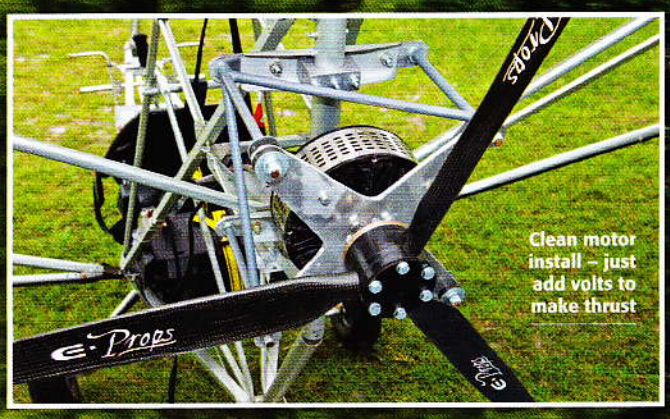
Electric Zigolo

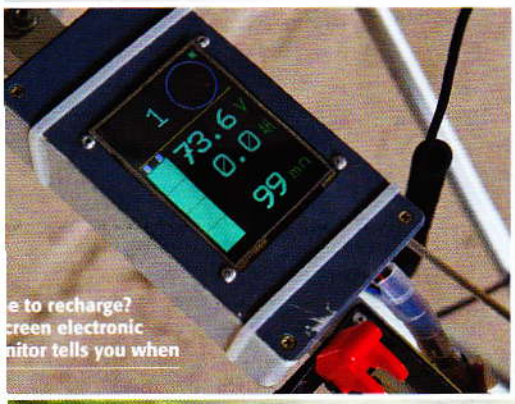
Ed Hicks reports on an electric-powered SSDR that's up and flying now, and promises to be in the UK in the not-too-distant future



Clean motor install – just add volts to make thrust

Refuelling, but not as we know it

We heard about Chip Erwin's electric conversion of his Aviad Zigolo after he'd made the short cross-country flight to Sun 'n Fun 2014 from his South Lakeland base – something he thinks might be a first for that type of aircraft/powerplant combination. Reports were of a flying machine whose loudest noise was made by its propeller, so walking through the rows of T-hangars to meet Chip, I wondered why I could hear the steady thrum of an engine. Rounding the corner, the source of the noise became clear; Chip was charging the batteries using a small, four-stroke Honda generator – or as he called it, 'refuelling'.



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Chip is a good friend of Graham Smith of Sprite Aviation, the UK importer for the Zigolo, and in talking to Graham he realised that the airframe seemed like a good prospect to electrify. Chip picks up the story.

"I was looking around and realised the technology exists now for a viable, light, electric aircraft as long as you are not going cross-country, and that perhaps the best place to start was where the technology works and makes sense. USA Part 103 ultralights and the UK SSDR light aircraft are perfect. Hardly anyone expects to go anywhere but up in these style aircraft. With the Zigolo, whose designer, Francesco Di Martino was inspired by the Sandlin Goat glider, just getting up high enough to catch thermals is the objective for the afternoon glider pilots, and having some extra power to reach the next thermal or the airport threshold is a big bonus. Plus, of course, you no longer have to worry about the two-stroke propensity to stop stroking!

"I'm currently using the French Electravia GMPE 102 motor. At 26hp (19kW), it's similar power to the Vittorazi Moster 185 used on the regular Zigolo. The E-screen electronic monitor is also from Electravia. The motor controller is from China, although I'm also considering one from the Czech Republic. Oh, and the batteries are from Korea. A true worldwide sourcing effort! The conversion from petrol to electric adds 25lb.

"I've been getting reliable flights of greater than 30 minutes, and I'm now integrating new components to push the endurance to 45 to 60 minutes and reduce the weight some more. This will be the version I'm hoping to market, and if everything goes to plan, I'm hoping the testing of version two will be completed shortly after Oshkosh, with deliveries possible in the autumn. I am selling delivery slots for $10.

"With the electric Zigolo, I can fly at 300 to 500ft and really enjoy the view without worrying about noise or the fear of an engine failure. Think of an aerial bike ride around the neighbourhood. Electric flight is turning out to be quiet, smooth, and reliable."

At this lighter end of the market, Chip thinks the gap between radio-controlled aircraft models and real aircraft is shrinking, and that the now common electric-powered ready-to-fly (RTF) model that you take out of the box, plug in the components and take to the skies within a few hours could be a reality for full-size. His ultimate plan is to offer the same thing but in a bigger box, but jokes about stencilling the crate, 'Just add pilot' or 'batteries included'!

We've got to admit, Chip's concept for this machine gets us charged up, and we hope a few Electric Zigolo aircraft find plug sockets here in the UK in the not-too-distant future. ■

www.aeromarine-lsa.com/zigolo-mg