

AN ANNUAL ADVENTURE?

The time had come. With the annual on my Yak 18T HA-YAV looming a decision had to be made on whether have the work done at White Waltham or to fly it to Hungary where it is registered in order to operate legally. I had recently completed a full interior refurbishment but still needed to have some major changes to the panel done including the installation of a 2nd radio, 4 place intercom and Skymap so costs were an issue too.

If the work was done in the UK, A Hungarian engineer and a representative of their CAA would have to come to London to sign it all off and I would be paying for **their** time, flights and hotels as well as UK maintenance rates. An E:mail to Bela Kobori of Kobo Coop in Hungary soon got a response and with vastly reduced costs for the panel work and a quote of 2-3 weeks for getting it and the annual done there was no contest. I got the brilliant NavBox running and started working out a route to Gyor-Per in Hungary.

After much fine tuning I decided to route from Devon to Lydd for fuel and then across to Spa in Belgium via Calais. Andy Bickmore who flies to and from Gyor frequently recommended Straubing in Germany as a next stop, then across to Fertoszcentmiklos to clear customs in Hungary before continuing to Gyor. He would also be flying back along this route in another 18T HA-YAU with its owner David Cue at about the same time as me. This routing would require I fly across Belgium, Germany and the Austrian Alps, all new territory for me as my previous continental experience only included France. The trip should take approx 8 hours.

Finding maps of Belgium and Germany was not a problem as the ever helpful FLYER listers loaned me maps but Hungary proved another matter entirely! I ended up with a 20 year old map and a number of large scale print outs from Navbox as Fertoszcentmiklos was not even marked on the old chart. With a departure date set for Monday 4th July it just remained to watch the Live 8 concert and the weather.

Rodney Rushton, a partner in HA-YAV unexpectedly became free to join me on the trip and after my protracted return from Perpignan because of weather problems last year I was glad to have some company for the journey. Meeting at Eaglescott on Monday morning I knew we would have some serious shower dodging to get to Lydd and so it proved but this was a fabulous flight with all the **very** heavy showers clearly visible in what was otherwise 40k visibility. Our only annoyance was the Southampton controller who unsurprisingly needed three orbits and a climb to 3000' in order to allow us across his zone. I should know better by now and just route around or under what is unquestionably the most irritating ATC unit in England. At least they are consistent:-)



Shower dodging all the way to Lydd

Arriving at Lydd at 1:20 with thunder storms scattered all over the South we jumped out, refuelled and went inside to get some lunch, check the weather and file flight plans if possible. 2 hours later and with only marginally less miserable TAF'S and Metars in hand we prepared to depart as even if we only got to Calais the idea of staying overnight at Lydd, soon to be called London (Ashford) airport, was not appealing. The people at Lydd are great and were extremely helpful but the site is remote and desolate. After some more torrential rain had pushed through we saw a gap and headed across the channel just before yet another impressive shower hit. Rodney thought the lightning and dark clouds to our right quite impressive as we took off. I was looking east and hoping the cloud base would allow us into Spa which is itself at 1500' amsl and might prove difficult given the TAF's and Metars but we needn't have worried as the only low cloud encountered en route was south of Calais and for the rest of the flight we were able to cruise at 2500' despite the forecasts. We even had to remove lifejackets and sweaters it became so warm.

One minor concern en route was the pilot who kept calling Brussels saying he was just south of the airfield but did not respond to any of their calls and passed on no additional information, height or heading etc. For nearly ten minutes we listened in as the worried controller tried to find and contact the aircraft eventually locating him some distance south of Charleroi! We held to our plotted course between the two and then overhead Namur before turning toward Spa where, thankfully, we could see plenty of air between the Ardennes forest and the cloud base. So much for the forecasts.

Rodney is a bit of a WWII knowledge database and was able to identify many battlefields all the way from Calais to Spa. Spa itself is a purpose built airfield, easily spotted as it is cut into the middle of the Ardennes forest which featured so horrifically in Spielberg's TV series "Band of Brothers". An uneventful landing on 23 ended the flying for the day, a total of 2 hours and forty minutes from Eaglescott. Asked if we were staying overnight. I replied yes and we were held on the apron until a Discovery appeared and led us to a hangar at the northern end of the field. Here we alarmed a couple of ladies pre-fighting an Arrow who were concerned about our proximity to them and obviously unaware of the Yaks ability to turn on a sixpence. They looked astonished as she turned on the spot to be pushed back into an immaculate hangar while the driver loaded our bags into the Discovery before running us back to the tower.



Rodney makes an offer – thankfully refused

After booking a hotel and a taxi we enjoyed a quick coffee in the clean and comfortable café overlooking the runway and two ex military jet gate guardians. Rodney made an offer on the Mirage but was refused. A five minute drive into town in a very fast BMW 7 series diesel had us at our hotel and after a clean up we walked into the quiet town of Spa in search of some supper.

It's instant. As soon as you cross the water the style and quality of life changes and everyone is so much more relaxed. After a leisurely walk around the small town and having selected our restaurant we settled down to a three hour evening meal that was fabulous, cheap compared to the UK and totally unhurried and stress-free. Marvellous to be on the continent again. Perhaps I should move?



Bad food doesn't seem to be an option on the continent

Tuesday dawned with grey skies and didn't look too promising but we headed out to the airfield, five minutes again in that BMW, and refuelled ready for the next leg to Straubing. The Met office was closed on Tuesdays so it was not easy to get TAF's but using the AvBrief WAP site I could see that we were going to be lucky to get away before the afternoon and making Straubing at all was unlikely as the weather got worse to the East.

We decided to go back into town for lunch and to check the terrific Meteoblue web site <http://pages.unibas.ch/geo/mcr/3d/meteo/dt/index.htm> for more detailed information. This done and with no significant change in weather forecasts we decided to press on with Oppenheim and Rothenburg as possible diversions if things got too bad further East. My route took us past numerous diversion airfields so I was not concerned. Living in Devon, diversions become a way of life rather than occasional events.

The bill at Spa, including the hangar, landing fee and 88 litres of fuel came to only £90. Very happy with that we took off at 14:35 and were soon crossing the incredible Grand Prix circuit at Spa/Franchoramps. This looks as spectacular from the air as it does on my F1 computer simulator with the tracks huge elevation changes quite distinct even from 1000'! I'd love to drive around that one for real.



Spa airfield – cut out of the Ardennes forest

Once again the forecast was way out as we cruised over Buchel AB at a comfortable 5000' instead of having to route around their zone in the forecast 1500'. Good to know it's not just the UK that gets weather wrong. It was warm too and Rodney and I were quickly down to shirt sleeves in the glasshouse that is a Yak18 cockpit. I shall look into getting some sun shades fitted one day.

ATC was helpful all the way, notably Frankfurt FIS who alerted us to a 737 "Range 3 miles in your 12 o'clock, descending through 5000'". Spotting it easily I decided to turn left and give the wake turbulence a bit of space as its pilot set up for an approach into Hahn airport to the south. No fuss, no bother. Southampton eat you heart out.

The fine weather continued east all the way to Rothenburg 180 miles further east but by the time we got to Ansbach it was down to 1200' and with high ground ahead I decided to divert. As I turned through 180 it was obviously clearer to the south and the Nurnberg controller suggested I switch to Ingolstadt Military for radar. This controller was superb, quickly getting me radar information on the storm which apparently spread 30Km to the east but advised I might get to Straubing by cutting south towards him and back up to the North East from Ingolstadt. This we did, sometimes dropping to 800' agl and sometimes winding our way between tiny wispy columns of cloud that reached up from the ground to the cloud base. This may sound dangerous but it was perfectly calm with no turbulence and almost surreal in its beauty. An up to date map and good map reading skills help too as a GPS is pretty useless in this situation.

With the crud clearing quickly we now headed North East and having got the good weather forecast for Straubing 40 miles further east we thanked the terrific Ingolstadt controller and continued direct. Straubing duly appeared on the nose and we prepared for our first taste of what was, not so long ago, communist East Germany. A requested dog leg approach around the village and over the small lake onto 10 produced another passable landing and we taxied onto the empty parking ramp in front of the smart and official looking control tower. Though there were many hangars, not another aircraft was to be seen..... nor were there any people about.

We carried our bags into the modern tower interior and were met by a man with good English who arranged a taxi and suggested two hotels. A sickly coloured cream Mercedes taxi duly arrived and took us into town where we booked into a very modern hotel and cleaned up.

Straubing was an unexpected pleasure. My pre-conceived notion of communist Germany was 50 & 60's tower blocks and mostly modern architecture. Straubing was full of fine older buildings and really rather pleasant. I located the Internet café for the usual morning weather check. I also phoned David Cue (owner of HA-YAU) to see where they were. It seemed they had got stuck in storms at Fertoszentmiklos and were unable to cross the Alps but things looked better for the morning. We arranged to try and meet with them at Straubing Airfield the next day when I might borrow an up to date ½ mil map of Hungary and swap weather information.



Straubing architecture was not remotely communist

After a jolly good meal in a small Italian restaurant Rodney and I walked through the small town in the fading light. I was struck by the prolific posters for an upcoming jazz festival featuring Diana Ross, George Duke, David Sanborne and Al Jarreau. Nothing communist about Straubing anymore. It seemed as if the post war communist period had not happened at all here as there was simply nothing at all to remind one of it. Not even poor architecture.

Wednesday dawned bright and sunny and after a fruitful weather check we climbed into another cream coloured taxi and returned to the airfield. Most unexpectedly, a lovely burgundy Beech Staggerwing was on the ramp and was being carefully looked at by a group of people. Numerous aircraft came and went while we were there and as ever, many came to ask what the Yak was. This wonderful aircraft is not a common site even in East Germany.

I had noticed our tyres needed a bit of air and left Rodney to refuel while I went in search of a foot pump. The first hangar was full of Piper Mirages and the owner of the facility told me they looked after nearly 30 for pilots in Germany and Austria. He bemoaned the fact that the big 540 Lycoming had caused all the owners enormous problems but it must have kept him very busy. An air cylinder on wheels was lent to me and after pumping up the tyres we taxied back to the ramp to pay our bills. This was a bit of a shock as avgas was very expensive at €243 for 131 litres. We also paid a €30 landing fee though this would have been €10 had we a noise certificate, apparently unobtainable for Yaks anyway. Made me think about a different route home though.



As ever, questions about the Yak – Rodney fields them this time

As I paid the bill, HA-YAU came on the radio 10 miles out so we would get to meet up with the returning 18. It was nice to watch them come in and see the two parked together. Great to meet chums so far from home too. Andy Bickmore had done my original check out in the Yak and I had met David Cue with his White Waltham based 18 on numerous occasions. We sat over coffee and discussed the weather across the Alps which should not be an issue today. Andy also informed me that Bela's engineering facility was not at Gyor/Per but at a grass strip nearby called Byon! He showed me approximately where it was on his map which I borrowed and I hoped I'd be able to locate it later in the day.



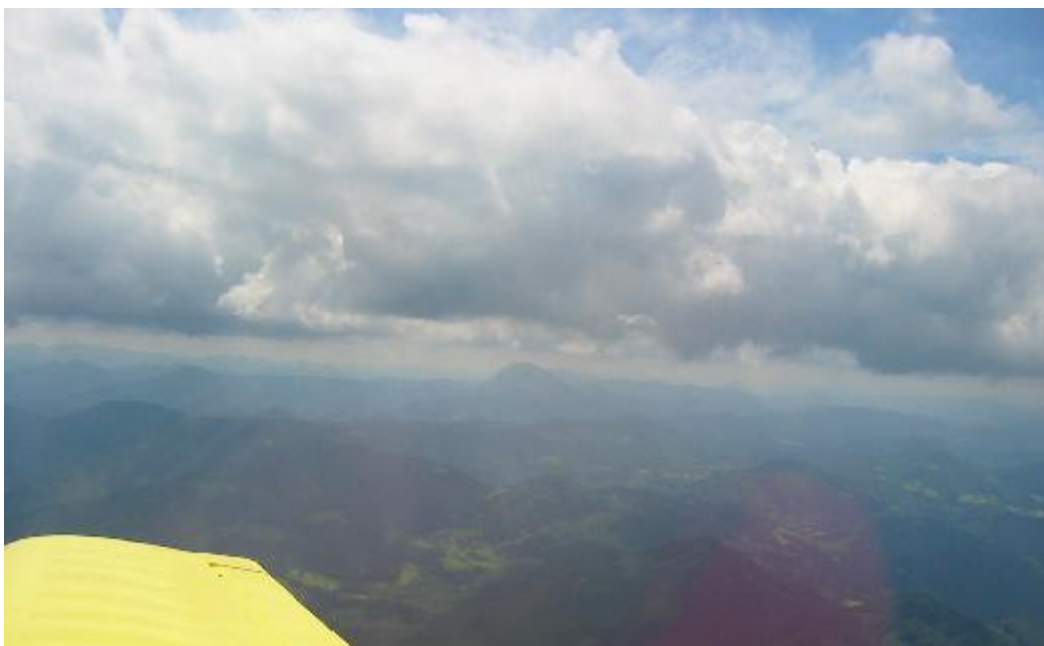
And then there were two – HA-YAU & YAV on the ramp at Straubing

Ready to go we said our goodbyes and set off from Straubing just after midday for the one leg of the flight I was nervous about. There were not many places to go in the event of an engine failure or weather problems on this leg and I like to have options. We also knew that we needed 6000' amsl and that the bases were currently at 6'500. Not a huge margin. Turning onto 120 after departure we were soon over the village and airfield of Vilshofen which looked stunning on the riverbank and was noted as a possible option on the return trip.



Almost too perfect fields in the Austrian lowlands

Crossing from Germany into Austria there is an clearly visible border. Normal fields and abnormally spotless fields. Hard to imagine I know but quite noticeable nonetheless. Our route took us across the City of Linz and continued south easterly toward the looming mountains south of Vienna/Wein. At 6200' the gap between the ground below and cloud base was comfortable enough but I was glad to have some lower ground to the north. What an incredible view though. Looking ahead we always had one mountain reaching into the clouds just south of our track and to the south of us there were many that disappeared into the murk. Granite clouds indeed for the unwary. It was cold up here too. This was truly the highlight of the trip. Fancy being allowed to fly your own aircraft over this lot. Absolutely amazing!





Clear to the north and we were able to route as intended at 6500'

And then a descent into the plain and across the border into Hungary. At last someone who gets my call sign right. The increase in temperature was huge as we descended and approached Fertoszentmiklos. I'd had huge problems pronouncing this and abbreviated it to Fertos in my calls which didn't seem to offend anyone. Having finally found the tiny and isolated little airfield (I'd been expecting something like Gloucester) we landed on 34 in a healthy crosswind gasping for a cold drink. It was 35C outside.



Tiny Fertoszentmiklos on the plains of Hungary

No sooner had we landed than a few people were out to look at the Yak, asking what it was etc. This was unexpected but as many Austrians fly to Fertos for circuit training and cheaper fuel perhaps not as surprising as you'd think. We were asked for passports for the first time since leaving and once through a simple customs area cleared for the cold drinks.

We sat in the almost Greek beach café atmosphere overlooking the airfield watching a Red Bull sponsored Pitts putting on a spirited display before us and had a light, but very much needed lunch. Despite the Pitts gyrations I don't think either Rodney or I could quite get over what a sensational flight ours had just been.



Austrian Instructor and student enjoy Pitts aerobatics at Fertos'

Ready for the short final leg we set off at 15.35 and again at 15.45. This because a quick return to the airfield was needed after hearing a knocking from the rear of the aircraft after take off making me think I hadn't shut the baggage door properly. In the event it was just our tow bar which had become dislodged from its position in the baggage area banging on the door from the inside. 15 minutes later we approached Gyor looking for the strip to the north at Byon. We spotted this from some way away helped significantly by the AN2's parked on the field. Gyor requested we call on final for Byon and we touched down on the grass strip at 16:05.



Mission complete – safely in the hangar with Bela's own Yak 18

I had had a few calls and e-mail exchanges with Bela Kobori over the year and though I had not met him, as we taxied in I knew instantly which of the waiting team was him. We had barely shut down and climbed out before his engineers had the aircraft in the hangar amid many other Yaks, Sukois and numerous Enstrom Helicopters which it

transpired Bela has a penchant for. After a quick look through all the paperwork, checking all the avionics I had brought along for the panel were correct and discussing a few other options Bela drove Rodney and I into Gyor and dropped us at a Hotel to be collected again at 9am for our return to Budapest and the Easy Jet home. As ever, best laid plans.....

After a shower I asked how long it took to walk into the centre of town. Language was difficult in Hungary as they do not understand much English or French and I have no German or Hungarian. After the usual sign language that ensues in situations like this I established that it was about 10 minutes.

An hour and some 6Km later, completely exhausted in the heat, we finally made it. Ah... a 10 minute drive maybe. However we did get to walk through an unseen side of Hungarian life and as a location manager in the TV business I was intrigued by much of what we saw. It would not be hard to imagine some of the railway sidings being used for films like Schindler's List or Sophie's Choice and as we peered through the gates it was quite moving to think of the atrocities that may well have actually taken place here. Gyor itself is a very pleasant small town and one could happily spend a day or two here just relaxing, exploring some of the older parts of town or taking a boat out one of the many tributaries of the Danube, one of which runs through the town centre. As it was after a quick drink we got a taxi back to the hotel ready for some local food.



Emotive siding near Gyor – What occurred here 65 years ago?

On returning to the hotel (exactly 10 minutes and 6Km) we found the local Harley Davidson owners out in force and one of the most amazing bike sculptures I have ever seen. Called Hardcore, this low rider was built to the most amazing standards and if the simplicity was impressive then the noise was awesome. I'm not a Harley fan, give me a Ducati any day, but this was rather special. The building shook as he tore off. Over an enormous mixed meat and rice dinner we saw many bike and bikers riding by. Mostly on one wheel at high speed which Bela later informed us was a common sight here.

Bela arrived to collect us at 9am for the hour and a quarter drive to Budapest. Our Easy Jet to Bristol left at 11:50. We got to the airport just in time to see it taking off from one of the blocked approach roads after a series of road accidents and traffic jams had left us no chance of catching it. Poor Bela was beside himself but we told him not to worry and decided to stay another day and explore Budapest on our own. Bela had some business to attend to at a GA airfield in Budapest so being proper aviation nuts we had him drop us there and had an explore.

Budaors airfield was fascinating and it was such a shame to see the lovely old control tower now not in use. That said, avionics engineers and gyro specialists still work in the bowels of the building and graciously looked after our bags whilst Rodney and I went walkabout. We watched Zlins and Grobs circulating with students and walked the line looking at some interesting types. Aside from the ubiquitous AN2's (we counted eight) there was a flying DC3 looking as beautiful and purposeful as only they can. Another aircraft was an unusual Zlin type which I believe is a Zlin37A Cmelak. We later saw this aircraft banner towing along the Danube in central Budapest. Another DC3 in pieces looked as if it was being restored as a static display.



Budaors tower looking past its best and no longer in use

In the hangars were a mix of aircraft of both western and eastern origin. The most unusual was a recently restored Polikarpov 2 bi-plane powered by a 99 hp Shvetsov radial engine. It first flew in January 1928. It's interesting to note that at no time were we bothered by security or anyone at the field. People just smiled at us and allowed us access anywhere. As much as I liked the aircraft I was very taken by their fuel trucks. These ex military monsters sounded even better than the Harley!



Will Buzzard Aviation need one of these at Folly Gate

A short taxi ride back into Budapest and a small cheap hotel on the Buda side left us able to explore at our leisure and we walked down the steep hill to the main bridge across the Danube. Coming the other way we first heard and then saw a sight that had us both in tears. A custom painted Trabant with matching trailer was holding up the traffic as it putted ever so slowly up the hill with a full compliment in the car belching 2 stroke fumes behind it.

A very enjoyable evening was had in central Budapest eating well at a restaurant on the Danube and watching the beautiful and elegantly dressed men and women of all ages walking along the river front. Such a shame that London is still into the "Grunge" look ten years on. Budapest comes alive in the evening as the heat of the day dissipates and it is unquestionably a nice romantic spot to visit and certainly deserves more time than the half day I was able to give it on this occasion.



So many upright lines in Budapest

At the restaurant the small folk band wandering around the tables finally came to Rodney and I which was a little embarrassing. The sad Hungarian folk music was lost on me and I asked the violinist if he knew any Stephan Grappelli. They immediately ran off three or four up tempo jazz pieces clearly hugely enjoying the change. Perhaps when I return to collect the Yak I'll be able to take my wife instead of Rodney. Walking back through the shopping area to look for a taxi we were approached by a couple of ladies of the night but being both too old and too tired for that we retreated to the hotel at about midnight.



Embarrassingly, Rodney and I were serenaded by the local folk band in this restaurant

Total flying time was 6 Hours and 45 minutes. The Easy Jet home the following day took less, but door to door it was over 9 hours. I know which route I prefer.

PS

True to his word Bela called when the Yak work was finished on 22nd July but paperwork delays meant it could not actually be collected until the 2nd. I fly out on the 3rd to collect it.

Vilshofen - Reims/Prunee - Le Touquet I think. And around Southampton!