Taking To The Skies

Posted on

Flying over the southernmost point of the island: visible below the lighthouse at Dondra

I am strapped in, my feet on rudder pedals, hands on the yoke, and eyes on the runway. I am in the passenger seat of Cessna 152 aircraft at Katukurunda airfield. The headphones clamped over my ears crackle to life, as the pilot at the controls radios the tower, “ready to take off Four Romeo Mike Delta Bravo.” And we are off on the runway, the engine roars and the aircraft accelerates, rudder pedals shimmy underfoot as the aircraft speeds along. The yoke in my hands pull gently forward… then up into the air, and I couldn’t contain a ‘whoop’!

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Menaka Aravinda

I arrive at the hangar at the Katukurunda airfield where Openskies Flight Training

school is prepping the Cessna 152 aircraft. I am escorted to the briefing room for an introduction to flying and what I am about to experience. It is all a little taste of what a student might undergo at the school. The two flight instructors launch into an introduction of the Cessna 152 aircraft, a two seater propeller aircraft with a maximum speed of 110 knots or nautical miles per hour (126 mph). These aircraft are usually used for flight training, be it for private pilot license or commercial pilot license, both offered at the school.

I am then overwhelmed with a deluge of technicalities of flying, starting from a range of indicators of the cockpit involved in operating the aircraft. I tried to wrap my head around attitude, altitude, airspeed, vertical speed, turn coordinator, wing flap controls and heading indicator! Students are first provided a ground training to understand aerodynamics and then venture 30 minutes of flying. I, however, am to embark on a cross country flight – a few steps ahead for a first timer. It was to be a VFR flight (Visual Flight Rules) where a pilot is able to see outside the cockpit and navigate. The flight plan would take me from Katukurunda to Koggala aerodrome and Dondra all the way down south. Incidentally there are several other cross country flights from Katukurunda, for instance to Weerawila, Anuradhapura, China Bay and Sigiriya. This would enable a student to complete the required 180 flying hours.

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Saturated with information I am taken to the aircraft that had just undergone a preflight check, and refuelling. About 24 ft long this was one of two training aircraft at Openskies Flight Training. My instructor climbs in at the controls and I get in at the passenger seat with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. And there it all was in front of me; dials, meters, knobs and levers. I felt like a child introduced to a new world.

The Katukurunda tower is first contacted for air traffic clearance and the aircraft is then started with the ignition key. With each step the instructor directs my attention to the control adjustments at the cockpit. The throttle is pushed down to propel the aircraft forward and on the floor board the rudder pedals are used to manouevre the plane on to the runway and lined up with the centreline. A lever moves the wing flaps down and the throttle is then pushed all the way in, as is the mixture control to feed fuel to the engine. The plane accelerates. At the right airspeed the yoke is pulled for take-off until the meter reads 70 knots. The Attitude or an artificial

horizon helps identify the orientation of the plane. With rudder pedals and yoke at my side of the cockpit as well I am afforded a simulation of the manoeuvres as they happen and I am torn between exhilaration and grasping the intricacies of flying.

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The aircraft soars into the sky and immediately the sights below evolve to sweeping green landscapes. However, the pilot steers the aircraft over sea and hovers above the blue depths. Although the aircraft can reach altitudes of 12,000ft it was maintained at 2,500ft due to cloud cover and at this optimal altitude I could take pleasure in the rare perspectives afforded of being airbone. Between the cloudy sky and the vast ocean below, it felt as though being suspended in time. The meter tilted above 2,000 rpm and the aircraft seemed to be in cruise control. At this point it was time to learn a few tricks as well. I experienced some of the manoeuvres that the students learn as the aircraft tilted and rolled into turns to execute ‘medium turns’ and ‘steep turns’. ‘Stalling’ is another manouevre and hits high in the adrenaline scale. As its name indicates it is to induce the aircraft to stall by reducing power. As the aircraft approaches a stall an alarm or a warning signal sounds off as the aircraft begins to dip and is then quickly recovered.

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It was time to head on, and the aircraft sped over cargo ships and familiar landscapes along the western coastline. Lagoons and bays carved along its length as the strips of beaches appeared laced with incoming tides. The view also offered a peek at the temperamental seas as they changed hues from deep blue, aquamarine to turquoise. Farther inland I caught bird’s eye glimpses of the Galle Fort, harbours, lagoons, temples and roads among many familiar landmarks though from a rare perspective. A pilot also uses many of these geographical landmarks to keep tabs on nautical miles and make contact with the airbase tower at regular intervals. About midway of the journey the pilot changes frequency on the radio to connect with the tower at Koggala.

With clearance gained, the aircraft heads inland towards Koggala airbase to execute a ‘touch and go’. I am once again gripped with anticipation and only just getting accustomed to listening to instructions through the headset as the pilot talks into his mic. This leaves me with a degree of apprehension as each time I am allowed a

hand, however slight, at the controls!

The aircraft turns inland and the runway comes into view and is kept within sight to orient the aircraft for landing. Facing the runway it is kept aligned and the descent begins. My eyes are fixed squarely on what appears to be a narrow strip of runway. As we close in, the controls are adjusted accordingly and I get a feel of the back pressure applied on the yoke on touchdown. I also hold my breath. The aircraft thuds safely and rumble across the tarmac. The rudders are worked almost frantically to keep the aircraft in balance and within seconds the aircraft is off again!

Back in the air sightseeing continues as the aircraft is steered farther south to Dondra to catch glimpse of the lighthouse before heading back. The return journey is made over land for a change; there is no room for this experience to turn mundane! With manouevres and training tips behind me I ease back to gaze upon the miniature landscapes that never fail to impress. Far beyond in the mellow blue sky I catch glimpse of a second aircraft carrying the instructor and our photographer who no doubt was in the throes of capturing this novel experience as it unfolded. At Katukurunda, preparation for landing begins. The aircraft gradually loses altitude to head towards the runway. The power eased the descent begins and within minutes it’s touchdown. Soon enough the aircraft hurtles down the runway to a halt and safely back to where it all began.

Climbing out of the Openskies Cessna 152 aircraft exhilaration was coursing through me. The aircraft may have touched down, but after two hours of cruising in the air it sure took me awhile to be earthbound!

Openskies Flight Training

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