

ROBIN FLYING GROUP

Spring Fly-out

April 2018

Following last year's highly successful, exciting and enjoyable RFG fly-out to Venice, we had no shortage of eager participants for this year's broadly similar but slightly more ambitious event - leaving it over-subscribed.

In the end we had to limit the number to twelve pilots on board the four aircraft at any one time, with various people arriving/departing along the route.

This year's team was particularly strong, including eight from last year and four from the much more ambitious Malta expedition two years prior to that, three of whom are now professional pilots. Only three participants had no prior experience of mountain flying – one having completed his PPL this year.



With such talent on hand we were well-covered for most eventualities and in the best RFG tradition everyone volunteered (or was volunteered!) for various roles, for both before and during the expedition to ensure its smooth running.

Mid-April unfortunately puts us right at the annual update time for charts. Each plane therefore carried the very latest charts that had been updated to 2018 (generally 1:1,000,000 scale) to be legal, but used 2017 ICAO charts manually updated to current data for actual navigation – supported, of course, by up-to-date Skydemon!

As ever, Skydemon was to prove a great boon, vastly facilitating planning, navigation, Notams, weather etc and making the many flightplans quick and easy to file. The new ability to modify flightplans within the app was to particularly appreciated.

The planning team laid out the whole expedition as one Skydemon route to put everything in perspective, then set about planning each individual leg in detail as a separate route. These routes were then “Airdropped” to participants to ensure that we were all “singing from the same hymn sheet”. Similarly, any amendments would be Airdropped as a fresh route.

In terms of aircraft, we were particularly well equipped this year, with two Robin DR400/180s, G-RONS and G-CCZX, one DR400/160, G-GORA, and the trusty yellow “school bus” A36 Bonanza, G-DAYO - allowing us to leave our lower-powered Robins at home for other members to fly. Since last year's expedition all our aircraft have been fitted with Trig TY96 8.33 MHz compliant radios and all now have Mode S transponders, both items proving extremely beneficial on a trip like this.

Mode S enabled us to be instantly identified by ground stations (except in Italy!) and the TY96 boasts a range of helpful features of particular relevance to us.

The “Monitor” facility allows each aircraft to listen to the one ahead when they change frequencies and so be prepared for what lies ahead. Much better than using two separate radios as it is obvious on the TY96 which frequency is being heard and it is muted immediately when there is a transmission on the live one.

Meanwhile, the “Say again” feature was particularly helpful under constant interrogation from Italian ATC for estimates to obscure places!

Best of all, though, was the frequency database. We had loaded memory sticks with the frequencies we would use, together with their station names – one for each day. At the start of each day's flying, that day's stick was downloaded into all four aircraft in seconds. This made pre-selecting frequencies en route a doddle and was also reassuring when we were directed to to a different frequency option and could see the name of the station.

All the aircraft were also equipped with PMR “walkie talkies” for inter-aircraft communication and PilotAware systems enabling us to see each other on our I pads. PilotAware range has proved a little disappointing despite intensive testing with all their antenna options. Perhaps that is unsurprising in view of the system's miniscule output power, so the plan is eventually to upgrade all our aircraft to

“ADS-B out” with Trig TN72s. Meanwhile PilotAware is adequate for detecting our own aircraft – still well beyond visual range.

As usual with such RFG expeditions, the plan was to fly hard on the first and last days, giving us the opportunity to relax a little in between.

TUESDAY

Launch day, Tuesday 17th April, dawned cold, damp and grey at Exeter Airport with a very strong crosswind, plus impending heavier rain and low cloud. We managed an expeditious departure just before conditions really deteriorated, heading direct to Deauville through the Portland Danger Areas. G-DAYO, the Bonanza, departed last but quickly caught and passed the others one by one intercepting each via PilotAware for a wave.



The weather cleared as we crossed the Channel and Deauville greeted us with bright, warm sunshine – but a closed café.



Deauville

So straight on to Troyes in lovely weather, arriving an hour ahead of our restaurant booking - giving time to refuel all the aircraft and for Rome-based Tommaso to do some circuits to get Robin-current again before an excellent lunch. Terrific feeling to be underway at last after so much planning and preparation!



At over 200nm, a longish flight by our standards from Troyes to Konstanz, though in excellent clear weather with helpful ATC and our Day 1 pre-loaded frequencies coming in very handy. We had been warned that the western end of Konstanz's delightful 760m grass strip was “a bit soft”, so on RY 12 short landings proved inevitable, with a lot of power required to taxi off the runway - not boding well for easy departure! At least the runway would have another 36hrs to dry out in forecast hot dry weather before we would put it to the test...

556 nm covered today, in pretty relaxed style. So to the Ibis hotel enjoyed last year and its welcoming beer followed by a good meal in the Brauhaus Joh Albrecht where we had been overwhelmed by enormous portions last year, but got off more lightly this time!

WEDNESDAY

A day at Aero Friedrichshafen. The 20min walk to Konstanz's harbour brought us to the catamaran terminal where return tickets including show entry and shuttle bus were bought easily, followed by the usual, comfortable 50min transit across the glass-smooth Bodensee and bus to the show.



Aero Friedrichshafen is enormous – by far the biggest General Aviation show in Europe with virtually everyone who is anyone in GA represented, including all the major US companies. Ranging from drones through microlights, VLAs, helicopters, electric flight, “conventional” light aircraft to bizjets, the show caters for all tastes. Every conceivable item of avionics and equipment is covered and it is a feast on a German scale – too big for a single sitting really.

Following the catamaran ride back to Konstanz, tired and a bit footsore we returned to the hotel for the ritual beer followed by an excellent restaurant just opposite. Thoughts were now turning towards an exit strategy from Konstanz airfield...

The figures didn't look encouraging – today had been over 25°C, the airfield elevation is 1360ft and there was no helpful wind forecast tomorrow. On a more positive note the QNH was over 1020 and the lack of wind should at least enable us to take off in the opposite direction from our landing, starting our roll on the firmer part of the runway and benefitting from a clearer and safer climb-out away from the town.

We'll just have to start early before the temperature rises too much and tweak the seating plan since, unusually, the Bonanza is the weak link in the equation for once.

THURSDAY

Thursday dawned still, bright and sunny, Konstanz's controller urging us all to abort our take-offs if not airborne by the midway markers on the runway. I pointed out that an A36 Bonanza was never going to get airborne in under 380m at 1360ft amsl/20+°C/zero wind/roughish grass but, if necessary, could be brought to a halt very abruptly simply by closing the throttle on the boggy part!

In the event, we all got away cleanly, taking advantage of our well-practiced rolling take-off technique, the relief heightening a fabulous flight into the Alps to Innsbruck for a relaxed lunch.





Venice beckons again now, but this year we have horsepower on our side without the worries of a low-powered Robin like last year and with the Bonanza now comfortably accommodating a full load and soaring over the Brenner Pass. A rare treat to weave our way through the Alps in zero wind without a trace of turbulence!

Siamo arrivati in Italia! A rapid descent into the murky plains to get below constricting airspace and back to the constant babble and demands of Italian ATC. Not too bad really today and we are soon in the helpful hands of Venezia San Nicolo and landing on their superbly-positioned grass strip on Venice Lido.



Final RY05 Venezia San Nicolo

With thirteen of us to accommodate, a change of hotel this year to the slightly decadent but excellently-situated Hotel Riviera - perfect for the short vaporetto hop to Piazza San Marco and onward on foot into the labyrinth that is the real Venice.

A consensus had been established to seek out the restaurant where we had enjoyed an excellent dinner last year. Fortunately, some of the crew had the navigational instincts to find it and the repeat was no disappointment!

A modest 297nm today, but what spectacular flying!



A brilliant day's flying celebrated in Venice!

FRIDAY

A relaxed start on Friday morning, followed by an easy flight to Portoroz in Slovenia where the runway was hiding behind high ground on the approach from the South, which we had never sampled before. Weather still hot and clear! The Bonanza was directed to park outside the terminal with the bizjets while the Robins were sent away to the grass parking area – segregation!

As usual, a complimentary tray of Schnapps/Grappa/Vodka was delivered to us which, of course, we all had to decline politely...



Portoroz

So, on to Croatia, following established VFR routes around Pula. Relaxed ATC were not bothered, giving the impression that we were welcome to go anywhere at any altitude. We were now following the Dalmatian coast southward, passing numerous very attractive and lightly populated islands.



El Paso, Losinj

We alighted on Losinj, one of these, with its small airport and tumble-down taverna-style restaurant, which always seems to be in the midst of a major rebuild when we go there, but changes little. As usual, the resourceful proprietor rustled up an impromptu lunch for us and this time enjoyed practising his Italian on Tommaso.

Well replete and unhurried, we launched for the third flight of the day to Dubrovnik. Definitely no better place than a Robin or Bonanza from which to enjoy watching the beautiful archipelago and coastline unfold! The 215nm flight seemed to pass very quickly, then we were joining left base for the enormously long RY30 at Dubrovnik.

We had no trouble booking what sounded like a promising hotel - the Hotel Lero - but the town is a long taxi ride from the airport. On arrival we discovered that it was the same hotel that we had stayed in last time we flew into Dubrovnik – this “dejà vu” repetition is getting ridiculous! The hotel had actually served us very well last time and did so again, offering a superb breakfast.

Last time we had all walked the 35mins down the hill to the old town, but this time some took a taxi and had already targeted their choice of a suitable restaurant by the time those of us on foot arrived. Surprise - it was the same restaurant we had eaten in four years ago!



With no loss of standards, it did not disappoint, but just as we were about to round off with coffee, a rushing mighty wind suddenly sprang up out of nowhere. The sea of parasols on the terrace responded enthusiastically until skilfully tamed by the well-practised waiters – leaving us with some concerns for our aircraft.

The wind then abated and we enjoyed a walk around the glimmering old town before returning to the hotel, most by taxi.

Another brilliant day's flying celebrated – this time in Dubrovnik



Made it to Dubrovnik!

365nm today – in perfect weather again! (1214nm since Exeter)