

Zara Rutherford, 19, to become youngest woman to fly solo around the world

Katie Gatens

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In many respects Zara Rutherford's gap year has been like any other, as she flies around the world with just podcasts and Spotify for company.

The difference is she is the pilot. And when the 19-year-old lands in Belgium on Monday she will have broken two world records to become the youngest woman to fly solo around the world and the youngest person to do it in a microlight plane.

"As school was coming to an end I thought - hold on, if I'm going to do something crazy this is the perfect time to do it," the Anglo-Belgian teenager told *The Times*. "I have nothing planned - zero responsibilities. I could do whatever I wanted to do."

Zara Rutherford's round-the-world route

The 19-year-old pilot is due to arrive back in Belgium on January 17, nearly five months after she took off



Graphic: The Times and The Sunday Times

Rutherford is currently in Crete, her final stop, and said that despite her adventures over the past five months, she is excited to come home. "I miss watching a movie with my cats or having a croissant or cup of tea and talking with my mum," she said. "Even the walk to the local grocery store - the things that make home 'home'."

Rutherford, the daughter of two pilots, has had a licence to fly since she was 17. She is due to complete her trip on January 17, two months behind schedule.

Since she set off in August she has visited 41 countries, logging 250 hours of flying time in her Shark microlight, which can fly for up to 12 hours. She carries all her luggage with her - a "capsule wardrobe" of two pairs of jeans, four t-shirts and two jumpers.

During the easier flights, like all teenagers, she listens to podcasts and has a Spotify pop music playlist. "Usually though, I do focus on flying. It's not often that I can just fully relax," she said.



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Because Rutherford doesn't yet have the qualifications to fly at night, her hours are determined by sunrise and sunset. The other big challenge: her aircraft can't fly through cloud. In low temperatures water droplets in the cloud turn into ice on the aircraft's wing and the build-up means the plane loses its aerodynamic shape. "It's no longer a plane - it turns into a block of metal in the air," she said.

"Russia was really hard, on every flight something went wrong, usually related to the weather," she said. "When you're flying, the horizon and the air can play tricks on you. You think you're seeing cloud when you're not. I'd have to decide whether to carry on to the destination, turn back to the airfield I'd left from, work out if the weather has changed; if I had enough fuel and sunlight to get back."

She said: "Let's say I can't get back and the engine stops: I'd have to try and glide onto the snow on the ground - I think I could make it down safely but in remote Russia I'd be at -35C for hours while waiting for rescue to arrive. It was mentally very difficult."

Rutherford spent a month in the remote town of Ayan in Russia, where no one spoke English and there was no wifi. "I had a satellite phone but I had to use it outside and it was -15C so I could only use it for five minutes at a time," she said.

Her trip has yielded some culinary firsts too: "Flying along the coast of Russia there's been a lot of seafood and very healthy. I even tried red caviar. In one homestay I was given a chunky piece of meat and told 'oh my neighbour shot this'."

Covid regulations in each country have also proved tricky. In Taiwan she was escorted from the aircraft to her hotel by workers in hazmat suits and was supposed to fly into China but had to change her plans after she learned it would involve five weeks of quarantine, diverting her trip to skirt the perimeters of North Korean airspace.

"I'm taking PCR tests all of the time - my nose is really struggling right now," she said.

Even when the weather itself was not playing up, Rutherford still had the issue of Californian wildfires to contend with. On one particularly testing flight, after trying to out-climb the smoke from the fires below, she decided to turn back.

"The smoke started to build and I tried to stay above it," she said. "I was at 10,000ft and I could smell the smoke in the plane. It got to a point where I couldn't see anything any more: everything was brown and orange," she said.

Some memorable moments from the trip have included flying over Central Park in New York, where she took off in her tiny, one-engine plane from JFK Airport after queueing in line with dozens of giant Boeing and Airbus jumbo jets. In the British Virgin Islands she was invited for lunch on Necker Island with the Virgin boss Richard Branson and his daughter Holly, arriving in her flight gear.

But it hasn't been all about having fun on her gap year. Rutherford has also been focused on her career prospects. During a private tour of the Space X headquarters in Hawthorne, California, she handed in her CV. Her next ambition: becoming an astronaut.