

## Christina Pfeiffer checks out aerial options in the wide blue yonder

**A**LL across Australia, flying clubs and tour companies arrange an array of winged activities. From a romantic jaunt in a Tiger Moth to a hair-raising spin in a jet fighter, the skies await.

### TIGER MOTH

"SPIN the prop!" yells Smithy from the seat behind me. His wingman spins the propeller at the front of the plane and nothing happens. On the third spin the engine roars to life and reverberates through the craft. The earphone in my headset crackles, "Ready to go?"

Feeling a little apprehensive about flying, for the first time, in a 70-year-old open-cockpit aircraft, I breathe a feeble "Yes, Smithy" into the microphone. He pushes in the throttle and the plane gathers speed; I sink into my seat as he cranes his head out of the cockpit, looking left to right to see where he's going.

Suddenly, with a great shudder, the aircraft soars into the clear skies of Queensland's Sunshine Coast north of Brisbane. The wind whips through my hair as we take wing along the coastline of Caloundra, with its expanse of sparkling ocean and dazzling beaches. Private yachts bob beside million-dollar canal homes and the Glasshouse Mountains stand watch in the background.

An open-cockpit aircraft is one of the best ways to appreciate Australia's wide expanses and the experience is available all around the country.

My aircraft is a de Havilland Tiger Moth, which was the basic training aircraft for thousands of commonwealth pilots during World War II. Mostly built during the 1930s, they served as communications and utility aircraft, wireless trainers, artillery spotters, air ambulances and even, sometimes, for prisoner evacuation. A small number were converted into bombers and fitted with bomb racks capable of carrying eight 11kg bombs under their wings or fuselage.

According to Smithy, pilot and owner of Caloundra-based company Fly with Smithy, there are about 100 of these craft left in airworthy condition in Australia. Every day more of these flying relics are uncovered in dusty barns and under houses.

For a hair-raising experience, try some aerobatics. The plane shoots vertically skyward until it stalls and dives towards the earth in a crazy spin.

Cost: \$90 for 15 minutes.

More: Fly with Smithy, (07) 5437 2037; 0422 166 379; www.flywithsmithy.com.

### JET FIGHTER

**LISTEN** to the rhythmic thumping in your chest as you slip on your parachute and fighter helmet. Beads of perspiration gather on your forehead as you strap yourself into the seat next to the pilot, oxygen mask in place. Your pre-flight briefing drones like a mantra in your mind: "Keep your eyes open — look straight ahead — this is how you release your parachute."

As the British Aircraft Corporation Strikemaster 167 jet fighter bomber slices through the air, the sound of heavy breathing through your oxygen mask roars in your ears. You focus on the mission ahead: this is your moment to be your alter ego in Top Gun.

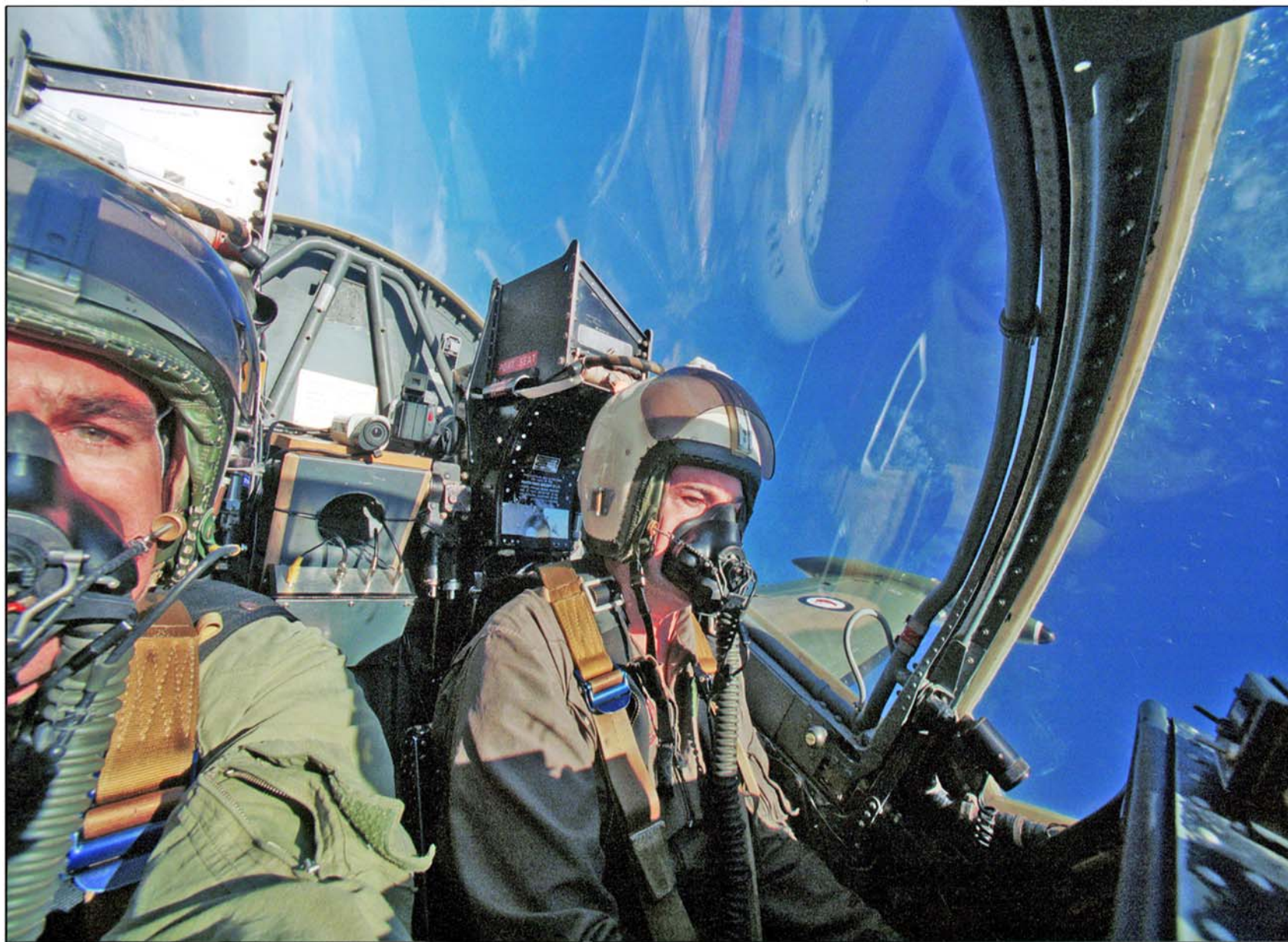
The fighter does a flip and the sky above Ballarat, an hour's land cruise west of Melbourne, is at your feet. Another flip and you're instantly the right way up. Next comes a loop, and a vertical 4000m-a-minute climb, then an inverted descent. At a gravitational force of 4 Gs, it's a struggle to lift your arm.

With a top speed of 900km/h, powered by a Rolls-Royce Viper jet engine, the Strikemaster has seen serious military action in the Middle East.

Australian Jet Adventures' Strikemaster owner and pilot Darren De Roia says those who have taken the flights love them; encouragingly, fewer than 5 per cent are airsick.

Cost: At \$1500 for 25 minutes of flying time, it includes 15 minutes of stomach-churning, high-speed aerial acrobatics. Flights over the 12 Apostles cost \$3300 and include close to an hour's flying time.

More: Australian Jet Adventures,



Top Gun moment: It's a struggle to raise your arm when the Strikemaster starts to flip, but airsickness is not a problem

# FLIGHT PLANS



On a wing and into the air: Hang-glider about to launch

Wendouree, Victoria, (03) 5339 2769; www.austjetadv.com.

### LIGHT AIRCRAFT

IF you're itching to fly a light aircraft, you can sign up for trial instruction flights at a licensed flying club or training organisation. Your trial flight may lead to a few lessons, which will help you to decide whether you want to continue training. Your instructor will also assess your potential to handle an aircraft.

An average student qualifies for a private pilot's licence after 55-60 hours' training. Full-time training takes about two months, but to fly solo you must be at least 16 years of age, speak English and pass a basic medical examination.

Ultralight aircraft are smaller, more affordable and carry a maximum of two people.

If you don't want to go to all this trouble but still want the adrenalin rush of controlling a plane, you can do this with a qualified pilot beside you. Joy flights are available throughout Australia.

Cost: Lessons cost \$50-100 for 30 minutes. Expect to spend about \$8000 in the quest for a private pilot's licence. Joy flights cost about \$100 for a half-hour. Royal Victorian Aero Club, Australia's oldest flying training organisation, offers flight instruction and joy flights.

More: (03) 9580 0088; www.rvac.com.au. Australian Ultralight Association website: www.auf.asn.au/clubs/index.html.



Fling thing: Paragliding at Stanwell Tops

### GLIDERS

AS the sound of the tow plane's engine fades in the distance, the wind whispers gently in your ears. The spectacular cloud formations appear close enough to touch, while the farmhouses that dot the landscape below are toy houses in the distance.

Normally, the glider would descend slowly, but if the air is rising faster than the descent rate, it gains altitude instead. During Australia's hot summer, when conditions are at their best, it is common for gliders to climb at rates exceeding 300m a minute.

Cost: Membership to the Australian Gliding Federation costs about \$175 a

year. Club fees vary from \$100-\$300 a year and use of a glider costs up to \$100 a day.

More: Gliding Federation of Australia, (03) 9379 7411; www.gfa.org.au.

### PARAGLIDERS, HANG-GLIDERS AND MICROLIGHTS

THE stunning landscape of Stanwell Tops, an hour's scenic drive south of Sydney, has long been a favourite spot for hang-gliding. Interested onlookers gather to watch the daring fling themselves off the cliff-face to soar along the magnificent Illawarra escarpment.

A hang-glider has a rigid frame that maintains the shape of the wing. The pilot usually flies in a horizontal position.

More recently, hang-gliding fans have taken to paragliding, one of the latest developments in sports aviation. Paragliding has the thrill and exhilaration of hang-gliding packed into a backpack-sized aircraft — all done in a comfortable upright position.

Often mistaken for a parachute, the paraglider is a wing that stays airborne on the same aerodynamic principles as other aircraft. It has the added advantage that it can be launched from the tops of tall mountains or from small coastal sand dunes.

If soaring with power is what you seek, try a microlight (or trike) — a powered hang glider with an open-cockpit body on three wheels. It looks a bit like a sleek dodgem car with wings.

Cost: Tandem paragliding instructional flights cost about \$175 for 30 minutes. Introductory microlight flights cost about \$130 for 30 minutes.

More: Hang Gliding Federation of Australia; (02) 6559 2713; www.hgfa.asn.au.

See www.aeroclub.com.au for flying schools and events.