

# Flying Adventure: Robins on a European Round Robin

Tommaso Cruciani

Since before the end of our Autumn trip, the planning for the Robin Flying Group's Spring adventure had been underway, driven by group leader Dermot and chief planner Tom, who ideated our ambitious route through Europe. The plan would see us reaching Malta via France, Germany, Austria, Italy, Slovenia and Croatia and cover areas we were unable to see on our last trans-European journey. We had firm plans to touch down as far as Tunisi on our way between Pantelleria and Sardegna, but the escalating security situation made us opt to remain intra-continental, with Malta an ideal turning point for our extended round robin.

The final weeks before the launch date consisted of buying a new extended range 160hp Robin DR400 for the job, and receiving a 180hp one back from months of maintenance with little time to spare. The final week was a frantic exercise in bureaucracy for the group leaders, but through their efforts we finally had three Robins legally ready for the adventure and eight pilots itching to fly them. With some of us attending this year's GA Sea Survival Conference that took place near our home airfield of Exeter, we were extra careful in our preparation of the emergency equipment onboard. From life rafts to immersion suits, PLB's, spot trackers, grab bags, marine band radios and flares, we could not have been more ready to face any eventuality.

On the day of departure we were all at the airfield by 06.45L, ready for departure as soon as the airfield opened at 08.00L. With clear weather noted across The Channel, bags loaded and seating arrangements sorted so as to have one more experienced pilot in the front of each plane for the first few legs, we set off down the Southern coast, passing by the NOTAM'd USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier towards Seaford VOR to make our crossing to Abbeville and clear customs. A quick pee stop and border agents nowhere to be seen, the formation was off again en route to Reims for fuel and lunch. The trip was well and truly underway!

The unexpected closure of the restaurant was met with famished grunts all around, but the friendly French re-fueler who kindly interrupted his lunch to ride his bike over and fill our tanks suggested we take a taxi into town as there was nowhere else to eat nearby. With the shuttling back and forth to the restaurant, we realized our original night stop of Innsbruck was somewhat optimistic and re-filed the destination as Friedrichschafen.

Friedrichschafen airfield, site of the yearly AERO trade show, lies in a TMZ where Mode S is required on board, so we resolved that since only one of our three Robins carried such swish equipment, he would lead the formation, squawk for the group and thus allow us into the airspace. The fantastic weather and easy-going German ATCO's made for a stunning evening approach over Lake Constance as the formation used a designated chat frequency and walkie talkies rigged to the headsets to discuss whether to take separate landing clearances as we are used to do in the UK. The tower resolved our doubts in typical succinct German fashion, "follow ze leader!"



*Illustration 1: Morning planning at Friedrichschafen*

Breakfast the next morning was the time to gather and check the weather for our much anticipated and researched Alpine crossing to Innsbruck. The winds have to be just right in order to have safe passage through the valleys, as anything more than light winds can create serious localized wind circulation that can be difficult to contend with in our tiny planes. Skydemon's brilliant GAFOR route visualizations through the Brenner pass provided excellent information for the day's flight. Pass by pass, the formation of three contended its way through the Alps, always making sure not to turn into a blind alley and approach each ridge at less than 90 degrees in order to allow for a turn away from the ridge in case of downdrafts.



*Illustration 2: The 757 that squeezed past on the approach into Innsbruck*

The weather could not have been more forgiving, allowing each of us to enjoy the spectacular views on a fairly relaxed flight. Turning down the final valley into the Innsbruck circuit, the tower advised us to pack closer to the North side of the valley to allow a Thompson 757 to scoot past underneath. For all our hard work, our arrival earned us a “thank you for your professionalism”

from ATC as we parked up alongside the troupe of posh private jets lining the apron.



*Illustration 3: Two Robins braving The Alps*



*Illustration 4: The colorful Robins stick out among the sombre biz jets*





*Illustration 5: The Team*



*Illustration 6: Fast descent leaving the Alps behind to tuck under the TMA*

With Venice awaiting us, we departed Innsbruck under a glorious sunshine and set route to exit the Alps onto the Northern Italian plains to the South. The sprawling controlled airspace forced an ear-busting descent from FL90 in the alps to under 2000ft within a few minutes and the more old-school, ICAO-format Italian RT challenged the uninitiated pilots amongst us, but we all made it to Aeroporto Venezia-Lido unscathed and in good time for lunch. This ideally situated grass field on the Lido island across from Venice dates from 1909, with one of the few remaining examples of a characteristic 1930's architectural style terminal. A 10 minute scenic *vaporetto* (essentially a public

water bus) ride from the Lido took us across to the center of Venice for some obligatory afternoon tourism and a well-deserved cold beer... or two.



*Illustration 7: Vaporetto ride*



*Illustration 8: Venice-Lido 1930's airport terminal*





*Illustration 9: Downwind for Venice-Lido grass airfield, with Venice island in the background.*

The following day was to be an ambitious and equally scenic one, with the landscape below us changing dramatically from the previous day's snow-capped peaks to Caribbean-like Croatian shorelines. Leaving the Italian FIR over the Adriatic sea and entering Slovenian airspace we anticipated the well-known hospitality that we knew awaited us at the friendly airfield of Portoroz. On landing we were pleasantly surprised by the presence of a Robin tow bar to position us for refueling and a selection of Vodka shots that we regretfully but politely refused.

Taking off all too soon and setting course Southwards along the length of the Dalmatian coast for the small island of Losinj we were rewarded with some of the most stunning coastlines Europe has to offer and for once we all wished we were on the ground, diving into the dream-like azure waters. The curiously themed El Paso Mexican restaurant on this secluded airfield was undergoing renovation and for once we were truly stumped, as there was no other option for food or water until the next airfield a couple of hours away. As the only customers for miles around we did not hold much bargaining power, but with some gentle persuasion the kitchen agreed to provide us with a 'small snack' for the road. Sat at the table, we were surprised with a bounty of fried calamari, sun-ripened tomatoes and chips. Incredulous at the sudden turnaround in our luck, we made a veritable feast of our 'small snack' and re-planned to skip Split and make straight for Dubrovnik for the night.



*Illustration 10: Croatian waters*



*Illustration 11: Croatian island chains*

The leisurely flight into Dubrovnik was a pure delight and any consternation we might have felt at landing at a big international airport was soon dispelled by the fact we were the only airplanes there! Only one week later and the season would have started, with airlines from all over Europe unloading the legions of tourists who invade Croatia during the Summer. The quaint but unassuming restaurant we chose for our evening meal in front of the citadel's ramparts proved to be one of the best of the trip, and by the end of the wine-imbibed evening we were well and truly ready to sleep. I retreated to my youth hostel and met with the only other guest in the bunk across from mine, a solo Japanese backpacker who had a hard time believing that I was flying myself around

Europe, and yet staying the night in a hostel!

The next morning, we awoke to yet another clear, crisp day. With renewed energy and enthusiasm we set for the airport to prepare for the sea crossing to Bari in Southern Italy. Up until this point, things had been almost too good to be true, with every obstacle comfortably surpassed. Little did we know this day would hold some of our first truly eye-opening challenges, teaching us lessons that cannot possibly be learned in flight school or a local flight around the patch; there is no substitute for experience. Arriving easily into Bari, problems began with the confusion during the taxi to the parking spot, which saw Robins shoot across the apron as a hesitant Ryanair jet looked on and follow-me vehicles scrambled to intercept our meanderings across the tarmac. It turned out they wanted us parked on a tucked away stand across the other side of the airfield rather than on the GA apron right in front of the FBO – makes total sense.

Received by the exceedingly helpful handlers, we settled into the plush passenger lounge and reviewed the onward weather to find grisly storm clouds painted on the iPad satellite weather radar. A quick call to our next stop at Scalea on the Southwestern Italian coast confirmed the deteriorating weather situation, so we began the search for an airfield to the South of the Apennines, figuring they would halt the onslaught of the storm fronts coming from the North. Unfortunately, Southern Italy and Sicily are infamous for their lack of Avgas facilities, with the fuel pumps few and far between. Italian GA has predominantly moved onto lighter aircraft utilizing engines such as the ubiquitous Rotax 912, with Mogas the preferred propellant – hence part of the success of Tecnam machines. A few Aeroclubs stock their own Avgas, a testament to Italian DIY solutions to inadequate aviation infrastructure, but purchasing some is an exercise in diplomacy. It's not what you know, it's who you know...

Eventually, we resolved to fly along the Southern coast, the so called 'boot' of Italy, protected from the storms by the Apennines and land at Reggio Calabria for fuel. The flight proceeded uneventfully until we reached the last headland before our approach. There, a mixture of miscommunication and inexperienced decision making led the formation to cross what some of us regarded as the foothills of the innocuous looking mountains. All of a sudden and with no warning, severe gusts snatched our tiny plane, sending it soaring to one side and then the other, first up and then down, until a particularly vicious downdraft caught us and began pushing down as we hit full throttle and pitched up to best climb attitude. The plane was difficult to control and I must admit there was some strongly explicit stress in the cockpit as we struggled to maintain altitude with little time to worry of the whereabouts of our other two companions. We turned towards the coast and the descending terrain to escape the silent but malignant mountain wave that had caught us off guard until, as suddenly as it had appeared, the turbulence stopped and all was calm again.

Once safely regrouped on the ground everyone had their own tales of battle to recount, with one plane having experienced the antithesis to our own formidable foe and been sucked up into a cloud by an equally powerful updraft. The third member of the formation, while escaping the mountain wave unaffected, was faced with the attempt by the Reggio tower controller to provide them with their own measure of adventure in the form of an ill-advised orbit on short final. In the terminal, the reams of paperwork that I had to complete in Italian for the group gave me ample opportunity to practice my negotiation skills and witness the comical but strangely endearing (to myself at least) Southern Italian bureaucratic mazes and slow pace of business.

A quick snack lunch later and we had recomposed ourselves ready for the sea crossing from Italy to Malta. While the winds had picked up and Malta was forecast as having stiff gusts, the choice of runways gave us confidence that we would land somewhat into wind and, worst case scenario, we had plenty of fuel to make a return to several mainland Sicilian airfields. Departing Reggio Calabria, we could just make out the mighty Mount Etna shrouded in cumulus to the West,



it really looked as if it was erupting! Further into the leg, the scraggy white caps below gave us reason to reflect on what a possible ditching might be like, however we had to put that out of our minds to prepare for the busy arrival and aid one of our group in a concern of their own. The group leader's aft port luggage hatch had come unlocked, with only the slipstream holding it down. There was worry that it might open and come off as we landed in the gusty conditions in Malta, precluding our usual quick succession landing technique to leave space for such an eventuality.

Luckily, the trusty Robin hatch stayed on despite a distinctly sporty approach and landing and we could breath a sigh of relief after a long, demanding day. Ready for our end of the day beers, our coincidental remarks of what a pleasure it would be to be received by the Maltese hospitality towards the English were short-lived. The authorities who received us at shutdown, rather than welcome us to their island, took great satisfaction in informing us of the base cost of 200 euro per plane excluding VAT, landing, and other necessary handling fees. To our great consternation and despite our reluctance arguments ensued, with clear confusion at how the ramp could be full of other GA aircraft who clearly were not paying upwards of 300 euro each time they landed. We were in a bind, as there were no other available handlers and we felt we were held hostage by the need for fuel. Luckily, after a couple well-placed calls by Tom and some skillful negotiation by Dermot, Air Malta agreed to handle us all for the price of one. We could not have been luckier, and the flag carrier truly exceeded our expectations in coming to our rescue and handling three wood-and-fabric airplanes in and amongst their large fleet of modern Airbuses.



*Illustration 12: Valletta, Malta*

For three days we were held on the island by wind and took the opportunity to rest and visit the salient sights, including the daily canon firing to commemorate the war. It was enough time to see most of the island and by the end we were eager to take to the air again. From Malta, we routed to Palermo's GA airfield of Bocca di Falco, one of the few in Sicily selling Avgas to the public. There, chatting to the aeroclub's CFI, there was a general feeling of disenchantment in the club as few young people signed up to learn to fly and consequently, there was little energy and resources for more adventurous undertakings. The stark contrast between our activity and that of this picturesque, well sited but quiet club made us feel truly fortunate about the opportunities we have.

Leaving an old-world Palermo behind, another very long sea crossing awaited us from Sicily to North Eastern Sardinia, with a direct routing possibly precluded due to extensive military danger areas across the Tyrrhenian sea. Once in the air and in range of Rome Information frequency we were informed that the danger areas were all cold and altered course direct to the short grass strip of

San Teodoro, on the stunning Costa Smeralda. The approach along the Sardinian coast almost topped that through Croatia in natural wonder, with the turquoise waters and small bays the stuff of dreams. The landing at this enchanting 500m strip, however, soon had our full attention as we made a low approach and go around to check the conditions. Unable to spot any issues, we each made a successful landing and parked up next to the owner's house as he came out to greet us. He apologized for the uncut grass that had painted our spats and prop tips as we unloaded and admired the incredible location by the water's edge. The truly idyllic place was equalled by the strip owner's kindness in lending us his jeep for a ride into town for lunch under the sun.

The quick deceleration on landing gave us cause for concern, however, as the long grass, calm wind, warm temperature, short strip and water at each end of the takeoff run posed a chain of noteworthy threats to our laden Robins. After watching a microlight lift off in what looked like an inspiring 75m we resolved to pace the length of the strip, observing the best track to take across the grass and briefing the short-field technique as well as marking out a decision point where, if sufficient speed had not built, we would abort the takeoff. Myself and Dermot in the lead in the lesser powered 160hp Robin would depart first to demonstrate the feasibility. A short taxi to the threshold and we performed a rolling takeoff, weaving between the tallest patches of grass for what felt like an eternity; decision point come and gone, ASI checked, controls responsive, we finally struggled into the air as the edge of the water fast approached, making an immediate and shallow turn into the few knots of headwind to find some lift and climb away into the overhead and wait for the rest of the formation. Circling above, we held our breaths and watched the other two 180hp Robins trundle down the field and lift off successfully. Another worthy lesson learned that day: safety margins are essential!

The route across the spine of Corsica introduced us to a new and awesome landscape, as Mediterranean coastlines were set against a backdrop of wild, lawless mountains whose snowy peaks rose into the flight levels. We spent the evening in the charming town of Calvi and set off the next morning for the Côte d'Azur, landing at Cuers. This half-military airfield seemed a true Mecca for Robin aircraft types and a frequent stop-over for trans-European travelers such as ourselves on their way to Corsica. From Cuers, we routed Westwards down the standard VFR corridors along the French Riviera, admiring yet again one of the most beautiful coastlines in Europe from less than 1000ft. The low flying was pleasantly slowed down by the Mistral blowing down the Rhone river delta and across the Camargue. This natural reserve is an impressive wetland to fly over, and with the large flocks of pink flamingoes passing by underneath our wings it truly felt like we were in one of Attenborough's finest episodes.

Stopping briefly at the quiet airfield of Albi, we made our way to Bergerac for the night. In the morning, we were greeted by low cloud and drizzle, which held us on the ground for a few hours before a respite in the visibility allowed us to set off for Dinard, our final customs airfield before returning to the UK. Making our way Northwards across the vast French countryside we eventually found ourselves scud-running in the vicinity of Nantes and were pushed down far enough to require a diversion to La Baule along the Loire river. Refueled, caffeinated and paid up we departed for Dinard, where an incredulous English Ryanair pilot who had seen us in Malta a couple of days earlier sent his best wishes across the airwaves.



*Illustration 13: Fantastic hangar!*

Back in Exeter for a sunny Spring afternoon brew we reflected back on the past nine days with near disbelief at how much we had accomplished on our epic adventure. A group of average VFR private pilots had flown our trusty single engine fabric-covered planes around Europe and back, overcoming every obstacle in our way and having one hell of a good time, all at relatively modest costs. We discovered the varied realities of pilots like ourselves throughout Europe, all with the same passion and objective. With no autopilots, deicing or other fancy equipment, we understood the true spirit of grassroots flying. The group became a team, with the sum of our skills making much more than the sum of the individual members. The biggest lesson to take away perhaps was that, while some of us may not have undertaken some of the flights on their own, the fact that we went ahead successfully is not a testament to hard-headedness but a credit to teamwork. For myself, building hours towards a commercial license, I can confidently say that what should be mandated are not hours, but experience building through set tasks that increase the skill level of a pilot who needs to push beyond his comfort zone. Any airplane is an incredible machine that affords us the privileged opportunity to see our varied and fast-changing continent from above, so never stop exploring!



*Illustration 14: The route*