



Before the expedition, Norwegian authorities required Jiří Průša to complete several courses. He carries enough equipment and food in the aircraft to survive independently for seven days. Photo: Anna Stjern

At 73, he is not too old for a polar expedition at 3,000 feet

Navigation in the small aircraft became challenging over the North Pole. Now Jiří Průša, 73, has set course across the Greenland Sea in the same machine.

“I am already over the coast of Greenland. I still have about an hour and a half in the air.”

Jiří Průša has just had Starlink installed in the tiny aircraft. Five hours have passed since he waved goodbye on the runway at Longyearbyen Airport. The 73-year-old from the Czech Republic is halfway through the expedition.

The two previous times he visited Svalbard were to train for the expedition in the Shark 600 aircraft. Before he was allowed to set course north from Příbram in the Czech Republic, via mainland Norway to Svalbard, the authorities required him to demonstrate that he could protect himself from polar bears and survive for a week in the Arctic.



Checking the oil on the Shark 600 is a physical task. Průša must turn the propeller by hand until the oil tank begins to gurgle.
Photo: Anna Stjern

Last weekend, he spent almost twelve hours in the small cockpit, flying from Longyearbyen to the North Pole and back. Now the expedition continues to the east coast of Greenland.

“Spending twelve hours in a small aircraft like this is quite different from sitting in a jumbo jet to New York,” Průša says as he begins to remove the aircraft’s tie-downs.



The Shark 600 weighs only a few hundred kilograms and, fittingly, is shaped like a shark. Photo: Anna Stjern

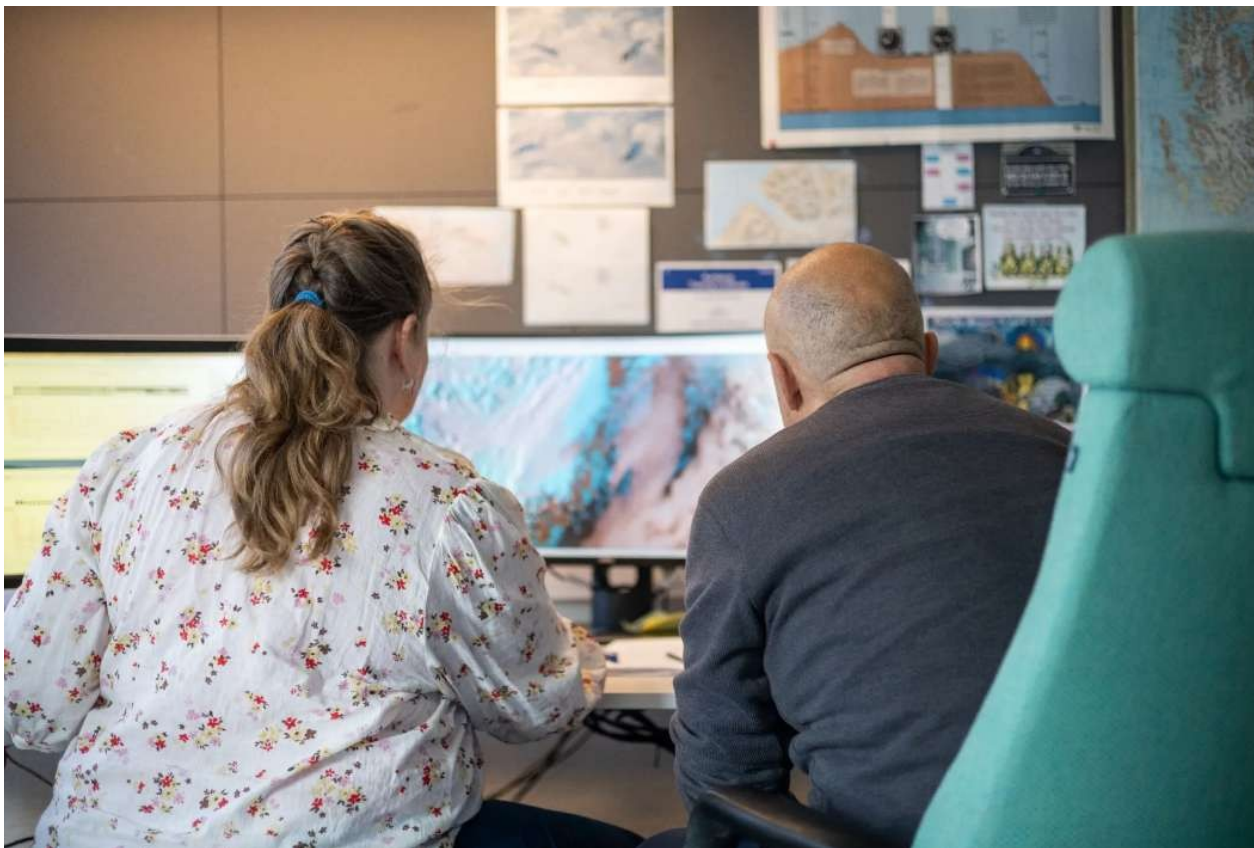
The little machine that will carry him across the Greenland Sea is tied down at Svalbard Airport with two lead weights tied to each wing. Průša unties them and checks the oil. With a little help, he gets into his survival suit before climbing into the small cockpit.

Over the North Pole

At home in the Czech Republic, Průša runs an aviation blog for fellow flying enthusiasts. He thinks it is a strange question when asked why he has embarked on an Arctic expedition from Svalbard to the North Pole, Greenland, Iceland and back to the Czech Republic in the small Shark aircraft.

“Well, I run the blog because I fly. And I fly because I want to,” he says.

Before the journeys to the North Pole and Greenland, the Czech pilot received what he describes as invaluable help from meteorologist Ine-Therese Pedersen in Longyearbyen. Weather is always his greatest concern before taking the microlight aircraft into the air.



Before departure, Jiří Průša receives a weather briefing from meteorologist Ine-Therese Pedersen. Photo: Anna Stjern

Pedersen advised him to postpone the twelve-hour round trip to the North Pole by one day. She also recommended reconsidering which longitude to follow.

“She was absolutely right. It was fantastic.”

The worst thing a pilot can encounter on a flight like this is freezing fog, Průša explains. Ice can build up on the wings and cause problems for the propeller. With Pedersen’s help, the microlight pilot managed to avoid icing.



The complete absence of solid sea ice was not what Jiří Průša expected to see from the air over the North Pole. Photo: Jiří Průša

“Over the North Pole, it was completely clear and cloudless. There was nothing but ice, but I was surprised that there was no solid sea ice,” Průša says.

Another problem over the poles is that maps go haywire. Průša carried three different navigation devices on the flight, all of which showed distorted distances and proportions over the North Pole. He says Svalbard disappeared from the map.

When he decided to turn around, he lost track of which direction to fly. He then called a friend in Prague who was tracking his position.

“He explained that I needed to fly 30 degrees to the left, because I could not work out which way was east and which was west.”



Průša carries extra fuel, first-aid equipment, food and clothing in the aircraft. The Norwegian Civil Aviation Authority also required red bands across the wings so the aircraft would be visible from the air. Photo: Anna Stjern

Next stop

Průša has been flying since his teenage years. He began with gliders and later developed an interest in all kinds of light aircraft.

He says he must keep fit to continue flying sixty years later. But it is no secret that being strapped into the small cockpit for twelve hours at a time takes a toll on the body.

“After a flight like that, you practically fall out of the aircraft when you land.”

On the next leg of Průša's expedition, “only” six hours across the Greenland Sea await him.



Jiří Průša has no plans to retire from flying. Photo: Anna Stjern

Průša must wait for clearance from the tower in Longyearbyen before he can take off. A few minutes after a Swiss charter aircraft leaves the runway, the 73-year-old receives clearance.

He waves goodbye and taxis onto the runway.

Six hours later, he is scheduled to land at Nerlerit Inaat on Greenland's east coast. Thanks to the Starlink terminal installed in the aircraft, Průša can update those following his journey from the ground.

Before landing at Nerlerit Inaat, a message arrives from the 73-year-old.

“All OK,” he writes.