight](#) time is also about an hour, and he mainly uses it for [pilot training](#).

Wellington International Airport is preparing for regular short-hop flights of new 12-seater electric planes that will begin in about five years' time, said Raeburn, the airport spokeswoman.

She said electric technology is not yet advanced enough to power large passenger planes, but biofuels and hydrogen will likely provide greener alternatives in the future.

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