

Adventures In An Escapade

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 Wednesday, 31 January 2007
 Last Updated Wednesday, 31 January 2007

Having spent 2005 building an Escapade, the time had come for me and Claire to have some adventures (or maybe even escapades) in it.

In the past we had enjoyed the competitive side of microlight flying so entered the various rounds of national competitions to qualify us to be part of the UK team going to the 2006 European Microlight Championships in August. This year the event was to be held in Nördlingen, in the Bavarian region of Germany. The serious part was to do well in the competition, the adventure was to fly there and back.

Flying abroad (in a microlight) was something we'd never done before so for some time before departure day I'd been researching answers to all those niggly questions that pop into your mind – usually in the early hours of the morning. (A notebook on the bedside table is a must!). Like what are the radio calls you should make when joining an airfield circuit in France? How do you file a flight plan to cross international borders? What are the telephone codes for international dialling? Etc etc.

One last minute job was to adorn the nose of the aircraft with 'QinetiQ' (where I work) stickers in return for special leave I'd been granted for some of the competition days. The aircraft 100 hour service had been carried out (it would have fallen due while we were away) and life jackets had been bought. So, loaded up with a tiny tent and sleeping bags and armed with my 'really useful folder' of info for flying abroad, we set off from Chilbolton one Friday evening for the first leg of the journey.

Since this was to be our first channel crossing, I was definitely going for the narrowest strip of water possible so we routed initially to Headcorn airfield in Kent which is a favourite jumping-off point for cross channel microlight flights. Not only that, but Jim Pearce was temporarily based there as he was flying the plane for the Headcorn parachute club and offered us a bed for the night. This meant we could put off having to squeeze into the tiny tent a little bit longer.

We arrived at Headcorn after just 1 hour 20 minutes in the air. Flying across the English countryside in the still evening air was a relaxing way to start the adventure. Surprisingly, the South East is the most wooded region of England and when seen from the air you can well believe it. During the course of the evening, a number of other microlights from the UK team turned up at Headcorn so at least we would have company for the channel crossing. We had been keeping an eye on the weather forecast which was threatening to develop into thunderstorms and sure enough there were periods of rain and flashes of lightning throughout the night. I was glad we weren't in the tiny tent.

Next morning was bright and clear so back at the airfield we filed the flight plan and after waiting for confirmation that all had been accepted, donned the lifejackets and prepared to take off. The destination was to be Abbeville with Le Touquet as an alternative diversion airfield. Approaching the Kent coast we could see that the weather was clear all the way across the channel and it was even possible to see the hazy outline of France. The crossing took about twenty minutes and we were soon passing over the comparative safety of the French coast at Cap Griz Nez. I guess it's human nature that despite having flown nearly 100 hours with this particular engine, you still expect it to stop mid-channel. Rationalising that the engine doesn't know it's over water helps a bit, but even so, senses are heightened. Did the engine note change then or was it just my ears popping?....

On reaching France we had to make a rapid adjustment not only to the different appearance of the landscape but also the change in style of the air maps we were using. However the visibility was good making it easy to navigate to Abbeville, our first landing field in France. We were the second of the aircraft in our loose formation of seven to arrive in the circuit and conscientiously made the radio calls in our best French, 'Vent arrière' (downwind), 'Finale; piste zero deux' (finals runway 02). I was sure we were impressing the locals with our airmanship and command of their language but then one of our number made the call 'Vent derrière' which indicated that his wind was coming from a different location entirely and rather ruined the semblance of professionalism. Flight time from Headcorn to Abbeville was 1 hour 30 minutes. We stopped at Abbeville for just over an hour, had a snack and topped up fuel tanks. The perceived wisdom among the others in the group who were experienced at flying abroad was that if fuel was available then you should fill up the tanks - you could never be sure that fuel would be available at the next landing field so 'get it while you can'!

From Abbeville our route was south east to take us north of the Paris air-space heading for our next destination airfield

called Epernay, just south of Reims. On this leg we passed Amiens which was where the famous WW2 DH Mosquito attack on Amiens Jail ("Operation Jericho") took place in 1944, when a precision attack from the air knocked down the prison walls to allow members of the French resistance to escape. As our services weren't required on this occasion, we bimbled past, a respectful distance from the town.

Epernay airfield was not that easy to spot as all the runways were grass but after 1 hour 50 min in the air we arrived in the overhead and made the circuit calls to land. This time I threw in an extra 'piste dégagée' to announce I had vacated the runway after landing. This evidently impressed my fellow pilots to the extent that I was subsequently told that as I could speak French (!!!) it was my job to phone the local taxi firm and arrange transport into town. I put it off as long as I could but putting up a tiny tent only takes so long, so with some trepidation, I rang the number and did my best to arrange taxis for fourteen (oui, vraiment, quatorze!) people at seven pm. Fortunately, at the appointed hour only two minibuses turned up (not the fourteen I was half expecting) and we set off into town to eat.

Next to Reims, Epernay is the main town for the production and shipment of champagne and many famous cellars/houses such as Moët et Chandon, Mercier, Brut, Perrier, Dom Perignon and de Castellane are located here. Our taxi ride took us past the headquarters of many of these famous names. Naturally we had to supplement the meal with a bottle – it would have been inconsiderate not to! At the end of the evening we emerged from the restaurant just as the heavens opened and a spectacular thunderstorm lit up the sky, but thanks to Messrs Moët et Chandon, somehow the prospect of a night in the tiny tent didn't seem to matter….

We were all up fairly early next morning ready to make the most of the day. The previous day we had lost time due to channel crossing formalities and also having to put our clocks forward an hour on entering France. Today we were expecting to complete our journey to Nördlingen in three easy legs and it looked as if the weather was playing ball too after the fireworks display of the previous night.

Soon after take-off from Epernay, on the first 120 nautical mile leg, we were passing over the characteristic terrain for which the region is famous; mile after mile of ordered vineyards hugging the slopes. The vines' position on the slopes provides the best sunlight and the run-off of any excess water. Gradually, the landscape changed as we passed into the Ardennes region with its extensive forests and rolling hills. Places to land in an emergency were becoming few and far between but we had been practising landing and stopping in a 100metre deck for the competitions so in reality it would usually have been possible to find somewhere to set down had we needed to.

We were heading for Vesoul airfield which is located on a plateau overlooking the town itself. The airfield is home to a parachute school and a general aviation club, and has steep forested ground on three sides and the town on the fourth. Like many French airfields, the facilities were excellent but as usual, there was hardly anyone about. Because we had left Epernay so early, none of us had breakfasted and it appeared that the Vesoul airfield café was not geared up to cater for fourteen hungry flyers who had appeared, literally, out of the blue. However as so often happens amongst the sport flying community, someone from the local club volunteered to rush off into town for supplies. Within half an hour we were all sitting down to a full continental breakfast and being waited on hand and foot. The Vesoul club members also assisted us in faxing off our flight plan, necessary for the next leg which would take us across the border from France into Germany.

Soon we were airborne again from Vesoul and heading for Bremgarten airfield, a short leg this time of only 70nm. The hilly terrain of the Ardennes transformed into the more rugged Vosges mountains and then after a few more miles the land flattened out as we reached the Rhine valley and soon after, the river itself came into view. It was easy to see why over the centuries the Rhine has been such a formidable natural obstacle to advancing armies and also why it has been such an important trade route into central Europe. From this point we were in radio range of Bremgarten so announced our approach and requested airfield information. Thankfully the controller replied in clear English; just as well as I hadn't brushed up on German airfield-speak. Ten minutes later we were lined up on the huge runway at Bremgarten which had been a German Air Force reconnaissance base flying Phantom RF4Es until the mid 1990's and was now in general aviation use.

Not until we'd parked and got out did we realise how hot the day had become. Sod's Law meant that to pay the landing and fuel fees we had to climb to the top of the control tower four floors, each hotter than the previous one until we opened the door to the greenhouse at the top to find – air conditioning. Phew.

After a brief stop at the airfield café we were keen to get away on the last leg of the trip as we could see towering thunderhead clouds developing in the distance, but fortunately not in the direction we were heading.

Bremgarten is situated on the flood plain of the Rhine valley but a few miles to the east the ground rises rapidly. We had to climb quite hard after take-off to gain altitude before we reached the rising ground and with the high ambient temperatures I was expecting the engine would be working very hard. In the event it took it in its stride and we were soon at 5000ft and back cruising in the cooler air. As we progressed on track we seemed to be following a line of escarpments

dotted with glider airfields. Gliding has always been popular in Germany right back to the pioneering days of Otto Lilienthal and on this sunny Sunday it seemed as if half of Germany was aloft in gliders as we were often having to dodge and deviate from our route to keep clear of them.

There were two features which we began to see more and more frequently from this point on; the first was wind farms, sometimes just singly or in pairs but often row upon row of them. Between one pair we flew over was a crop field on which had been mown a detailed map of Germany – or maybe the aliens with their crop circles have progressed to cartography now…

The other feature was the number of castles (Schloss) of fairy-tale character (or maybe Harry Potter style, to be more contemporary), which always seemed to be built in the most inaccessible locations, often perched on the very top of a rocky pinnacle or sometimes apparently clinging to the edge of a wall of rock.

We knew we were getting close to Nördlingen, our destination, when we crossed the edge of the Ries crater. The Ries (about 25 km in diameter) was formed 15 million years ago by the impact of a large meteorite that hit the earth. Today, the Ries is one of the best preserved and researched meteorite craters in the world with a rim which rises about 200metres above the crater floor. Nordlingen is situated within the crater and is a medieval city which with its own perfectly preserved encircling wall fits in exactly with its surroundings. We flew past the town to reach the airfield and were soon touching down on the smooth tarmac of Nordlingen to a very warm welcome from the locals.

Within half an hour the whole of our group of flyers had touched down; all had made the 600 or so mile trip safely and without incident. A cold German beer on the terrace of the airfield bar was the perfect way to celebrate our arrival before we began to set up camp which was to be home for the next two weeks of competition flying.

Next time – The journey back, landing on a road in France and nearly coming to grief over the channel.