

Sun-powered Solar Impulse 2 lands in New York

The Solar Impulse 2 aircraft flew into New York past the Statue of Liberty completing the US leg on Saturday, 11 June, of a record-breaking bid to circumnavigate the Earth powered only by solar energy.



The plane, which is no heavier than a car but has the wingspan of a Boeing 747, is being flown on its 35,000km round-the-world journey by two pilots taking turns, Swiss entrepreneur Andre Borschberg and psychiatrist Bertrand Piccard.

"It's absolutely incredible," said Borschberg over a live video feed as the iconic statue lit up the night below him.

"It's a dream here."

The light, slow-moving aircraft landed at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, one minute ahead of schedule at 3:59am (0759 GMT) after a five-hour flight from Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania.

Photographers in New York harbor captured the innovative solar-powered aircraft as it flew over the Verrazano Bridge, circled Lady Liberty and cruised the Manhattan skyline before turning south to land.

"I felt like a three-year-old kid looking at the Christmas tree, it was so beautiful," Borschberg told a news conference after landing.

It was the 14th leg of an east-west journey that began March 9, 2015 in Abu Dhabi, and has taken the aircraft across Asia and the Pacific to the United States with the Sun as the plane's only source of power.

The journey so far included a stretch of five nights and five days from Japan to Hawaii, which broke a record for the longest uninterrupted journey in aviation history. But a third of the journey remains. From New York, the Solar Impulse team will attempt to cross the Atlantic, then fly through Europe and on to the Middle East back to Abu Dhabi.

The single-seat aircraft is clad in 17,000 solar cells. During night-time flights it runs on battery-stored power.

It typically travels at a mere 48km per hour, although its flight speed can double when exposed to full sunlight. Piccard, a balloonist who made the first non-stop balloon flight around the world in 1999, talked about the symbolism of the Statue and changing definitions of liberty during the course of history.

"In the 21st century I believe liberty is to get independent from fossil fuels and pollution," he told a news conference.

John Degnan, chairman of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey which operates the airport, paraphrased US hero Neil Armstrong, who in 1969 was the first man to walk on the moon.

"Today the solar impulse's effort is a small step for man but a giant step for clean air in our environment," he told a news conference.

Borschberg skimmed over Pennsylvania at an altitude of less than 900 metres, descending to 500 metres as the plane crossed over the bays at the entrance to New York harbor. Fielding phone calls from well-wishers and journalists during the flight, he said he could see the light grow denser and denser as he crossed out of Pennsylvania in the approach to New York.

The entrepreneur and engineer was also at the controls on its most difficult segment of the trip; a 6437km, 118-hour endurance run from Nagoya, Japan to Hawaii. But the journey has not been without problems. High tropical temperatures damaged the plane's batteries on the Pacific crossing, forcing its crew to take several months off to make repairs.

Borschberg is no stranger to adventure. Fifteen years ago he narrowly escaped an avalanche, and in 2013 he survived a helicopter crash with minor injuries.

Source: AFP

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