

## Robin Flying Group – into Africa

We are a non-equity flying group or small private flying club operating a selection of Robin DR400s from Exeter Airport. Being fast, quiet and comfortable and offering an outstanding view of the world outside, these aircraft are ideally suited to touring and so to fly-outs in company with each other.

Our fly-out culture ranges from the impromptu "Where shall we go for breakfast/lunch/tea today" (most weekends) through several more organised ramblings abroad to one "headline" event each year.

Last year's included a tour of the Robin factory in a circumnavigation of France over 4 days, the year before a circumnavigation of Southern Ireland taking in the Arran Islands. Both had involved six pilots in 3 DR400s and were hugely enjoyable - though not always plain sailing due to weather. Cruising in company somehow offers more than the sum of the parts and minor setbacks successfully overcome actually seem to enhance the level of satisfaction.

Perhaps not entirely by coincidence the same six pilots participated both years, becoming a well-honed team.

So what to do for 2009? Something a little more ambitious to keep these "Kerrymen" happily challenged but at the same time not too daunting for our least experienced members. "Let's go inter-continental" was quickly resolved into a plan to fly through France and Spain to Morocco and a time span set for 20<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> March.

We had 3 Robin Flying Group DR400s at our disposal plus Dermot's DR500 President (which he insisted it would be sad to leave at home on an expedition for which it would be so ideally suited!) so with our normal format of 2 per plane, room for 8 pilots. The wannagoes soon crystallized into 6 definite can-goes so we elected to take G-CEKO a rare 2 seat DR400/100 Cadet, G-GCIY a 160hp DR400/140B and terrific load-lugger plus G-GMIB the DR500. This would leave our trusty 2+2 G-GAOH to keep happy those members who could not come.



*The hardware at Les Sables D'Olonne*

The crew were equally diverse, down to 3 Kerrymen this time and experience ranging from around 100hrs to 1600hrs. Nevertheless, with a doctor, vet, IT specialist, man from the Met Office, aircraft mechanic and Barbara (the one lady pilot, who is French and speaks Spanish and some Arabic) we looked to be covered for most eventualities!

The initial parameters for our route were variety, interesting places to stay and frequent comfort/refreshment breaks.

Some of us were not over-confident of our personal range and it is often such a pleasure to meet and engage with the locals at small airfields rather than just overfly them – particularly in France.

We quickly figured that Spain was going to be more limited for stopping places, some legs requiring 2 hrs or more. We had also heard of severely delayed turnarounds at Spanish Airports. So perhaps fewer stops would be preferable anyway – just have to take some "Travel Johns" for psychological reassurance!

Our IGN French charts from last year were still in date and for Spain we opted for Jeppesen charts as these were readily available and had recently been updated. An American TPC dating from 1998 was the best on offer for Morocco but we only planned a one-night stopover and had heard that we could get all the info we needed at Tanger Airport.

“Navbox” flight planning software proved, as ever, invaluable for planning the route, from the initial “broad brush” concept to final detailing - so quick, easy and intuitive in comparison with its clunky competitors. We would have a laptop with us so, as on previous trips, could fine-tune the route at any stop then upload it into our portable Garmin GPSs ensuring that we would “all be singing from the same hymn sheet”.

Far from being politically-correct anti-GPS snobs, we recognise how much easier and more enjoyable GPS can make touring when consulted sensibly and not exclusively. Simply marking off on the map distances to each waypoint provides good correlation between visual and GPS-assisted Nav.

Often flying in formation, we have found simple PMR band walkie-talkies very handy for inter-aircraft communication, particularly when encountering the unexpected - though sadly not always dependable.

As IB the DR500 has a massive range, we decided to take our fuel transfer kit (20litre motor racing dump bottle + siphon pump) so that we could easily download fuel into the other aircraft if we encountered supply problems. We have not yet perfected air to air refuelling techniques!

Preparation responsibilities were shared out:

Derrick detailed the route, supported by Barbara phoning airfields to confirm acceptable routing procedures, fuel prices etc

Richard T collated copies of all our passports, pilots licences and aircraft docs into a master file. He also investigated hotel possibilities. The plan was to choose overnight stops where finding accommodation should be easy but not actually to book until we were sure of arriving! This policy has served us well over many expeditions.

Peter took charge of loading the aircraft and confirming that we would always satisfy W & B requirements. This was greatly simplified by a brilliantly user-friendly spreadsheet developed by Derrick. Simply entering the names of the crew plus the fuel loaded gives an immediate visual presentation of current and zero fuel positions in the envelope for each aircraft.

Dermot carried out an Annual on KO and 50hr inspections on the other two, prepared tool and spares kits, sourced bits and bobs, weighed absolutely everything and harangued allcomers into bringing just one compact item of luggage each.

Richard H ensured that all 3 aircraft left Exeter in spotless condition with a healthy coat of polish above and below to fend off all nationalities of bug.

## **DEPARTURE**

We had all arranged to take 10 days off work to provide realistic flexibility for the 5 or 6 days away envisaged. The plan was to launch early on the Saturday unless a need to get ahead of weather demanded a Friday departure.

With all the planning complete and the aircraft prepared, loaded and fuelled our roles changed subtly, with Derrick reverting to met supremo, Richard T and Barbara as stopover facilitators, Peter in charge of refuelling and the all-important kitty plus Richard H and Dermot responsible for keeping the planes in good order.

With so much metpower to our elbow (Barbara used to work at the Met Office too) we were confident of getting away as planned on Saturday and optimistic about reaching San Sebastian that night, with the likely bonus of tailwinds for most of the way.

## **DAY1 Exeter – San Sebastian**

To deprive Jersey Zone of the entertainment of our formation flying we agreed to leave at five minute intervals, fastest first to facilitate relaxed clearances. This normally works well until someone gets impatient and sets off prematurely getting too close to the one ahead. A last minute cunning plan was hatched to obviate any catching up, we donned our “blobby suits” and lifejackets and started the adventure by launching for Dinard at healthy intervals. An easy Channel crossing augured well...

Recognising that Dinard might not admire our rudimentary fuel transfer system in action on their apron, we refuelled IY and KO formally which always takes an age there (with the refuelling card based as far from the pumps as practicable!). A Ryanair came and went but for once did not disrupt our movements in and out of the terminal too much. Perhaps we were just so relieved to be under way after so much planning that we were supremely relaxed.

In the same vein we decided not to stop for fuel and lunch at La Rochelle, formerly so pleasant and welcoming but now self-important and over-run with tourists - courtesy of Ryanair. Instead, we left Dinard in formation to Les Sables D'Olonne (no fuel) for lunch and Arcachon (no lunch) for fuel. The welcomes were friendly as ever, the lunch good and the fuel relatively cheap though our now habitual battle with Arcachon's recalcitrant pump took longer than usual and several dashes up and down the tower.

We had filed our Arcachon – San Sebastian (France to Spain) flight plan from the Aeroclub at Les Sables. Fortunately, both the French and Spanish proved pretty relaxed about delayed departure times all the way along our route, up to an hour after "Estimated Off-Block Time" being acceptable.

The tailwind persisted to Biarritz where we were cleared along the coast into San Sebastian to land on a carrier deck style runway jutting out into the harbour. In all, a fabulous day's flying - much of it along the beautiful but deserted beaches of the French Atlantic coast. The only disappointment was that the walkie talkies proved frustratingly intermittent.

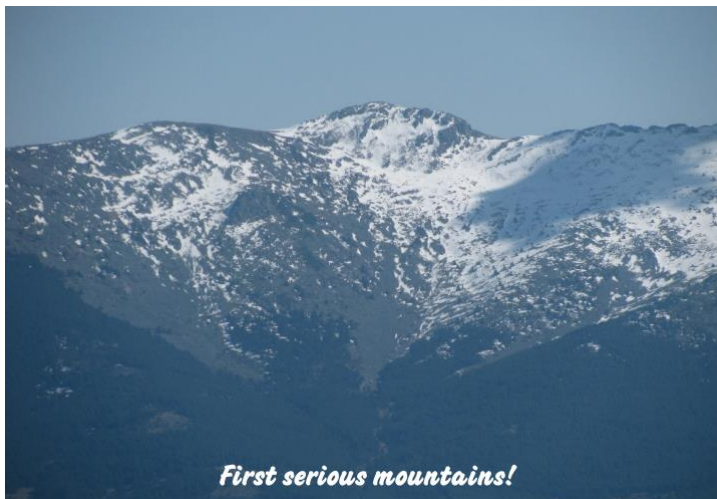
Barbara's linguistic abilities swung into action and found us the Hotel Bidasoa close by and recommendations for restaurants. The walk to the hotel showed the one downside of carrying a laptop and printer, but they were invaluable for implementing a route change at next morning's post-breakfast flight planning session.

### **DAY2 San Sebastian-Cordoba**

We were now in Spain so effectively a flight plan was required for each leg – no casual rambling with ad hoc destinations here. Faced with a choice of Logrono, Vittoria or Burgos as a fuel stop to break the long haul to Madrid, we opted for Burgos after some phoning by Barbara.

Meanwhile, at San Sebastian, Richard and Barbara set off to file the plan while the rest of us set out to load and prepare the planes. Oh no you don't! You can't exit the terminal without presenting a stamped copy of your filed and accepted flight plan. We waited an age – frustratingly in sight of our aircraft only metres away.

Gradually the Spanish art of ensuring that GA pilots fully appreciate the inside of their airport terminals for as long as possible began to dawn on us! Even with Richard and Barbara's skills and diplomacy, supported by the document file tome to fend off all bureaucratic ambushes, no Spanish stopover was ever going to be fast and efficient.



After a delightful flight over the western end of the Pyrenees, Burgos proved particularly slow, being in effect two separate airports with the fuelling at the old one and the admin at the new - miles of taxiing and one beleaguered official as the general factotum. Nevertheless like every other official we came across on our travels, he was charming and friendly.

The leg into Madrid Cuatro Vientos looked potentially the most challenging of the whole trip with complicated user-unfriendly class A airspace all around down to low levels, plus mountains and Danger Areas

set to confound the humble VFR pilot. Derrick had devised a route with a significant but sensible detour to keep us out of the worst trouble and give us a non-radio option right up to the destination.

We discussed the arrival procedures at some length and made a collective decision to fly in formation non-radio until contacting Madrid – in hindsight perhaps our first wrong decision of the trip. In good weather and still with a tailwind everything went fine until we wanted to contact Madrid – and now could not, being the other side of the mountains.

We then suffered the two major deficiencies of the Jeppesen charts simultaneously - poor depiction of high ground and hard-to-interpret outlines of controlled airspace. In this case it was class A very close to ground level, so vitally important. Avoiding the ludicrously low class A left us (and presumably everyone



else on the designated approach route) scraping low over heavily built-up areas feeling embarrassed for the annoyance caused to those below.

We muddled our way into Cuatro Vientos with IY as No 2 having somehow overtaken IB and landed first. The controller was at least as muddled (or muddling!) clearing IY to land then IB too on top of IY still blocking the runway. An invitation for one of our party to visit the tower set our minds racing towards self-examination but proved innocuous, simply seeking to pass on a message for us.

Our attempt at an expeditious turn-around was thwarted as usual, with even a few sandwiches taking an age to arrive, but we broke out of the terminal at last, eating our sandwiches as we walked over to the aircraft.

Departure from Cuatro Vientos for Cordoba was not much more auspicious than arrival. When about to pass reporting point WG as per our flightplan we were suddenly told that we should be routing via W instead – which would now have required a 180 degree turn from our intended heading. Since we were already well clear of their zone anyway, IB and IY simply “resumed their own navigation”, but the more obedient KO behind tried to comply and in doing so lost sight of them in the melee and never caught up.



*Giant solar panels*

IB and IY continued in loose formation, unable to raise KO on the walkie talkies but eventually heard Ciudad Real talking to them, and realised that they must be a fair way behind as KO's transmissions could not be heard. An interesting flight over varied countryside with plenty of windmills and the first banks of giant solar panels seen, but after the tensions of the day so far, not quite as relaxed as usual.

A rash comment from Dermot on how lucky we had been with the weather so far produced an immediate response – rapidly deteriorating visibility with a line of threatening-looking heavy showers partially obscuring the next ridge we had to cross.

To the left of IB it was dark and menacing. To the right was IY - not close, but in just the right position to be collected by IB if it had to turn back! From IY's perspective it looked as though IB was about to fly into the darkest stuff so they held their position where it was not too dark ahead.

In the event both aircraft flew through light patches with no more trouble than visibility severely reduced by rain for a few seconds and continued in the euphoria of relief.



*Turning final  
Cordoba*

With no ATC at Cordoba, IB made more than usually comprehensive blind calls in the hope that they would be heard by KO and provide some reassurance, but on landing IB was greeted by a lady rushing out from the terminal in a state of agitation.

“One of your aircraft is missing” certainly set the hearts a-trembling but when she said it was G-GCIY we were able to reassure her, pointing to IY joining downwind. It turned out that IY's transponder had inadvertently been switched off causing it to disappear from

Sevilla's radar and that they had been unable to raise IY by VHF because of the high ground. Our apologies were accepted and it was reassuring to know that Sevilla had cared.

KO appeared much later having prudently detoured right round the storms after seeing a bolt of lightning.

A tired and slightly chastened bunch of aviators decamped into Cordoba in two taxis to the Hotel Mezquita which had received an excellent write-up in a Pilot article. It lived up to expectations being cheap but very cheerful and ideally situated alongside the historic Mosque.



A few beers, a reasonable meal and a good night's sleep restored us to fitness for action, now determined to learn the lessons of yesterday, the chief of which was all of us to contact all Flight Information Services en route. This would give us progress reports on each other and we resolved to put formation flying on hold until back in France.

The calm of the impressive mosque was a benign influence and coming out we were amused to watch an EU job creation scheme with three men painting a shop fascia. One was smartly dressed, clearly the boss. Another was up the ladder applying the paint very slowly. After each couple of brush strokes he would climb halfway down the ladder and pass the brush to the third man who would dip the brush in the paint and pass it back. It was a parable for our slow passage through Spanish Airports!

### DAY3 Cordoba – Tanger

Cordoba Airport was more friendly and intimate than the other Spanish ones encountered so far, letting us out on the apron freely, but still not quick. It took our accomplished facilitators longer to file the flightplan and pay the modest dues than it did to refuel three aircraft very slowly with 6 forms to complete at the pumps. By now we had come to accept the inevitability of delays and derive more amusement than frustration from the variety of means by which they were achieved!

So on to Jerez for Customs - an airport clearly taking itself seriously with "Follow me" van and bus from the GA apron to the terminal. We had not given the Moroccans 24hrs notice of our flightplan as technically required, but a phone call by Barbara reassured us that our it would be accepted anyway – which it was.

The usual delays gave us plenty of time for lunch before passing through Customs and Immigration control. We were emigrating actually – but, as usual, frustrated in our intentions! Having satisfied all possible security and bureaucratic scrutiny we were released into a departure lounge with the bus waiting for us outside the exit door - but no one to open it.

The wind at Tanger was forecast at 30-40kts, but straight down the runway and it was windy enough on the apron at Jerez. A pleasant but very bumpy flight to Tanger, with the worst turbulence over the Straits of Gibraltar where the strong easterly wind was funnelled at lower levels by the high ground on both continents.

Shortly after we had made contact with Tanger, a crisp English-sounding voice came on the radio: "Tanger, there is a dog running around on the taxiway". "It's OK he is in radio contact with the tower". There was a pregnant pause while the pilot digested this gem then: "A dog, a CHIEN, CHIEN, CHIEN". "Sorry, yes a chien. Thank you for the information".





ATC were kind to us, bringing IB and IY straight in from left base ahead of a Royal Air Maroc 737 who (understandably!) was getting a little agitated on right base, catching us fast. Fortunately there were plenty of exits from the huge runway to allow us to vacate quickly after a minimal ground run, but we had to taxi at a crawl to avoid going flying again.

On arrival at the GA apron were greeted very cordially by two policemen in a jeep and given some forms to fill

in which was no mean task in the strong wind. IY and KO refuelled from the prehistoric bowser once a tolerable price had been negotiated in cash Euros.

On the advice of our in-house met office, we decided to stay put for the night instead on continuing to Fez as there looked to be a risk of us getting stuck there. We tied the aircraft down for the night after being shown the wreckage of a plane that had not been.

Tanger turned out to be a most agreeable destination with even the Airport friendly and welcoming. We were in no rush now so sat drinking mint tea, researching hotels on the laptop.



Once again, by talking to the airport information desk Barbara obtained some useful recommendations and we settled for the hotel Rembrandt. She also established what a taxi should cost to take us into town - 100 Dirhams - and was soon wagging her finger memorably at a would-be rip-off driver - "NON, NON, NON!". This did the trick and we soon had 2 compliant 100 Dirham drivers in their ancient Mercedes. The second was extremely chatty and determined to demonstrate his superiority - eventually overtaking the first in a daring sleight of hand involving a U turn in a traffic jam with much wheel crunching over curbs. He set the mood for the bustling Tanger admirably.



The Rembrandt had perhaps passed its heyday, though with its mildly Art Deco style and bar with a sea view populated by characters reminiscent of the film "Casablanca" it certainly had charm – and was inexpensive.

A walk to and around the medina offered an all-too-brief window on another world before we adjourned to what to us looked like a pretty authentic restaurant where we had an excellent meal.

#### **DAY4 Tanger – Granada**

More forms to fill in at the airport and some to-ing and fro-ing as we were batted backwards and forwards from one official to another, making no progress. That was until Dermot pulled out and donned his Batman cape (aka one of our fluorescent waistcoats with "robin-flying-group" "AIRCREW" printed on it). The effect was instant and we were then treated with due(?) reverence and our passage made easy!



Today we planned a single flight, but one with plenty of contrast. Once again it was bumpy across the Straits, but we got a good view of Gibraltar this time and Ceuta its less impressive-looking Spanish counterpart on the African side. Tanger invited us to call Sevilla but gave us the wrong frequency. By now we were far too on the ball to be fazed by that and soon made contact on

the right frequency before flying along the Costa del Sol past Marbella and calling Malaga.

To our surprise, they were relaxed about clearing us through their zone along the coast at 2000ft until IB, the lead aircraft, was told to contact Malaga Tower for onward clearance, who replied "Join downwind right hand for Runway 14" "We're not landing at Malaga". "Yes, report downwind". "At circuit height or is 2000ft ok?" "2000ft is ok" "G-IB downwind right hand for 18 at 2000ft". "Hold position" (difficult if not in a helicopter!). "G-IB orbiting" (easier said than done with a 2000ft mountain close) . "Do not cross the runway without permission". "G-IB will not cross without permission" seemed to set the controller's mind at rest and he cleared IB immediately to cross behind a landing jet and continue on its way.

IY had been held briefly at a previous reporting point and KO not at all, so we had closed ranks a bit before turning north to climb over 5000ft mountains to Granada. Malaga Approach now allowed us complete freedom of routing and height so each aircraft deviated to varying degrees from the more formal route we had expected to be obliged to fly.

The rugged minimally-populated mountains made an elegant contrast with the density of the villas of the super-wealthy along the coast and set us up perfectly for a relaxed arrival at Granada.

Even a "Follow me" car and a bus to take us the 100 or so metres to the terminal failed to convince our "seen it all" crew that Granada was a "Really Important International Airport". Having only flown a single



leg today we were in good time and with our most intensive day's flying ahead tomorrow, we refuelled all three aircraft – very expensively at 2.25 Euros/litre.

Richard and Barbara sorted a promising-sounding hotel and as we exited the terminal we noticed a poster protesting against the possible privatisation of AENA, the Spanish national airports authority who seem to run virtually all airports in Spain.

Quite a long haul in the taxi but well worth it with a delightful hotel up a narrow cobbled alley (cuesta) in the steeply hilly old city claiming a view of the Alhambra (well just - you could see the flagpoles high above!). After some discussion we decided that a tour of the Alhambra was impractical this late in the day.

Instead, a steep walk up the cuestras to the belvedere of the Plaza de San Nicolas gave us a beautiful if fairly distant view of the Alhambra and a healthy appetite, temporarily assuaged by some beers. Back at ground level we enjoyed tapas and a solid meal.



**DAY5 Granada - Castelnaudary**



This was the big one – lots of flying from the south of Spain over the Pyrennees into France, so an early start – compromised already by a “vital” quest for cigarettes with the Tobacos not opening until 8.30. The first wave left for the airport followed, eventually, by the cigarette-delayed second taxi.

During the longish taxi ride, Dermot mused (in the spirit of our fascination with the seemingly infinite repertoire of potential Spanish Airport delays) “All we need now is an AENA strike”.



Many a true word spoken in jest! On arrival at the airport we were shocked to discover a strike in progress and the airport employees marched past us carrying placards. Ironically, the strike had no negative impact on us. ATC were operating normally, the flightplan to Requena was filed and if anything our exit from the terminal was quicker and easier than usual – thoughts of how much more efficient the Cordoba painting team might have been with two less participants!

As an increasingly competent and aware team ourselves, we were not so stupid as to take the Jeppesen chart's improbable 710 ft elevation of Requena as definitive. A quick internet search produced full details of Requena – with an elevation of 710 metres!

The flight there was fairly spectacular with, yet again, very rugged landscape but easy and straightforward.

Requena itself was different from our previous Spanish encounters being a small airfield open to all GA and largely run by the Brits for the Brits. Cabair operate a flight school here training students ab initio for a modular course leading to the airlines. Apparently they do their first 80hrs or so in the benign climate of Requena before returning to England for their instrument flying – it was interesting to talk to both instructors and students.



Excellent choice of stop (found by Derrick and Barbara at the route planning stage) – friendly and welcoming - no faff or big-airport-itis here, just remember to use the phone to cancel your flightplan on arrival. We faxed our ongoing flightplan to Sabadell, Barcelona's GA airfield, had an excellent light lunch and took off in the midday heat – not especially briskly from over 2000ft agl.

Gradually we elided with Spain's east coast, eventually tracking up the coast and round the back (west) of Barcelona for Sabadell via several easily identifiable reporting points. On changing frequency to Sabadell we were all instructed to report point November, as expected. On arrival there IB, the first, was told to hold, so orbited profusely, periodically dodging a yellow Piper Cub which, presumably, had been given the same instruction but in Spanish.



Eventually IB was cleared to join downwind right for runway 31 which we did, mindful that that published procedure called for a tightish downwind leg avoiding the most heavily built-up areas, only to receive a reprimand for flying too tight a circuit and to be sent long, wide and low over the houses – seemingly completely unnecessarily since there was little other traffic.

Not requiring fuel. IB was directed to the south side of the runway and the others to the fuel bay on the north. IB's

crew set out to file the onward flightplan while the others waited for the fueller – and waited, and waited....It did not matter as filing the flightplan was an equally slow process.

The plan filed was for a route dog-legging to the east of the highest peaks on the Pyrenees instead of straight over the top at 11,000ft as we had contemplated. Discretion seemed the better part of valour at the end of a long day's flying, particularly with the possibility of high winds.

A pleasant and relaxed flight resulted, though the high snow-covered peaks in clear air on our left looked very tempting.

The wind was strong by the time we touched down at Castelnaudary, where we received a warm welcome from the Aeroclub plus an offer to come in specially to refuel us in the morning and a lift into town for those who did not fit in the single taxi.



The Hotel du Canal, on the bank of the Canal du Midi, has a good reputation but was undergoing major building works so was not at its most beautiful. Nevertheless it served us well and made a good launch pad for a walk into town in search of Castelnaudary's famous speciality, Cassoulet. Replete with the rich dish plus some accessories we were glad of the walk along the canal back to the hotel.

#### **DAY5 Castelnaudary - Saumur**

Ideally we would return to Exeter today, but the in-house met office

thought that unlikely as the Channel would probably be blocked with foul weather. We were relaxed about the prospect of an extra night away and resolved to forge ahead for Limoges and Angers as planned and see what happened. That's the beauty of France – no flightplans required, a plethora of airfields as potential diversions and the ability to make up your route as you go.

Limoges came and went without excitement apart from a long delay refuelling IY and KO and over-officious procedures for escaping the terminal – much more like Spain than France. It did, however have a fully functioning Meteo France station manned by a forecaster – very chatty and helpful. He thought it unlikely that we would make it further north than the Loire today, but tomorrow should be reasonable in northern France once the front had passed through.

Shortly after departure, Richard H and Dermot were discussing Angers, our destination (originally planned as a fuel stop), and decided that if we were stopping for the night on the Loire, Saumur would be more appealing and convenient.

*"Limoges from G-IB, request pass a message to IY and KO". "Go ahead IB". "G-IY and G-KO, suggest we land at Saumur, LFOD, 20 miles short of Angers". "Roger". "Affirm". "Did you copy that Limoges? Destination now Saumur, not Angers, G-IB". "Yes, the wine is better in Saumur!"*



We got a good view of the town and Chateau of Saumur on approach to the completely deserted and slightly sad and desolate feeling airfield which used to be so lively. There was a board on the outside of the small terminal building with useful phone numbers such as fire service and taxi, so Barbara organised the latter to take us into town in two drops and include a tour of likely hotels in the first one.



## *Saumur and chateau*



We ended up split between two hotels, one cheap and cheerful, the other smart and potentially expensive but negotiated down substantially into what had become our usual price range. A meet-up for beers followed walks by both parties up to the chateau, then an excellent meal, befitting the last night of the trip.

### **DAY6 Saumur – Exeter**

The smart hotel ended up hosting all for our usual post-breakfast planning, which it did with good grace. The forecast weather was looking acceptable but not certain enough to encourage dawdling or diversion so we resolved to ditch a Channel Island stop and refuel instead at Dinard.

Our original fuel planning had budgeted for filling at Angers, but with no one else at Saumur airfield we put the fuel transfer kit to good use to ensure plenty of reserves for all before taking off for Dinard.

*“G-IB long final 30”. “You look to be lined up for 35 G-IB”. “Sorry, I am on left base for 30”.* (Still can’t get it right after over 2000 miles in the last few days!)

After the usual Dinard refuelling pantomime, we re-checked the met, filed our flightplan and enjoyed a good light lunch. With no Ryanairs in range we even escaped the terminal easily, before donning “blobby suits” and lifejackets and launching, theoretically at five minute intervals, to Exeter via Berry Head.

IB was cleared into Jersey Zone at 3000ft (clearly impossible for VMC) so requested “2000 or below” and was given “at 2000”, suggesting that IY was closer behind than planned. IY then came on frequency and was given “1500 or below”, suggesting that KO was adequately separated behind. IB then accelerated to pull well clear of IY and was eventually granted the “2000 or below” clearance required to clear the cloudbase at 1700ft.

Thereafter, an easy crossing with the Exeter weather fine and a fitting end to a fabulous trip.

Just one problem, voiced by Peter, the un-sung hero of the kitty and so many tedious refuellings, over a cup of tea minutes after arrival back at base:

*“How are we going to top that one then?”*

*Photos courtesy of Derrick and Barbara*



## **SOME OBSERVATIONS**

### **Team:**

The diverse mix of capabilities, experience and personalities worked well both in planning and execution of the expedition and made for entertaining and agreeable non-aeronautical discussion. Our fly-outs have proved time and again that limited flying experience need be no impediment and is hardly ever detectable. Day 2, whilst not the easiest was probably what best galvanised the team into an efficient unit and came at the right time to do so.

Apart from metpower and linguistic abilities, fortunately the “specialist subjects” of members of the team were not called upon!

### **Aircraft:**

All three aircraft performed perfectly without missing a beat and flew in company relatively well for machines of such different power, though IB was clearly happier (and more economical) when allowed to fly faster than the others.

It is hard to envisage any other aircraft type which would have been so enjoyable on a VFR trip like this. The DR 400 beats everything else hands down on view and we were able to enjoy the spectacular scenery to the full from a quiet and comfortable cockpit environment. The DR 500 is even better – a fair bit more spacious and supremely smooth, comfortable and quiet and so much more versatile than its obvious competitors, the Cirrus or DA40. All the aircraft were gratifyingly economical:

|        |          |              |
|--------|----------|--------------|
| G-CEKO | 26.12hrs | 612.22litres |
| G-GCIY | 24.93hrs | 687.94litres |
| G-GMIB | 23.52hrs | 734.59litres |

### **Costs:**

Fuel prices ranged from 1.58 Euros to 2.25 Euros (mean c. £1.72)

Landing/parking fees were generally minimal and would put most UK airfields to shame!

Hotel prices ranged from 39 Euros to 74 Euros

### **Communication:**

It made sense to contact FIS as available – helps keep track of each other

Not everyone knew to disable auto-squelch when trying to hear weak transmissions. Flying in mountainous areas we had a lot of those

Need to try harder for walkie talkie reliability!

### **Navbox:**

Brilliant, but - It is really easy to drag track lines round airspace or other obstructions by creating additional user waypoints. However, these need to be named and easily identified/cross-referenced to charts.

### **Jeppesen charts:**

Positive points = Commonality of style for all countries, Morse decode for beacons.

Negative points = pretty well everything else! Particularly - non-intuitive depiction of ground elevation, inadequately distinctive depiction of controlled airspace and absence of controlling frequencies.

If we had to use Jep charts again, we would at an early stage modify them to replicate more user-friendly ones like IGN (France) by highlighting the edges of airspace, writing in controlling frequencies and drawing relevant airfield runway orientations.

We would also be much more aggressive in checking them for simplistic errors like Requena elevation.

### **Spacing through controlled airspace:**

For relaxed and un-proscriptive clearances it pays to provide for adequate separation between our own aircraft flying identical routes. Five minute intervals are realistic with fastest first, otherwise longer. We keep messing up on this, getting too close to each other. Perhaps a psychological problem, not wanting to get left behind - the ultimate solution might be to fly in reverse order of pilot patience!

### **Formation flying in poor weather:**

Either stick close so as to act as a single entity or stay miles apart to avoid potential for confliction.