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LOCAL NEWS • News

# Teen pilot, vying to be the youngest to fly solo around the world, makes stop in OC



SANTA ANA, CA – August 08: Seventeen-year-old Mack Rutherford was greeted by news crews and officials after landing at John Wayne Airport in Santa Ana, CA on Monday, August 8, 2022. Rutherford is attempting to be the youngest person to fly around the world solo in an aircraft. Rutherford, from Belgium, was making a pit stop along his route to 52 countries on five continents in five months. He is flying a Shark ultralight aircraft. (Photo by Paul Bersebach/MediaNews Group/Orange County Register via Getty Images)

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A collage of stickers litters the hood of the one-seater Shark ultralight aircraft, each decal like a postcard from some far-away part of the world: Greece, Oman, Kenya.

On his journey to circumnavigate the earth, the pilot in the cockpit, Mack Rutherford, added another one to the collection on Monday when he touched down at John Wayne Airport in [Santa Ana](#). The visit was a pit stop along his solo route to 52 countries on five continents in five months — a feat daunting to even the most experienced pilots.

Rutherford is 17. When he lands back in Bulgaria — where he began his journey — later this month, he hopes to break a world record by becoming the youngest person to fly around the world solo in an aircraft.

At Clay Lacy, the private jet terminal located at John Wayne Airport, Rutherford stopped for a refuel for his plane and himself and was greeted by local pilots, politicians, firefighters, and law enforcement officers, who watched from the tarmac as the teen sailed in on the long runway.

When he unfolded himself from the small cockpit in his ultralight plane, Orange County Supervisor Lisa Bartlett, who represents the district that encompasses the airport, affixed a pin bearing the county seal to the collar of Rutherford's green flight suit.

Bearing witness to the teen's journey, "I would dare say it's a once in a lifetime thing," said Scott Cutshall, vice president of development and sustainability at Clay Lacy. That someone younger could obtain their pilot's license and make the around-the-world trip seems doubtful, he added.

The logistics alone are a feat, Cutshall said. Not to mention days that must be "very, very lonely."

Those who came to meet the teen "may be witnessing history here," he said.

Rutherford, who is from Belgium and comes from a family of pilots, noted that the most challenging part of his trek so far was crossing over open water from Japan to the U.S., a 10-hour flight that required some advanced planning to add extra fuel tanks to his aircraft so he'd have enough gas to make it. The plan was to make it to the Alaskan Adak Island, but unexpected strong headwinds slowed down his speed and caused more fuel burn, according to an update on his



He decided to touch down at his alternate landing site that was closer, on an island off Alaska called Attu. His overnight stay there has been one of the most memorable of his journey, he said. The uninhabited island has an airport owned by the U.S. Coast Guard, and Rutherford said he slept in a small shed.

He explored the island some, and when it was time to wind down, he didn't have much food,"so I had Oreos for supper," he said.

Rutherford was inspired to set off on the solo journey by his sister, Zara Rutherford, [who, at 19, became the Guinness World Records holder](#) for youngest woman to circumnavigate the world solo by aircraft and the youngest person to fly around the world solo by microlight, a lightweight aircraft.

The title of youngest person to fly around the earth solo in an aircraft belongs to [an 18-year-old from the UK.](#)

Gary Schank, a member of Southern California Pilots Association who came to see Rutherford land, called the teen's journey "amazing," noting the difficulty Rutherford must face trying to plan his landings and navigate long flights. On top of unexpected weather and having to "constantly calculate" fuel range with changes in winds, Rutherford has had to do on-the-ground navigating as well to coordinate and get the necessary approvals to land his aircraft in dozens of different countries, Schank noted.

Rutherford's stop in Orange County comes near the end of his around-the-world trek. After starting in Bulgaria and hitting some other stops along the southern coast of Europe, he flew to Africa and visited countries like Kenya and Egypt, then he traveled to the Middle East, then to India, and then, eventually, to Japan. He departed for the U.S. from Japan on July 30.

After California, Rutherford will go to Mexico, Canada, Iceland, and the United Kingdom. His flight plan has him arriving at his starting location in Sofia, Bulgaria, on Aug. 24.

Part of Rutherford's journey is to be a source of inspiration for other kids and teens with big dreams, to spread a message that "young people can make a difference," he said.

"You don't have to be 18 to do something special," Rutherford said. "Just work toward your dreams, however old you may be, and eventually they'll come true."

