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Eighty-five years ago, Lady Mary Heath stunned the world with what was her crowning achievement when, in her open cockpit Avro Avian plane, she covered the length of Africa in a period of three months.

It was the kind of adventure that modern-day travellers drool over, but if Lady Heath were to do that journey today, she would probably hardly recognise the landscape below. Modern cities, deforestation, war, and turbulence of a different kind to that which she had originally encountered in the air.

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Her journey took her over South Africa, Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Tanganyika (Tanzania), Kenya, Uganda, Sudan (now South Sudan and Sudan), Egypt, Libya, en route to Italy, France, and ultimately the UK. At least three of those countries can hardly be called stable and peaceful.

Tracey Curtis-Taylor, the pilot who will be following the same flight path Lady Heath undertook in a more relaxed era, was born in the UK and emigrated to New Zealand in her early twenties. There she fell in love with flying and, in particular, vintage aircraft and warbirds.

Her flight route over places such as Sudan and Libya will be dependent on the political climate. Speaking about one major difference in their journeys, Tracey said: "Lady Heath flew mainly between seven and eight thousand feet, because she was trying to look after her plane's engine, which would run cooler at that altitude.

"So she did not see much of the land unfolding beneath her. I will be flying at a lower altitude most of the time, so I can engage with the landscape."

Herein lies the key to the venture. Tracey adores Africa, which is one of the reasons she undertook this re-enactment. She said she had always had an affinity for the colonial days of the 1920s and '30s in Africa.

An iconic image, for her, is of Karen Blixen and Denys Finch Hatton flying in Out of Africa... "Romantic, thrilling, adventurous... That is the essence of why I fly."

How did she come to have such an affinity with Africa?

Tracey explained that she began her working career as a diamond valuer for De Beers in London, then moved to the diplomatic service, with one motive in mind: a posting to Africa. When this did not materialise, she came to this continent under her own steam.

"I worked in Johannesburg, and travelled around South Africa, then I took an **Encounter Overland** expedition between Johannesburg and England. It was a life-changing experience."

Africa had crept into her bloodstream, so the re-enactment of Lady Heath's journey gave her the chance finally to return.

What is particularly fascinating is Tracey's perceptions and insight into her formidable predecessor.

"When I first heard about Lady Heath, she sounded extreme and eccentric, but I find I have a growing affinity with her, and have become fascinated by her.

"We display some alarming similarities," she joked. "She was an outsider, something which I have always regarded myself as, but the main thing is her joie de vivre, which I really relate to.

"She came from a very fractured rural background in Ireland." (Heath was just one year old when her father bludgeoned her mother to death with a heavy stick, and was committed to an asylum. She was raised by her aunts, who frowned on her interest in sport).

Lady Heath constantly pushed the parameters, and Tracey found her attitude to men interesting. "She had three husbands, and seemed to always be striving for financial independence. I think her marriage to Sir James Heath was a career move - owning a plane and being able to fly, but it ended in public litigation just after her crash in America. He struck at a crucial time, trying to discredit her publicly," said Tracey.

Heath, she said, was a far better pilot than Amelia Earhart, who had the backing of her husband and was, she says, something of a construction by the media, while Lady Heath's husband seemed to do everything possible to scupper her.

"Despite this, she prevailed against extraordinary odds. Nothing could keep her down," said Tracey.

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