



# An interview with Otmar Birkner (owner of Autogyro Europe)

Otmar Birkner is the owner of Autogyro Europe, manufacturers of the very popular MT-O3 and Calidus range of gyros. The company is represented in New Zealand by Tony Unwin of Gyrate in Tauranga and Otmar was one of the visitors to NZ who travelled with Tony on the recent Air Safari (see article in this issue). KiwiFlyer took the opportunity to speak with Otmar about his company while he was here.

details of the factory and aircraft, we talked about growth. The company has doubled turnover every year and at seven aircraft per week is now a, if not the, major player in the industry. Otmar's approach to sales has been to partner with like minded people. He has appointed a network of distributors that covers 36 countries, all of whom are aviators with aviation backgrounds, often

German ultralight autogyro regulations in September of 2003. In 2005 they split the company with Thomas focusing on a training school, Michael leaving and Otmar taking over sales and production. By this time their aircraft had become the first choice for gyros in Germany with more than 60 sold.

There is no secret that they started with an existing design, the Spanish ELA gyro. Originally, Thomas and Michael had wanted to certify this aircraft for sale in Germany. They undertook a variety of design changes in order to do so but the Spanish factory refused to incorporate these into production. Otmar explains they realised that for the cost and effort of purchasing and then modifying each aircraft, they could just as easily build their own, thus also ensuring they had full control over the design and quality of the finished product.



Otmar Birkner piloting one of his Calidus gyros on the recent Around NZ Air Safari.

**THERE ARE** now more than 600 MT-O3 gyros flying in 36 countries around the world. Production from the factory in Germany is currently seven aircraft per week, five of these being MT-O3 and two being the new Calidus model. Turnover last year was 12m Euro which is an outstanding achievement given that the company began less than 10 years ago and also given that there are other more well established autogyro manufacturers in the international market. There are now nine Autogyro Europe gyros on the NZ register.

As well as talking about current and future products, we were particularly interested in how this growth had been achieved and in Otmar's approach to running his business.

A most obvious trait is that Otmar loves to fly. In 2006 he completed a 12500km trip around Australia in one of his MT-O3 gyros. He has also flown an 8000km tour of South Africa and an 8000km tour of Northern Europe. And now he has flown around New Zealand as well. He says that life is a pleasant mixture of fun and business, but you get the feeling that life is business and that business is fun. I couldn't help but ask whether there had ever been any scares on these long distance odysseys which have often traversed a good amount of tiger country (many gyro pilots can claim credit for at least one engine stoppage – and safe landing). Otmar said no, never a problem, touch wood.

### Partners for Growth

Still staying away from the technical

in the training sector. His stated aim is to achieve common benefits amongst all those involved with the organisation.

All of the distribution arrangements are based on handshakes and friendship, rather than lengthy business contracts and Otmar endeavours to visit every distributor at least once every three years. At a rate therefore of one per month, this involves a lot of travel, something Otmar considers well worthwhile in order to "learn of anything that can be done to improve the product or to better meet the needs of distributors and customers".

### In the Beginning

Otmar started out with an interest in trikes and microlights. He was manufacturing microlights on a small scale (10 per annum) when approached in the early 2000's by Thomas Kiggen to undertake larger scale gyro production based on a project Thomas had been working on with partner Michael Ullrich since 1999. Their aircraft became the first machine to gain approval under new

We were curious as to the company's selection of polished stainless steel for the aircraft frame. Otmar explained this choice as being a trade off between the added weight incurred (achieving the necessary strength adds 10kg over alternate materials) versus eliminating the concerns of potential hidden corrosion they had with microlight owners who might not adhere to required maintenance and inspection programmes.

Autogyro Europe's production is now entirely in-house except for the engines which are Rotax. They have a 4500m2 facility at Hildesheim in Germany and have approximately 50 employees. Factory leadtime is currently 3 months from placement of order.

### New Models and the Future

Since 2008 the company has been developing a fully enclosed tandem model called Calidus. This is now in production at the rate of 2 per week, limited only by the requirement to construct more moulds to produce the composite fuselage. Otmar says that Calidus was designed to avoid

adverse yaw characteristics often associated with fully enclosed pusher gyros and that extensive flight testing had proved this capability. Otmar used a Calidus during his Air Safari flight around New Zealand, this machine currently being available for demonstration flights at Gyrate in Tauranga.

Otmar says that especially with the reputation of gyros changing for the better, the company is only at the beginning of its market opportunity. New customers cover the spectrum of aviation backgrounds, with many keen to add a multitude of accessory options to their aircraft. Improved rules are being developed or adopted in many countries and with German and UK certification behind them, Autogyro Europe are in a strong position to accommodate different international standards as required. They are not selling in America yet (partly due to America's penchant for litigation) but are investigating avenues with which to pursue this market. They are also investigating the potential for fully certified autogyros and although this has been often talked about by other manufacturers, one gets the feeling that Otmar and Autogyro Europe are more likely than most to take the matter on seriously and accomplish it.

A final indication of Otmar's enthusiasm for the industry comes when he explains how he recently bought the airport their production facility is based at. After hearing that it was likely to be closed down due to losses of some 300k Euro per annum, in spite of 60,000 movements a year, he stepped in and bought it recently for One Euro. In his words "It's another hobby I have now".

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