

AN ANNUAL ADVENTURE (Part 2)

Having dropped my Yak 18 off in Hungary on the 6th July for its annual and some panel work it only remained to wait for the collection call. True to his word, Bela phoned on the 22nd to say the aircraft was ready except for the paperwork which would be complete by the 3rd or 4th August. I book an Easy Jet flight to Budapest on the 3rd as both the plane and I are needed in Perranporth on the 6th to complete some filming for a German film crew. An old non flying friend, Mark Ter Haar, is up for a ride and we meet at Gatwick for the flight which departs three hours late but gets us to Budapest at 8pm local. In drizzle. After the 35C temps of the outbound trip I have not brought a warm or waterproof jacket and the cold damp air is a shock.

Bela's son Akos has come to collect us and drives the 90 minutes to Gyor in weather which becomes atrocious as we go west with thunderstorms and flooding on the motorway. After taking us to the hotel, which does not serve food at this late hour he announces that "all is arranged" and we enjoy an enormous meal on an old river boat called the Veszti where his wife Sylvia joins us and we talk about everything and nothing for hours whilst eating huge portions of meat in true Hungarian fashion! Rather unusual was the drawing of Ronald Reagan on the wall beside our table which I eventually had to cover up as I found it so distracting and incongruous in this setting.



Mark, Author, Sylvia and Akos. Note Ronald Reagan drawing in the centre

After a good nights sleep Akos arrived to pick us up at 9:30am in a fine grey drizzle and low stratus. I have already been into town and at the internet café had found the weather across the Alps to be impassable today with more storms forecast from the west. My weather demon follows me everywhere. There will be no flying today. Whilst back in Hungary I had hoped to get a ride in one of the Kobo Coop AN2's which are used for mosquito spraying but this is no longer an option. Photographs we saw in the Kobo Coop offices show these enormous bi-planes flying just 50' above rooftops to spray a biological mosquito killer when numbers become excessive. This is gauged by the number of stings local students get on an exposed arm each hour! I understand from Bela that the students are paid quite well for their pain. Over a certain number of bites per hour and the Antonovs are called out, paid for by the state. A nice little earner apparently.



AN2 interior rigged with mosquito killer – Yak ready to depart parked on the wet Bőny airstrip with the huge Antonovs behind.

Having sorted out all the bills and paperwork at the airstrip, Akos takes us off to a small village nearby to meet up with Sylvia again, this time for lunch which turns out to be at a small bar/restaurant in the village. A truly rural Hungarian experience it is too with Sylvia or Akos having to translate every word of the menu and field all questions from the small staff. The décor was not unlike some English country pubs with old plates and mugs hanging from the ceiling and numerous stuffed animal heads and hunting paraphernalia. Hunting is quite a big business in Hungary with people visiting from all over the world to shoot deer, wild boar and the usual pheasant and rabbit. Not something I'm interested in but it takes all sorts.

After lunch Akos runs us back into Győr and a hotel in the city centre from which we can explore the town. Győr, literally the "City of Rivers", sits on the confluence of the Danube, Rába and Rábca rivers and was called Arrabona in Roman times. It has many beautiful buildings, some dating back to the 11th and 13th Century including the Keep and Chapel at the Bishop's Castle on the river. Sadly the appalling weather and my lack of waterproof clothing rather put a damper on much walking and exploring so, wet through, I returned to the hotel and after a change of clothes I sat down to review the flight planning.

I now intend to try for Le Touquet in three legs tomorrow with an early departure on Saturday for the two hour flight to Perranporth via Goodwood to drop off Mark. Thank heavens for BST and the extra hour which should allow me to get to Perranporth in time for 10:30 local. Just in time for the start of filming. Fingers crossed.

After a quick visit to a supermarket to stock up on chocolate and various presents for my children we spend two hours reading in a small Café. This has a particularly pretty blonde waitress who Mark tries to chat up without success despite his good looks, Dutch charm and four languages! Highly amused, I decide I'm very happy not to be single. As it is still pouring with rain we decide to return to the Veszti river boat nearby for dinner but it is packed so we try a small Italian which is good but a little pretentious and quite expensive. We both have steaks but the beef is just not very good in Hungary. In the butchers section of the supermarket I had noticed that the local diet was predominantly chicken and pork with no beef and very little lamb on display.

On Friday Akos again does the honours and drives us the short distance to the Kobo Coop strip called Bőny just outside Gyor town. I eventually learn to pronounce this as "Burnya" but I found it difficult to get a grip on the Hungarian alphabet and pronunciation. Being multilingual, Mark found it easier to make himself understood but even with fluent Dutch, English, French and German he too found it hard. After half an hour familiarising myself with all the new switches and positioning I re-load the spotlessly cleaned aircraft and position maps, charts etc within easy reach. I also load a box containing all the old ADF equipment removed from the panel and its associated invertors. A useful weight saving of 43lbs I learn later when weighing it all at home!

We were ready to go so we said our goodbyes and headed out along the still slippery taxiway to depart for Fertoszentmiklos to the west to clear customs. I have given Mark a thorough briefing about all the odd hissing and banging noises that Yaks make when raising gear, lowering flaps etc and our 10am departure is uneventful.



Departing for Fertoszentmiklos we fly over Gyor in not very good weather conditions

Our arrival 20 minutes later at Ferto' is memorable as it is my first real greaser in the 18. Mark was holding his seat waiting for impact 10 seconds after we'd touched down. Even I wasn't sure. Most enjoyable! After a quick coffee and chat with a Bucker Jungmann pilot just in from Austria I decide the direct route to Linz is not an option and go to plan B which takes us over the lower ground north towards Vienna before cutting west.

Once airborne it is quickly apparent we have made the right decision as mountain tops to the south were covered in cloud. Wein ATC were very helpful and we were soon floating over Austria's picture perfect fields past Voltendorf and following the enormous Danube west toward the delightful looking Vilshofen just across the German border where I had hoped to stop. Time was against us though and we pressed on toward Frankfurt and Egelsbach.



Better weather over Austria as we join the Danube en route to Frankfurt

Once again I was told to be aware of a 737 inbound to Hahn but this time we could see he was turning behind us and continued on track. 50 miles or so from Egelsbach the weather was beginning to deteriorate and I began to look at options just in case. The 20kt headwind has slowed our groundspeed considerably and fuel could be an issue too so Mark dug out the Jeppesen charts and we looked at our options. Schwabisch Hall looked like the only Customs option but in the event we are able to run into the Frankfurt Airspace at 1300' and on into a busy Egelsbach circuit after a 3hr 35min leg. In drizzle.



The vagaries of northern European weather are evident as we arrive at Egelsbach in low drizzle. Runway just visible ahead – Altimeter reading 900'.

I don't know about you but my bladder lasts about two and a half hours before complaining and I now wished we'd stopped at Vilshofen. Still, better to have a 2½ hour bladder and 4 hours fuel than vice versa. And fuel was the next issue.

No credit cards are accepted. This had been mentioned to me but I'd forgotten and was very low on Euros. Not wanting to go into town to find a bank I pleaded with the airfield manager, himself unhappy with Air BP's policy on this. He agreed to put fuel and landing fees onto a visa for me for a 3% charge. Far cheaper than a run into town but also the most expensive fuel we encountered at €1.89 a litre even before the 3% surcharge. It was fully 40 minutes before I got to a toilet and an hour after landing before I finally sat down for a late lunch! Annoying as this was, especially given our time problems, I do not want even more monthly paperwork or interest payments, so will still not be signing up for an Air BP card in the near future.



Mixing with the rich folk at Egelsbach – Not really our scene at all

The weather forecast now looked appalling to the west and we had to rethink. Brussels and Charleroi Metars were giving 1000 & 800' respectively and we needed at **least** 2500' to get across the Eifel and Ardennes hills. Stuck again. Although very attractive in its own way, Egelsbach is clearly a very upmarket airfield, the busiest in Germany apparently, and not really my speed. Mark also had bitter experience of Frankfurt hotel prices on a previous visit so we decided not to stay and at 5pm flew 20 miles west to Mainz to "see what happens". We had looked at going to Oppenheim on the river bank to the south but on phoning ahead found them closed?

With rising ground and low cloud ahead Mainz was definitely as far west as we were going to get so on landing I called Petra Luedeke, one of the German producers of the film in Penzance to let her know I certainly wouldn't be able to make it. I had organized all the filming and had enough manpower on hand but there would now definitely not be a continuity Yak on site. Petra graciously told me they could work around this and thanked me for trying. Ironically she knew exactly where I was having been born in Mainz! What a small world it is. I felt a little guilty for missing the filming but was also relieved as I no longer had a time constraint and this was very freeing. Deadlines and VFR flying are not an ideal mix.

We walked across the enormous apron to the tower where we were welcomed by a very helpful controller who was quite sure he had seen me at Tannheim (Tannkosh) with the Yak two weeks earlier. I finally convinced him it wasn't me but promised to be there next year as he did a marvellous PR job for the event. Bela had told me this was a special weekend with many visiting Yaks. We organized a taxi and found a very pleasant hotel in the nearby town of Frinthen which was clean, cheap and which served truly wonderful food. After a leisurely meal we wandered around the small town which was delightfully free of the usual large shopping chains but had many tiny independent businesses covering everything from chocolate to sewing machine repairs. Every shop seemed to specialise in just one thing. The only down side to our stop here was the large German party in the hotel restaurant who's male members started singing at midnight and sang until 2am!

Back at Mainz airfield at 10am on Saturday, the tower were brilliant in providing 30 minute weather updates and our offending frontal system was, very slowly, clearing to the north of our intended route. No longer in a rush we sat and watched the local airfield activity with interest. Notable was one very nice looking modern microlight called a Breezer which did no less than 20 touch and goes with a student as we watched from the comfortable balcony restaurant by the tower. There were also a few Pulsars and CT's and the usual mix of 70's American types.



Delightful looking Breezer earned its keep doing 20 circuits while we waited for weather to clear

Out of the corner of my eye I also noticed what at first appeared to be a tail wheel Aztec twin! Closer inspection from the front revealed that the engines had been removed and it was just tied down in this attitude. Silly me. Nice thought though. Mainz had been a huge military base and some of the larger hangars had electric motors to slide open the enormous doors. I did wonder what would happen when these motors eventually give up as the doors must weigh a half a ton each!

By 12:00 the weather looked good enough to go though it would still not be great in Belgium. I flight planned for Le Touquet and briefed myself for a possible weather diversion to Spa or Namur if it looked too bad further west. Taking off at 12:30 we had a glorious first hour and flew overhead the enormous Air Force base at Buchel. It all looked good. Crossing the Ardennes and with Spa just visible to the North it remained okay but as we approached Charleroi the cloud base sank to 1000' on the back end of the front. We were just able to squeeze through between Florennes & Charleroi at 900' before finally entering clearer skies near Mauberge in France.



Rather gruesome weather ahead as we approach Charleroi after crossing the Ardennes

Now talking to Lille we continued west via Valenciennes and into CAVOK weather as we passed just north of Arras. The latter made me think of Antoine Saint-Exupery and his thought provoking book, "Flight to Arras". In this he vividly describes watching the French villagers below him helplessly evacuating ahead of the rapid and unstoppable German advance. As we now fly over numerous WWII cemeteries en route I think again of how much his books have enhanced my enjoyment of flying and the privilege it bestows.

The now perfect weather also allowed me to let Mark have control for a while and after my low level exertions it was great to just sit back and enjoy the view. He asked if we could do a loop but with all the various old panel parts and other loose objects in the back it wasn't possible so we indulged in some steep turns and er?.... "aggressive manoeuvring" before resetting course to Le Touquet and a good lunch, now just 30 miles away. At Le Touquet it was clear that while we had been in the murk to the north and east, southern England had invaded France. I've never seen so many G registered aircraft on the ramp and actually had to wait a while for someone to leave in order to slide into their parking place. Thankfully this delay wasn't too long and we were soon in a taxi to the very busy town centre.



Crowded streets in Le Touquet

Overwhelmed by the volume of people out today we sought refuge away from the centre and walked south of the main drag looking for a “local” restaurant. Mark’s excellent French was helpful here. It was extraordinary to watch him switch between languages as easily as he does and I felt more than a little envious. After Moules et Frites in the old sector it was time to enjoy one of my favourite pastimes. Food shopping in France. The quality and range of food stuffs available here is so superb it can be quite daunting but having stocked up with bread, ham, prawns and langoustines for (hopefully) a late supper in Devon we returned to the airfield.



Fantastically fresh food at excellent prices – five different types of prawns to choose from

To my delight, another Yak 18 had arrived on the ramp, this one based at Earls Colne I believe, but I was unable to locate the owner and so, refuelled, we set off in fine weather across the Channel. Once past Lydd we routed overhead Tenterden in Kent for Mark who had lived there for many years. I reset a course for Goodwood which was completely deserted on arrival at 18:20 local on a beautiful Saturday evening? I finally found four people behind the clubhouse preparing to leave and thankfully one was an old acquaintance from my Goodwood days who agreed to run Mark into Chichester for the train back to London. Thank you Mike.

Unable to close my flight plan at Cega Aviation on the field I quickly got back in the air and had London Info close it for me. Of course I should have done that as I was approaching Goodwood in the first place but I’ll know better next time. A quiet and relaxed trip back to the west country followed. Even Southampton let me through. This was a very enjoyable and relaxed flight in fine weather over familiar territory. It was a lovely summer evening until 10 miles west of the M5 where the cloud base was dropping quickly in the cooling air. Oh no. Not now I thought and had visions of having to divert to Exeter and all the associated hassle, taxis etc.

As I approached Lapford I could clearly see Eggesford but the cloud was now getting very low. My wife could come and pick me up there easily. Just then I saw the conveniently positioned Burrington Radar, a colossal white golf ball adjacent to Eaglescott 4 miles to the north. 3 miles out I could make out the field. I'd make it all the way home after all. At 620' agl my long final descent onto 26 at Eaglescott didn't take very long and I touched down at 20:10 local. Whew!

Half an hour later I was at home with my family enjoying the French bread, ham, fresh prawns and langoustine. The phone rang. Filming was complete although they'd had to wrap up at 7pm due to fog at Perranporth and all had gone fine without me. Rats. I'm not as indispensable as I'd like to think.

Lying in a hot bath later I did wish I'd not had the time constraint from the outset. I would love to stop and visit Vilshofen properly. Valenciennes looked nice too.

The Yak had run beautifully as usual using just 50 litres an hour. It is such a hugely capable and reassuring tourer and happily, it will need another annual next year. And I thought annuals were supposed to be a pain.....

Lets see. If I go outbound via Tannheim and Vilshofen then I can come back through Slovenia into northern Italy and Trieste. Maybe a brief stop at San Nicolo in Venice. Then along the coast to Cannes to visit my brother..... And I'll take my wife next time too.

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