

# Going 'Cornhusking' Over the Arctic Circle

By Kirell A. Lakhman  
*The Moscow Tribune*

The airplanes, a pair of Antonov An-2s circa 1950, sit beside a short airstrip outside St. Petersburg. If a plane can look out of shape — like it's had too much *sala* and not enough miles on the treadmill — the An-2, in all its archaic stumpiness, does.

Originally designed in 1947 for the Soviet Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry for crop-dusting, the An-2, a chubby, single-propellor biplane nicknamed the *Kukuruznik*, or cornhusker, soon impressed Aeroflot engineers who saw its work-horse stamina and go-anywhere design as a healthy asset to the booming airline.

On July 10, the two biplanes, technical fossils of what was once the world's largest airline, took off from St. Petersburg on a month-long expedition that will take eight crew members and more than a tonne of supplies across Russia's length of the barren Arctic Circle.

The journey, the brainchild of American pilot-cum-thrill seeker Shayne Lundgren, is equal parts sociological mission, documentary and simple adventure. It will take the team — among them writers, cameramen and others "just looking to do something different" — to more than two dozen small villages and once-secret military cities scattered throughout the vast Siberian steppes, ending in the frozen gulag capital of Magadan.

American aeronautics maven Ron Davies will be aboard for the expedition.

A slight, excitable man with thick glasses and a sharp wit, Davies was asked to join the team by Lundgren because of his unique knowledge of airplanes, especially of the pair of



Photo by Ron Davies

The An-2, first designed in 1947 as a crop-duster, fitted as a floatplane. Now an international team of sociologists, writers and thrill-seekers have taken the plane on a voyage along the Arctic Circle.

Antonovs donated by the Russian Amateur Aviators' Association.

The author of *A History of the World's Airlines*, *Airlines of the United States*, and *Aeroflot: An Airline and Its Aircraft*, Davies, formerly a Lindbergh Fellow of Aerospace History at Washington, DC's, Smithsonian Institution and currently its Curator of Air Transport, has devoted most of his life to aviation research. When Lundgren, himself a pilot for Air Berlin in Germany, approached Davies with the prospect of flying with him across Siberia, he jumped at the chance.

"When I'd heard that these enthusiasts were getting together for a flight across Russia, I knew that was what I needed to do," said Davies, a native Briton, who is also a Fellow of three British Royal Societies — Aeronautical, Geographical, and the Arts — and an associate of the French National Air and Space Academy.

"What a terrific opportunity to see that part of the world under such wonderful circumstances."

Davies, who turned 73 last week, is no stranger to high adventure. He travelled to Antarctica three years ago on a similar expedition, and has travelled the world over in his research for the Smithsonian and other organisations. "I've always had a wanderer's lust," he said. "I have an instinct or interest in the world's wild places."

The journey, which is as much a tribute to aviation technology — or, in this case, simplicity and elemental reliability — as it is to unspoiled adventurism, will offer the team an intimate look at a part of the globe where dozens of cultures were long kept hidden from the eyes of the world. "A very important reason for the trip is to witness the changes in society that happened over the years throughout Siberia," explained

Davies. "There's so many sociological aspects we want to look at," he said. "How are these people getting on today" after the collapse of the communism that was never theirs yet always there, he asks.

Accompanying Davies on the team will be a crew from the Smithsonian Communications Department as well as a French television crew, each tagging along in the hopes of capturing the unique hues and myriad personalities of the vast region and re-telling the journey as a documentary. From the northern Russian city of Petrozavodsk through the ancient Arkhangelsk to the once-secret military assembly-line towns of Norilsk and Anadyr, the trans-Siberian expedition will travel east along what Davies calls the "Northern Route," taking the two planes, coughing and squeaking with age, along the Arctic Circle running the length of Russia's Far North.



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