

Jiří Pruša becomes the first person in the world to reach the North Pole in an ultralight aircraft

Aleš Vašíček. 21. August 2026

Before Czech pilot Jiří Pruša became the first person in the world to take off from Svalbard and fly non-stop to the North Pole in an ultralight aircraft, he spent a year and a half dealing with challenges for which there was no instruction manual—simply because nobody had ever attempted it before.

Jiří Pruša has a reputation as an aviator who enjoys pushing the limits of what is possible in aviation—and in a single human life. He has now achieved something nobody else has managed: a non-stop flight to the North Pole in an ultralight aircraft. In a machine with limited capacity for both fuel and the equipment needed to survive in Arctic conditions.

Before he could even take off, he had to meet a long list of requirements set by the Norwegian authorities. Most of them concerned preparation for survival in the event of an accident. We divided our extensive interview with Jiří Pruša into two parts. In this first part, we focus on the entire process of preparing for the expedition—an expedition whose chances of success the pilot himself estimated at only 50 percent at one point.



“I created my own category. I call it freestyle.”

Let's start right at the beginning. How did the idea of flying an ultralight to the North Pole come about?

I have been flying long-distance routes in small aircraft for about ten years. Three years ago, I set an official world record, but official records come with precisely prescribed criteria: there had to be a two-person crew, a predetermined route, and an inspector overseeing everything. We flew about 2,000 kilometres and the result was internationally recognised. But those restrictions bothered me. You can see that you could fly farther, but you cannot, because the route had to be fixed in advance and you are not allowed to change it during the flight.

Complete Arctic equipment

Shopping for Arctic equipment

Arctic survival training

Polar-bear defence training

24 photographs

So I created my own category. I call it freestyle. I flew from northern Norway down to the island of Brač—3,200 kilometres in fourteen hours. During that flight, I also realised that on a journey of that length, the aircraft is no longer the limiting factor; the pilot is. Fatigue, being in the same position, bodily functions. But it can be endured, and for a while you are happy that you managed it. Then you start thinking about what comes next.

Originally, I wanted to fly around the world, but that is not possible now. Russia is at war, and in the current situation I certainly would not want to fly into Russia. I do not know whether they would let me in, but I would definitely be concerned that they might then put me in prison. And without Russia, flying around the world in an aircraft like this is almost impossible. You would have to go via Iran, Pakistan and India, which is always complicated and is now hardly feasible. Then you would have to cross an ocean to America, where you encounter legs of around 3,000 kilometres over open sea, and with all the mandatory equipment required for overwater flying, that is simply too much.

So I decided on the North Pole. Then, more or less by chance, I discovered that on 12 May this year, exactly one hundred years had passed since Roald Amundsen's flight—and that helped me make up my mind. I had been playing with the idea for about a year or a year and a half. You have to solve things for which you cannot find answers anywhere, because nobody has flown it before: what navigation is like there, whether the route is within the range limits of an ultralight, how and from whom to obtain permission, where to get fuel—essentially everything.



Previous expeditions and a changing Arctic

In 2008, Petr Bold and Richard Santus reached the North Pole. Were you able to draw on their experience?

They did it very differently—using a larger twin-engine aircraft, an L-200 Morava. More importantly, at that time the Russians operated a seasonal airfield called Barneo on an ice floe about 150 kilometres from the Pole. It operated every April and May, when there was already polar daylight but temperatures were still low enough. Petr and Richard flew from Svalbard over the North Pole and, on the way back, landed at Barneo. They refuelled there and returned to Svalbard.

I could not use any airfield because there has not been a seasonal airfield there for several years. Today, Svalbard permanently has the world's northernmost airport, about 1,400 kilometres from the North Pole, and between the two there is simply nothing except water and ice floes.

And today, would a route via Barneo still be possible?

No. The two main reasons are the global political situation and the fact that the area is thawing because of climate change. I saw it myself at the beginning of July: there is nowhere a solid, continuous ice surface—everything is just separate floes, all the way to the Pole itself. It is unbelievable. The floes do not even begin until roughly 200 kilometres north of Svalbard, around the 82nd parallel. In the past, Svalbard itself was completely frozen; in old photographs you can see people walking on the ice. Today, 200 kilometres to the north, there is normal open water. I documented all of it in photographs and videos so that it would not be merely my own claim.

Permission, survival training and seven days of self-sufficiency

An ultralight is limited not only by weight and technical parameters, but also by regulations. How did the permission process work?

I have a Norwegian friend who is also a pilot. He does not fly long-distance routes himself, but he supports me. He said: "Just apply for it." Sometimes you need someone to give you that push. So sometime in February this year, I applied to the Norwegian Civil Aviation Authority. They wrote back telling me everything I had to fulfil—and the list was enormous. Nobody had applied for anything like this before, so they were making it up as they went along and included everything they could think of. My opinion is that they thought I would eventually give up. That they would simply discourage me so they would not have to deal with it.

But I dug in. I had to go to Norway three times for training, and I spent a lot of money buying Arctic equipment. At the beginning of June, I finally managed to obtain the permission.

Seven days before help could arrive

Jiří Pruša first stood on an airfield at the age of four. From the age of fourteen, he flew gliders and later also paragliders.

Since 2009, he has focused primarily on long-distance VFR flying in small powered aircraft. By September 2025, he had accumulated approximately 3,500 hours flying small aircraft and gliders.

He has landed at more than 1,700 airports around the world.

His list includes Wales near the Bering Strait in Alaska, the world's lowest airport at Metzada in Israel, the second-lowest airport in Death Valley in eastern California, the desert airport of Cap Juby in Western Sahara, Funchal Airport in Madeira, and dozens of airports in Iceland and Greenland.

He has crossed the Sahara several times, as well as the Namib and Kalahari deserts in Africa and the Mojave Desert in the United States.

In August 2023, together with Eliška Kudějová, he set an FAI world record for the longest non-stop ultralight flight: 1,912 kilometres.

In the summer of 2024, he flew alone from Norway's North Cape to the island of Brač, covering 3,189 kilometres. The non-stop flight lasted almost fourteen hours.

He is the author of numerous articles and publications.

(Source: Na limit publication)

What exactly did the authorities require from you?

Interestingly, to my surprise, they were almost not interested in the flight itself. They focused on what would happen if I crashed—specifically, my ability to survive in the Arctic. For seven days, because that was how long it might take for anyone to reach me. A ship would have to set out, possibly to refuel a helicopter, or an icebreaker might be needed.

Seven days meant carrying food and drinking water. Ice there is salty, so I needed seven litres of water—or an evaporation device. But you cannot easily obtain one, and it would add more weight, so I took seven litres of water.

Then there was a tent, a sleeping bag and three layers of thermal underwear. And ice claws for the hands: if you land in the water and need to climb onto an ice floe, you cannot simply pull yourself up. You drive these claws into the ice and haul yourself up. In addition, there were all kinds of radios and, obligatorily, a PLB—a personal locator beacon that transmits your position.

The survival suit, the aircraft and the fuel

And what about the famous survival suit?

That was the thing that really made life difficult for me. A floating suit. First of all, it is very heavy and cumbersome. Then it has rubber seals—on your wrists you can tolerate them, but around your neck... you cannot really breathe properly, and you have to wear it for twelve hours. That is pretty tough. It is also hot. In the cockpit, because of the engine, you might have ten degrees Celsius even with the windows open, and underneath the suit you have three layers of underwear because the suit itself is not enough.

I asked artificial intelligence what else I should add. Then I sent the whole thing to the authorities—and they were surprisingly satisfied. I was waiting to see what else they would come up with, because in a study like that you can keep finding things to question forever.

An aircraft capable of doing it

Let's move on to the aircraft. What had to be prepared on the machine itself?

The authorities had one requirement: I had to cover the aircraft with at least four square metres of fluorescent material so that it would be visible if I had to land somewhere. We applied the markings at the Shark production facility in Senica. I was there about three days before departure; we prepared the aircraft, applied the markings, and I also installed a Starlink antenna for satellite communication. Before the flight, we simply inspected the entire aircraft and fine-tuned whatever was necessary. Apart from an additional fuel bag, however, the aircraft had no special modifications.

How did you deal with fuel?

The Shark has two 75-litre tanks, so 150 litres in total. In addition, I have a fuel bag that holds about 80 litres and has a hose and pump that transfers fuel into the tank in the right wing. Because of the weight, however, I could not take the full amount. I had 150 litres in the tanks and about 60 litres in the bag, because the aircraft was already full of Arctic equipment.

The straight-line distance to the Pole is around 1,400 kilometres one way, and because you do not fly perfectly directly, I estimated the round trip at 3,000 kilometres. My experience from the flight from Norway to Brač helped here: I had already tested 3,200 kilometres, and at the end of that flight I still had about 15 litres left. The Shark burns around 17 litres per hour. So I calculated that I would have a fuel reserve of approximately one and a half to two hours.

You previously flew a Dynamic. In what way is the Shark better for a flight like this?

The engine is exactly the same—a Rotax. The difference is mainly in the aerodynamics. The Shark has lower frontal drag because its cabin is narrower.

“They thought I would give up.” How do you prepare to fly an ultralight aircraft to the North Pole?

From Svalbard to the North Pole and back: how Jiří Pruša completed the world-first flight

The preparation was one thing. The actual flight was another. Pruša had to deal with navigation near the Pole, weather that could change the entire plan, the physical demands of spending many hours in a cramped cockpit, and the knowledge that below him there was no airport, no runway and almost no possibility of rescue.

He describes how the route was planned, how the aircraft behaved, how satellite communication worked and what it felt like to finally see the point that had been the goal of more than a year of preparation.

The expedition was not designed as a publicity stunt. Every kilogram mattered, every litre of fuel mattered, and every decision had consequences. The flight had to remain within the aircraft's real-world performance limits while still leaving a margin for the unexpected.

The journey to the North Pole therefore became a test not only of the Shark ultralight aircraft, but also of preparation, discipline, endurance and the ability of a pilot to manage a completely unfamiliar environment.

At the Pole itself there was no runway and no ceremonial landing. The achievement was the flight: reaching the geographic North Pole and returning safely without an intermediate landing.

For Pruša, that was the essential point. He had set out to attempt something nobody had previously done in an ultralight aircraft—and to prove that, with sufficient preparation and the right machine, the limits of long-distance flying can sometimes be pushed farther than expected.

