On November 17, Guillaume Féral and Mike Lomberg took off from Geneva, Switzerland, for Verona, Italy, the first of 150 hops on an around-the-world adventure that will take them to six continents and 80 countries over nine months. Not unusual, such adventures. Except that the pilots are wheelchair users.

Mr. Féral, 58, French but Madagascar-born, learnt to fly at 19, but at 25 crashed while learning to fly gliders, and lost the use of his legs. Mr. Lomberg, 60, a South African Air Force pilot, later a test pilot, had a vehicle accident which damaged his spinal cord. Both are hugely experienced pilots, and Mr. Féral is also a qualified instructor.

They aren’t the first paraplegic pilots to solo around the world, but they will be the first in a light sport aircraft. Records don’t matter though; their mission is combating prejudice and promoting inclusion of persons with disabilities. They are raising funds for Handicap International, and the expedition is managed by Handiflight, a nonprofit organisation.

Technology helps
They are grateful, they say, to be in an era when technology helps people with physical disabilities be pilots. Mr. Féral says there is a community of blind pilots in France who use a device that gives them headphone inputs on everything their planes are doing and where they are, and there is a strong community of deaf pilots in U.S. Mr. Lomberg says that while qualifying for his European licence at Aerobility, an organisation in the U.K., he met pilots with a range of disabilities. “It was quite an emotional experience for me. There are new disabilities coming into flying, if I can put it like that. For each, there is a regulation process to understand how it is going to work. I think the European environment, and even more the U.K., is open to accommodating pilots with various disabilities.”

In Australia, New Zealand and the Americas, disabled pilots of ten nationalities will join them, two at a time.

What are their India plans? For both, it is a first visit. On the itinerary: meetings with Fédération Aéronautique Internationale and Lions International members, and a chat with two young Indian women who are flying around the world. Aside from that, Mr. Féral says, “We don’t know. Each time we arrive somewhere, it is always beyond our expectations. We must leave things open to randomness and what life can offer us.”

Mr. Lomberg agrees. “As we get closer [to each halt], we are discovering opportunities to engage with people we would never otherwise come across. I read a book once which said, if you only visit one country other than the one where you live, visit India; that has always stuck in my mind. I’ve always been wary as a disabled person of taking a holiday in India, but I have decided I need to approach this with a complete open heart and open mind and discover what made [that author] say that.”

Guillaume Féral on his aircraft. FACEBOOK/HANDIFLIGHT