

EYES TO THE SKY

FROM TOP: The world's best pilots take to the skies in the Al Ain Aerobatic Show; the Breitling Wingwalkers are the world's only aerobatic formation wingwalking team.

IT'S TIME TO LOOK UP AS THE WORLD'S AERIAL DAREDEVILS HEAD TO THE UAE. ADRENALINE, EXCITEMENT AND ACTION MEET AT THE AL AIN AEROBATIC SHOW

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

"A young boy looks on in wonder as the aircraft loops, springs, twists and rolls. When it lands, the boy rushes to meet the pilot. He says 'When I grow up, I'm going to be a display pilot.' The pilot rests his hands on the boy's shoulders and says: 'Son, you're going to have to make a choice. You can't do both.' That's what display flying is all about – having fun and hoping that it's obvious to everyone else that you're having a ball up there," says Jonathan Whaley of Heritage Aviation, who flies the Hawker Hunter aircraft affectionately known as *Miss Demeanour*. Jonathan is preparing for his swan-song at the Al Ain Aerobatic Show taking to the skies over the oasis-city at the end of November. It's promising to be extreme.

This year, the Arabian Gulf's premier aerobatics event celebrates a decade, its 10th edition coinciding with Etihad Airways' 10th anniversary, and the UAE's 42nd National Day celebrations. With cause to celebrate, the world's top aerobatic pilots are gearing up to perform spectacular stunts against the backdrop of one of the world's oldest desert-oasis settlements.

"We have given the show a total sensory upgrade," says Sultan Al Muhairi, general project co-ordinator of the Al Ain Aerobatic Show. "From bigger seating areas [to] more engaging activities, superior aerial displays,



our most impressive aircraft line-up yet, and so much more to come, we are confident it will be on everyone's radar."

With an action-packed daily aerial programme running overhead and a 60,000 square-metre interactive spectator zone underfoot, Al Ain will be bursting at the seams with things to see and do. "We've already confirmed four elite military teams, seven daredevil pilots, gravity-defying wingwalkers, parachutists, and a new-to-the-region aircraft line-up for the show, with more to be announced," claims Al Muhairi.

Jonathan chose the event as his finale because he had so much fun here the last two times. "It's the relaxed atmosphere with relatively little pressure, yet being able to display enthusiastically in the wide open space," he says. "Flying over the desert is

something special. Low flying over the desert is like having a cross between a 4x4 and a Formula One race car, but driving in three dimensions."

Jonathan's a born pilot and while he's easing back on the throttle, he's not giving up flying entirely. "My earliest memories are pretending to be a plane," he reminisces. "As a child, you don't really differentiate between being the plane or the pilot. I think in many ways that remains true for me to this day."

Jonathan's flying partner, *Miss Demeanour*, was originally built for the British Royal Air Force back in 1956. "She is an example of a perfect design at the peak before the demand for greater speed, [and] the ability to carry more and bigger weapons for longer and further, took away the sheer delight in flying for the sake of flying," he comments. With a fresh paint-job, *Miss Demeanour's* flying days are far from over.

"When I bought *Miss Demeanour*, I wanted to break away from the military links and bring it to everyone's attention as a superbly-designed aircraft, both aerodynamically and simple purity in form. To do that, she needed a colour scheme that accentuated her shape and was a work of art. I spent two years working on the colour scheme," says the proud owner. "The Hunter is very much one of those aircraft that you strap on and wear, rather than climb in to," he continues. ⇒

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"It handles as nicely as it looks, no matter what the colour scheme."

Miss Demeanour will be easy to spot in the skies over Al Ain. If her distinctive colours don't catch the eye, Jonathan's manoeuvring will. "Given the airspace, our final manoeuvre is to go vertical from 30 feet until we are just a speck in the sky, all in a few seconds," says Jonathan. "If I could keep going to outer space, I would."

Steven Jones and Paul Bonhomme will also be drawing eyes skyward, but they'll be performing tandem as The Red Bull Matadors in all-new aircraft – the XtremeAir XA41 – never before seen in the UAE. "The XA41 is an incredible aircraft," enthuses Steven. "It can do figures that most pilots can only dream of. Having two of them allows us great freedom to explore extreme formation flying."

Naturally, formation flying requires a strong rapport – and perhaps a sixth sense. There are no built-in proximity safety mechanisms. "The only mechanism for keeping our required distance is our own judgement. There are very few on-board systems in an XtremeAir XA41. It is built like a top-class racing car, but without any complications or electronic systems," explains Steven.

Steven and Paul have been flying together for 16 seasons so they know each other well. "Often we can predict what the other will do even before they do it," says Steven. "This can be anything ranging from how either of us will fly a particular manoeuvre to which restaurant they can be found in. This is essential for a good formation team."

In a display flight they reach speeds of around 400 kilometres per hour and about 100 kilometres per hour when travelling backwards, and while their figures are well practiced, they're not set in stone. "This allows us to change the display according to the show site, the weather and the duration. Very often we will alter the display mid-air to cater for variations in wind and weather," Steven explains.

"What we love to do in our display is all the things that other teams don't do, showing what the XA41 can do in formation. We love the Al Ain Aerobatic Show," says Steven. "The scenery as the sun sinks is something I particularly remember," he adds.

Breitling Wingwalkers Freya Paterson and Stella Guilding will be experiencing this for the first time and both are extremely excited



CLOCKWISE: The Breitling Wingwalkers take to the skies; the colourful *Miss Demeanour*; a parachutist drops in.



Danielle likens clambering out of the plane's cockpit mid-flight to climbing a tree in a hurricane; no mean feat

about their inaugural performance in the Middle East. "I can't wait. It's such a privilege that I have the opportunity to wingwalk in Al Ain. I'm hoping the weather will be better than in England," says Freya. "I am so excited to have the opportunity to do what I love – stand on the wing of a biplane – and to do that while it's flying over the Middle East... wow," adds Stella.

The Breitling Wingwalkers are the world's only aerobatic formation wingwalking team, performing a breath-taking sequence of acrobatic manoeuvres and handstands while strapped to the top wings of the team's Boeing Stearman biplanes. Manoeuvres include loops, rolls, stall turns and even inverted flight. "My favourite manoeuvre has to be the "Mirror", when one plane flies inverted above the other and the two wingwalkers try and touch hands," says Freya. Stella's pick is the "Cockpit Lady" where the wingwalkers stand on one leg and hold on with their arms in a balletic pose. This also happens to be the most difficult wingwalking stunt to perform.

It takes a special kind of person to want to clamber around a plane mid-air. "I must have been six or seven years old [when] I first saw the spectacle of a wingwalking aviatrix in action," reminisces fellow wingwalker Danielle Hughes. "I remember jumping up and down

and waving excitedly as the plane whizzed past, shouting to my parents "That's what I'm going to do when I grow up."

The flying sequence is highly rehearsed as the wingwalkers can't talk to the pilots during the show. "The pilots communicate with each other using radio communications, but as wingwalkers we have to communicate using hand signals and subtle head movements," explains Danielle.

"It's an amazing job, but like with any other job, there are some not-so-glamorous parts to it too – like cleaning the flies off the aeroplane, oh and from your teeth," Danielle laughs. She likens clambering out of the plane's cockpit mid-flight to climbing a tree in a hurricane; no mean feat. The salve is the spectators. "It's great looking at the crowds from the wing," Danielle says. "You can see them waving up at you and although you can't hear them, you can tell that they are excitedly cheering you on."

With so much action in the skies, there's much to cheer about. "Over the years we have seen many amazing stunts and I expect this year will be even more mind-blowing," concludes Al Muhairi. "It's really hard to pull a standout stunt out of so many amazing ones, so I'll let people make their own minds up when they visit the show." 🍷