

A chance to live every boy's dream



Playing Top Gun

DARREN DeRoia lives a childhood fantasy — he owns his own fighter jet.

The movie *Top Gun* spawned a generation of would-be fighter jet pilots who felt a need — the need for speed.

"You get to play Top Gun for real," Mr DeRoia said.

"Flying a jet is unlike any other aircraft type. The noise, the speed — it really sucks you in."

Mr DeRoia's Strikemaster jet blurs the dream of the would-be fighter pilot with reality.

In the cockpit it is often a skewed reality, looking at the world at odd angles as Mr

By MICHELLE POUNTNEY

DeRoia or fellow pilot Allen Page take passengers through air combat manoeuvres.

Mr DeRoia is a former commercial pilot who became bored with charter work and turned to computer programming. But he was drawn back to flying and started Australian Jet Adventures, offering joy flights in the Strikemaster.

The \$300,000 Strikemaster is available for joy flights from Essendon Airport at \$1200 for 25 minutes.

Mr DeRoia has co-owned the 1972 BAC Strikemaster jet for about two years.

It was used by the New Zealand Air Force until 1993

as a lead-in trainer for more advanced fighter jets.

The aircraft are still used in combat in the Middle East, particularly in Kuwait and Oman.

With a top speed of 834km/h, it can cover a lot of Melbourne in a short flight.

The jet can climb at 1600m a minute, pulling serious "Gs", the force of gravity exerted on the body. But the pilots will not push the plane that hard during joy flights.

"The first time I pulled serious Gs in a jet it was like, 'wow, this is really flying'," Mr DeRoia said.

During aerobatic manoeuvres in the Strikemaster, the aircraft pulls four Gs, meaning the body feels up to four times heavier than on the ground.

During joy flights, passengers sit beside the pilot, and dressed in their flight suit, slimline parachute and fighter pilot helmet, feel like a *Top Gun* about to embark on a mission.

But it is not all fun and games. Before climbing in to the aircraft, passengers receive pre-flight and safety briefings.

About 100 people have ta-

ken a flight so far, and Mr DeRoia said the most common reaction was "wow".

Most customers had been celebrating major birthdays, and many were elderly people who had coveted a ride in such an aircraft for a long time.

The company has even had a passenger who once flew with aviation legend Sir Charles Kingsford Smith in the *Southern Cross*.

Despite the aerobatic manoeuvres and the g-forces produced from turning through the air at high speed, Mr DeRoia said only one passenger had been ill.



Oh joy: Darren DeRoia's Strikemaster is put through its paces and (inset) sunset from the cockpit. Pictures: MARK SMITH