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Reporter joins 'secret club' and learns a lesson in freedom high above Crescent Beach

BY KELLEY SCARSBROOK, SURREY NOW AUGUST 17, 2010

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"Source" reporter Kelley Scarsbrook and King George Aviation flight instructor Toma Nishimura prepare for takeoff at the South Surrey ultra-flight school. Scarsbrook spent time in the classroom in preparation for her first ultra-light flight.

Photograph by: - Sharon Doucette, The Now

SOUTH SURREY - Like most people who live in the Surrey/White Rock area, I have driven past King George Aviation dozens of times and wondered "What the heck do they do there?"

It's probably what incited me to phone owner Arnold Klappe to find out more about his company.

What I discovered is it was an ultra-light flying school providing lessons for those interested in becoming pilots.

I was graciously invited to visit and learn about flying, and take a ride up.

I was a bit hesitant.

It's one thing to learn about flying while safely on the ground, but a whole other thing to actually do it. However, I decided to look at it as a lesson in overcoming fear.

Thus, three days later, I found myself sitting in the building of King George Aviation with pen in hand, learning the basics of flying from Klappe before my flight.

"We start with a discovery flight for people, which is essentially a familiarization flight in one of our ultra-lights. We get you up and you are able to touch the controls and learn about them. You can take as much control as you like," said Klappe.

The lesson program handled by Klappe's school provides students with 20 hours of ground school and 17 hours of flight time. After a student has completed their hours, they receive an ultra-light pilot's permit.

A person can be as young as 14 when they start to work toward their pilot's permit.

In addition to the pilot's permit, a person must have a valid up-to-date medical, and there are restrictions based on the experience of a pilot.

But what Klappe believes is the most challenging part of teaching people about ultra-lights is overcoming misconceptions of their safety.

"We have to get over the pre-conceived notion that they are a lawn chair with a lawn-mower engine attached with brooms for wings. Ultra-lights have come a long way since they were originally introduced 25 years ago. Many are professionally designed and factory-built and very safe," said Klappe.

Next he took me outside to watch an incoming ultra-light land. This one had an open cockpit, with no windows. A woman was on a discovery flight with an instructor.

After landing, she looked elated. I couldn't help but ask her what she thought of her experience in an open airplane.

"It was fantastic," said Elle Tara with a smile. "I'm actually afraid of heights but I felt so safe and secure!"

This certainly helped calm my nerves.

I was then introduced to my flight instructor, Toma Nishimura, who would be overseeing my discovery flight.

Nishimura has been instructing at King George Aviation since 2005, and was appointed as a chief flight instructor in 2007.

His calm demeanor and warm smile instantly put me at ease as we headed over to the ultra-light we would use. It was a bright-yellow A-22 Fox Bat (with a fully enclosed cockpit.)

He took me around the ultra-light and showed me how to examine the plane before take off.

"It is very important to ensure there aren't any cracks or flat tires or anything that may cause a problem with the flight," he said.

I got in and put on my seat-belt, which came up over my shoulders and snapped-in across my chest. I was handed a head-set with a mic so Nishimura and I could communicate throughout the flight.

There are three important instruments on the dashboard: the altimeter, which measures the altitude of the plane; the air-speed gauge, which shows how fast the ultra-light is travelling; and the gas-gauge.

And of course, there's the radio, which was used to communicate our location at all times.

After writing down the time of our departure in a notebook, Nishimura turned on the engine, and we were off.

As we left the ground and headed in to the sky, I couldn't help but notice how smooth the takeoff was. I had expected a small plane ride to be bumpy.

When we circled around Crescent Beach, I suddenly understood how amazing flying truly is: I felt as though I had entered a "secret club" that gave me a perspective and an appreciation from a very different vantage point.

My silence must have made Nishimura think I was still nervous as he checked in on me to see how I was doing.

"Great!" I replied with a rather over-the-top enthusiasm.

It was at this point he wanted me to take the helm.

"Take the yoke," instructed Nishimura (indicating the stick for flying the plane).

"When you push forwards, it takes us down; when you push back it takes us up. The rudder pedals at your feet take you in the direction you want to go, so whatever direction you want to go, use that foot."

And before I knew it, I was piloting the plane on my own.

I turned the airplane left with a slight left turn of the yoke. As we flew over White Rock pier, I can only use one word to describe how I felt at that exact moment - exhilaration.

As we continued flying over White Rock and Surrey, I checked our altitude, which was just over 2,000 feet.

"Keep your eye on the horizon," advised Nishimura. He said that watching the horizon in relation to the dashboard of the plane, it helps keep the airplane straight.

The flight lasted 30 minutes, and went by very quickly.

As we landed, Nishimura pushed forward on the yoke and we made a smooth touchdown on the field of King George Aviation.

After I got out of the airplane, I thanked both Nishimura and Klappe for the experience. I must admit, I was on a high for the rest of the day.

Who knew learning how to fly would not be a lesson in overcoming a fear, but rather, a lesson in freedom.

If you want to give a discovery flight a try, King George Aviation is located at 4981 King George Blvd. To for more information, call 604-501-2488.

- This story appears in the Aug. 17 of the South Surrey/White Rock Source.

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Kelley Scarsbrook and her flight instructor taxi for liftoff at King George Aviation's field. Photograph by: - Sharon Doucette, The Now



King George Aviation's Toma Nishimura goes through a cockpit check with Kelley Scarsbrook before they take to the skies for her discovery flight in an A22 Foxbat ultra-light. Photograph by: - Sharon Doucette, The Now