

# Hine-o-te-Rangi

The Adventures  
of Jean Batten

by Bronwen Wall



1928 was an exciting year in the world of flying. The newspapers went crazy when Bert Hinkler made the first solo flight from England to Australia. They went crazy again when Charles Kingsford Smith flew 11,500 kilometres across the Pacific, from the United States to Australia – also a first. He set another record a few months later when he successfully flew across the Tasman.

## Learning to Fly

Back in New Zealand, an eighteen-year-old named Jean Batten avidly followed this news. In these thrilling times, she had a dream. She wanted to become the first woman to fly alone from England to New Zealand. So in 1930, the year she turned twenty, Jean travelled to England to learn how to fly.

At the London Aeroplane Club, some of the other trainee pilots didn't think Jean would cut it. She was slow to learn. But Jean knew what she wanted, and as she said, it was "quite useless to ... dampen my enthusiasm in any way". By December – seven months after Amy Johnson became the first woman to fly solo from England to Australia – Jean had her private pilot's licence. She began training for the next stage. This meant learning about cross-country navigation, meteorology, and aeroplane mechanics. Two years later, Jean qualified as a professional pilot.

## The Try-again Girl

Spurred on by Johnson's success, Jean began planning her own flight to Australia. She was bold and focused, and within a few months of becoming a professional pilot, she'd found a way to buy her first plane: a Gipsy Moth. On her first attempt to reach Darwin, in April 1933, Jean was caught in sandstorms over Syria and Iraq. Her plane went into a spin, and she recovered just in time – though she had to spend the night alone in the desert, sleeping beside her plane.

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*I was horrified to see what looked like a wall of sand overtaking me. I put the nose down and tried to outrace it.*

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Two days later, Jean flew into another sandstorm over Pakistan, and she crash-landed in a field near Karachi. She escaped with no injuries, but her plane was wrecked. Undaunted, she returned to England to find a new one.

A year later, in a second Gipsy Moth bought for her by an oil company, Jean tried again. This time, she ran out of fuel over Italy and had to make an emergency landing in the dark in the middle of Rome. Somehow, she managed to find a tiny patch of clear ground where she could land. Jean had her damaged plane repaired and flew back to England to start again. Two days later, on 8 May 1934, she set out a third time. She finally reached Darwin in fourteen days, twenty-two hours, and thirty minutes – bettering Amy Johnson's time by over four days! The journey had required twenty-five landings and take-offs.

Jean became world famous because of this new record. In Australia, huge crowds gathered to catch sight of her, and she received a flood of fan mail – over a hundred letters a day. After a month in Australia, Jean toured New Zealand. Her arrival in Auckland brought trams and traffic to a standstill. People wondered what this incredible twenty-four-year-old would try next. The following April, Jean flew back to England. This made her the first woman to fly herself from England to Australia and back again.

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Greeting the crowd in Sydney after breaking Amy Johnson's record



## The Longest Journey

Jean bought a new plane, a Percival Gull. This was faster and more comfortable than her Gipsy Moth. In 1935, she used her Gull to fly from England to Brazil, becoming the first woman pilot to cross the South Atlantic. The 8,000-kilometre flight took just over two and a half days. Again, "Jeanius" made the headlines.

In October 1936, Jean embarked on her dream journey – the longest by far: almost 22,000 kilometres from England to New Zealand. Jean's route took her across Europe, then over India and Indonesia to Australia. She reached Darwin in record time – a whole day faster than the record holder, Jimmy Broadbent.

Jean rested in Sydney before attempting the final leg to New Zealand. This meant crossing the Tasman Sea, a tricky stretch of water known for wild and stormy weather. Many people urged Jean not to attempt the flight. It was too far and too dangerous – she would be lost at sea. Before leaving Sydney, Jean announced that if she disappeared, no one was to search for her plane.

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*If I go down in the sea, no one must fly out to look for me.*

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**TOP:** Jean and her Percival Gull – luxury compared with the Gipsy Moth

**BOTTOM:** Jean and her black kitten, Buddy, given to her for luck



# Moths AND Gulls



Jean's first two planes were **De Havilland Gipsy Moths**, which travelled at a speed of 130 kilometres an hour. The moths had a range of 1,290 kilometres – the distance Jean could fly before running out of petrol.

Jean's third plane was a **Percival Gull Six**. It was nearly twice as fast as a Gipsy Moth (240 kilometres an hour) and could carry a lot more fuel. Depending on the weather, the Gull had a range of up to 3,220 kilometres.



## LANDMARK FLIGHT DETAILS

- ..... England to Australia (May 1934)
- ..... Return flight to England (April 1935)
- England to Brazil (November 1935)
- England to New Zealand (October 1936)

## Jean Batten

**BORN:** Rotorua, New Zealand,  
15 September 1909

**DIED:** Majorca, Spain,  
22 November 1982



When Jean flew her Gipsy Moth, she wore a leather helmet and goggles to protect her face. A thick flying suit and fur gloves kept her warm. When it was hot, she wore a cotton flying suit.

## Ups and Downs

A few people did consider Jean foolhardy, but she took her flying very seriously. To be the best, she had to stay as fit as possible. "I trained systematically ...," she explained, "skipping, running, swimming, walking, and horse riding." But even a well-prepared pilot finds it difficult flying alone. In the air, Jean was kept busy plotting her course, checking her position against maps, writing in the flight log, and pumping petrol into the tanks (a job that wasn't necessary in the Gull, which had electric fuel pumps). She had to keep herself fuelled, too. It was hard to eat and drink while flying, especially when the plane hit an air pocket.

Jean also had to be resilient. She experienced disappointment and expense when she crashed and wrecked her planes. At times, she was scared, and she suffered from the hours of isolation. "When I had been over the sea for about two hours, I experienced a terrible loneliness – my only company (if they can be called such) were the four flames from the stubb-exhaust pipes of my engine and the purr of the engine itself."

At the same time, Jean saw extraordinary things: the night sky "encrusted with stars", the moon "coating my plane with its ghost-like rays". She flew across brilliant blue skies with the sun blazing down. She flew through rainbows and rain clouds and sandstorms.



## Maiden of the Skies

Jean wanted to explore the world, and she wanted to break records. She longed to fly faster and further than anyone else. She also wanted to show people that an aeroplane could take them to places they'd never thought possible. Plus she had a secret wish. She wanted her achievements to draw the world together. "I hoped that, in some small way, by my flight, I had perhaps been able to strengthen the great bonds of friendship ..." she wrote in her memoir.

It was a time of great possibility, and the public was eager for news of Jean and her adventures. When she finally reached New Zealand – her greatest adventure of all – on 16 October 1936, the crowd waiting at Māngere aerodrome broke through the barrier and surrounded her plane. In her hometown of Rotorua, a few months later, she was honoured by Te Arawa with a feather cloak and the title Hine-o-te-Rangi: Maiden of the Skies.

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Jean in Rotorua, being greeted by Guide Bella



# Anyone's to Explore

Jean's epic journey from England to New Zealand took just over eleven days, with twenty-four landings and take-offs. She'd had little sleep and was physically and mentally exhausted. Instead of a celebration tour, like she'd planned, Jean had a much-needed rest at Franz Josef.

The following February, Jean flew back to Australia. A few months later, she returned to England, setting another record with her time of five days, eighteen hours. She continued to make small flights around Europe, but not long-distance ones, and she would never hit the headlines again. Perhaps she didn't mind. The times were changing. Soon bigger, faster, safer planes were being made.

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*Every flyer who ventures across oceans to distant lands is a potential explorer.*

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These could carry people together all around the globe. As Amy Johnson put it: "Our job is done. Record breakers are wanted no more."

Besides, Jean Batten had achieved her lifetime's dream. She'd proven to the world that the sky was hers – and anyone's – for the taking.



# Hine-o-te-Rangi: The Adventures of Jean Batten

by Bronwen Wall

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