

## **ROBIN NEWS MAY 2019**

Never before have we sent three newsletters in such a short time, so apologies if you are suffering from RFG newsletter overload!

Many thanks for your completed forms and subscriptions. The forms are coming through fine as long as you send them as Excel or pdf files.

There has been a little confusion over the subscriptions – probably my fault for not explaining properly in the first place. One member thought the sub to be £80 per annum + £10 per month. No, it is either/or - not both - the monthly alternative simply to make provision for short term members. Please note that the subs go into the bank account on the form, which is separate from the block renewals (which remain unchanged).

Another member thought that all flying now had to be booked two weeks in advance. Not so, there were special provisions during the big fly-out but now that life is back to normal you can continue to book any time.

This can be by e-mail, text or phone as always, but the e-mail booking template has been introduced as an easy and reliable means of getting what you want. Qualified pilots please book through me, students and those requiring Lyn's assistance through her. Please bear in mind that I have little or no mobile signal at home so texts are highly unreliable and may not be received until the following day...

The RFG is now fully operational as a "DTO" but (fortunately, perhaps!) there is little to show for it, with flying continuing exactly as before. Behind the scenes the picture is less rosy with a mass of bureaucracy to wade through including setting up new maintenance schedules and provisions for all the aircraft under the new regime. All this on top of two Annuals and two 50hr checks this month, but at least the background hassles have been offset by some really great flying!

### **SPANISH FLY-OUT**

Our big April fly-outs always involve a huge amount of preparation and not a little trepidation. April can be a superb time to fly, often with clear skies, excellent visibility and comfortably warm but not excessive temperatures as one heads south. It is not, however, a reliably stable time of year...

After five successive relatively trouble-free passages through the Alps, this year it was beginning to feel a bit like Russian roulette! Also, delightful as they proved over the last few years, Venice, Portoroz, Croatia etc looked a trifle repetitive and the time was ripe for a change of route.

We still wanted to take in Aero Friedrichshafen and had booked the usual accommodation in Konstanz but from there we planned to route through Switzerland to the South of France and then on to Menorca, Majorca and the South of Spain before heading for home.

Despite a reasonably promising forecast, departure day dawned grey and unflyable. We did eventually manage to get away to Deauville, where we spent the first night - and the second night as it turned out, with all directions completely socked in...



Nevertheless, it was a huge relief to have got away after all the preparations and I spent much of the second day sleeping them off, while others used their time more interestingly.

We accepted that Friedrichshafen was going to have to be abandoned as we would not get there the next day and risked getting stuck there after that. So we resolved to aim for the South of France to resume the planned route - and, hopefully, schedule.

Day 3 was still pretty grey and murky with the forecasts indicating a belt of dire weather right across the middle of France which was moving slowly southwards. Our only chance of getting under the low cloudbase looked to be via the Rhone Valley, with the Alps on one side and the Massif Central on the other.

A better than expected flight got us to Nevers where we had a leisurely lunch in a supermarket by the airfield, then our first quick and easy self-service refuelling with our new BP cards. Fortunately, our weather assessment now looked to have been spot on, with a clearer passage developing along the Rhone. So we followed the impressive river to Montelimar with relative ease - declining Lyon Approach's kind offers of a direct routing which would have driven us into the low cloud and mountains.

Last time we visited Montelimar, it was a thriving, bustling field with a welcoming new restaurant. Sadly, this time it was desolate – nothing happening apart from a very strong blustery wind and the restaurant abandoned and decrepit. We still had time to get to Perpignan, our planned overnight stop with booked hotel but the Metars and TAF were extremely discouraging, threatening 40+ knot winds. A quick decision was required in time to cancel the hotel, so we did that and looked elsewhere.

Somewhat improbably, Montpellier appeared to offer light winds, despite gales all around it. So, suppressing my cynicism ("if it looks too good to be true it probably is too good to be true!") we headed for there having established that we could get into a hotel virtually on the airfield.

The airfield was basking in the evening sun with little wind, exactly as forecast, and we refuelled ready for the long sea crossing next day. A call to the hotel to whistle up their courtesy bus and thoughts of some well-earned bières after a long day's flying from the Channel to the Med – things were looking up!

Our euphoria was put on hold when the "courtesy bus" turned out to be a scruffy old van, then blown away altogether when we saw the hotel and ghastly grubby rooms. Pragmatism and the late hour kept us there after multiple room changes to escape a sewage smell and at least there was nothing wrong with the beer. In the end we had a passable meal too and the rooms were at least functional, but the hotel probably rates No. 2 on the RFG hotels blacklist after the Formula One at Troyes...

Day 4 dawned fine but windy and we had a superb flight to Menorca, benefitting from a stonking tailwind which cut the crossing from Montpellier down to the same time as it would have taken from much closer Perpignan in no wind. Newcomers to Spain were introduced gently to the daft Spanish policy of having vast areas of impenetrable Class A airspace down to 1000ft AGL - by being forced below it from 20nm out from Menorca. No problem over the sea, but... (see later)

Fortunately, unlike for our last visit there, the wind was pretty well straight down the narrow runway on arrival at San Luis and, better still, the restaurant was open. With no more flying that day, the beers were engaged and a typically Spanish three-hour lunch ensued, with a barbecue laid on for us.

We arrived at the Hotel Port Mahon in great anticipation, having much enjoyed its faded grandeur on our previous visit. We were not to be disappointed. The grandeur was no longer faded, the hotel now really smart but still delightfully inexpensive for such quality.



After our large lunch, a walk around the port and top-up beers we dined in the hotel restaurant which did us proud catering for a wide range of hungers. Probably rates No.1 so far on the RFG hotels favourite list...

Day 5 involved the crew swap between Jez leaving and Marie arriving. Jez left the hotel at 5am to catch his flight and later the rest of us flew in glorious sunshine to Son Bonet, the GA airfield at Palma, where we were greeted by Marie and some very expensive fuel.



Minor change of ongoing route required as Murcia San Javier no longer accepting civil traffic. A brand new Murcia Airport had apparently popped up, opening in January - unmarked on our Spanish ICAO chart. It did not sound appealing with compulsory handling etc so Tom's fluent Spanish came into play, redirecting us to Muchamiel, a small airfield near Alicante with a tight arrival window but an assurance that it had a restaurant which was open.

Taxying onto the spacious apron we were met by a Senõr Negativo telling us where we could not park, which was pretty well everywhere, but with a bit of enterprise and spreading the planes around, we seemed to satisfy him and wandered over to the restaurant. Fortunately, we were not in a hurry, which would be anathema to dining in Spain...

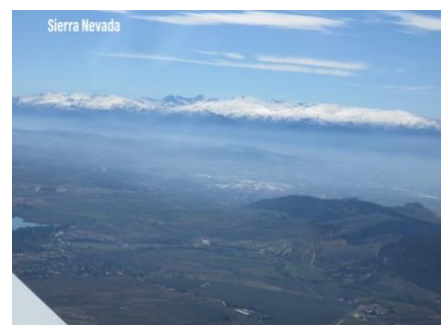
Hotels on fly-outs pose a problem because one does not want to commit until pretty confident of successful arrival! Accor hotels' (Ibis/Mercure/Novotel) policy that you can cancel up to 6pm on the day has been a huge boon to us, combined with Booking.com's ease of booking.

Other hotels are not so accommodating and the need for a large number of rooms does not help. To secure the rooms in the Hotel Port Mahon we had had to commit well in advance. For Granada, where our normal delightful hotel was fully booked, I had managed to book a reasonable-sounding hotel provisionally, but they bombarded me with e-mails demanding a credit card number. Then they phoned while we were at Muchamiel saying they were about to re-sell the rooms. A compromise was reached by promising to give them my card number as soon as we arrived at Granada airport, 6pm at the latest, which we honoured – just!

The stop at Muchamiel had put us the wrong side of Alicante's complicated and proscriptive airspace for our onward journey to Granada. Tom's Spanish came into play again over lunch when he sought advice from some professional pilot fellow-diners.

The plan was to request a zone crossing the moment we took off as we would be in Alicante's controlled airspace almost instantly. Fortunately, they obliged promptly and we were cleared in turn to route along the coast at 1000ft with the Bonanza leading.

Then to 7000ft, a frequency change to Sevilã and along a wide valley towards Granada with the impressive Sierra Nevada rising to a heady 11,000+ft alongside us to port. Repeated attempts to get danger/restricted area information were rebuffed by a particularly unhelpful controller (who eventually told us to shut up and stop asking!), leaving us obliged to make a very steep and rapid descent from 7000ft into Granada.





Sadly, “handling” is now compulsory at Granada. Though the handling agents were actually very helpful and facilitating, fuelling took a long time and the whole process was spectacularly expensive. After a tiring and at times tense day, we probably did not really do Granada justice this time but we were glad to have got there on schedule and looked forward to a relaxed flight to Cordoba the next day.



Day 6: Instead of our planned route from Granada to Cordoba as per our flightplan (effectively flightplans were compulsory for all our flights in Spain) Granada insisted that we routed via a reporting point to the north which required us to climb to 6000ft quickly. Do-able, but another pointless imposition like so much in Spanish flying.

We arrived at Cordoba to find the airport deserted and a bit degraded since our last visit but the “terminal” was open with loos etc and plenty of space to sort ourselves out.

As we were in good time we carried out detailed checks on the aircraft and Laurence booked us a hotel – the 5 star “Eurostars Palace” which sounded pretty flash for 100 euros per room. The rooms were indeed pretty flashy, with Jacuzzi and two separate showers in each bedroom’s wetroom, no doubt offering a fascinating range of possibilities to the more adventurous!

The hotel looked a bit unprepossessing (like a giant rusty metal milk crate) but was ideally situated and suited our purposes admirably, starting with the roof-top terrace bar for the inevitable cervesas before heading into the old town close-by and taking a tour of the spectacular and world-famous mosque.



I had been sorry that the quirky but charming Hotel Mezquita (where we had stayed previously) had been fully booked with no space for us, but this proved fortuitous with the route for the Palm Sunday processions set out right in front of it. Yes, it was Palm Sunday as some of our crew were about to find out - getting trapped within the procession for hours with little to do - except drink – and drink more!

They eventually joined us at the pre-arranged restaurant a couple of hours late, but no worries, in a Spanish dinner not much had happened by then. Their condition did, however, suggest that it might be prudent to adjust tomorrow’s seating plan to excuse them from P1 duties...

Day 7 dawned a bit cold and grey with the convincing threat of bad weather in the north of Spain which would inevitably halt us somewhere on our passage northwards. Liking Cordoba, we decided to stay put for that day in preference to getting stuck somewhere else and going through the hotel and taxi routine afresh.

A setback was that the price of our rooms would rise by 50% for the second night, but a compromise price was reached and we confirmed our decision to stay. This gave the morning's sufferers a chance to recover and others to do their own thing (flight planning for Lyn and me at the roof-top bar!) but Chris pronounced himself feeling under the weather. The kangaroo court of the RFG diagnosed him to be suffering from Shingles, with an uncomfortable-looking rash on his neck and the side of his face. With his Spanish capability, Tom kindly accompanied him to a private clinic right by the hotel and within the hour they were back with Chris formally diagnosed with guess what – Shingles!

From then on Chris was awarded a reclining seat in the back of the Bonanza, eventually sleeping for much of the way home, but always emerging to discharge his Kittymeister responsibilities at each stop.

The flight planning team had set the ambitious target of reaching Dinan next day – the best part of 1000 miles – and booked rooms in the Ibis Styles hotel so often used by the RFG. Particularly ambitious because the Spanish seem to have an uncanny knack of inducing delay into everything for no apparent reason and nothing appears to happen quickly and efficiently (apart from Chris' doctor relieving him of funds!). We would have to refuel twice and it would also be nice to eat at some stage but we bought some water, nuts and raisins from a supermarket as a precaution.

Day 8 dawned cold and grey again, but with a good forecast. We obeyed Rule 1 of the RFG (Have a good breakfast, you don't know when you will next get to eat!) and got to the airport early, all primed for the long day ahead.

We were greeted with a simple "The airport is closed". This was then qualified by "until the cloudbase is higher than 1500ft", which did not seem unreasonable with high ground all around. So we hung around waiting, eventually with clear blue sky almost everywhere, until the local met man conceded and gave us the ok to go.

The first leg promised to be very exciting due to the Spanish airspace policy which dictated that we remain below airspace 1000ft *above ground level* over a huge area around Madrid. Simple enough to comply over the sea or flat terrain, but this was mountainous, ranging from under 2000ft above sea level to over 5000ft meaning that we had to follow a roller-coaster profile. Worse still there was also a simultaneous cap of 5000ft, then 3000ft *above sea level* dictating some horizontal meandering to avoid the higher points too.

It is hard to conceive how flying a light aircraft could be made more difficult and potentially dangerous – entirely pointlessly since the airliners they are allegedly seeking to protect would never be flying anywhere near that low...

Perhaps we should just be grateful that we could fly there at all and relish the exciting low flying and challenge of complying!

Anyway, we all arrived safely at Casarrubios del Monte, a small but (unusually for Spain) thriving airstrip close to Madrid. The Bonanza, last to take off but first to arrive taxied up to the smart new BP self serve fuelling terminal – which promptly rejected our smart new BP cards. Fortunately, the airfield staff were helpful and got us fuelled eventually, albeit at considerable loss of increasingly vital time – and forfeiting lunch in the promising-looking restaurant.

After quick drinks and cakes we launched for Burgos, feeling for the first time on the trip the effects of hot and high on take-off performance. Our planned route around Madrid worked well and we soon escaped the confines of their airspace to climb above the arid landscape of central Spain.

A few years ago our G-GCIY had accidentally landed on the taxiway at Burgos resulting in a major enquiry. At the time the vast pale beige-coloured runway had black crosses painted on it and there were piano keys and displaced threshold markings on the taxiway (former runway)! To cut short a long and

at times worrying story, not unreasonably, the enquiry found Burgos guilty of not having marked their airfield correctly, exonerating the RFG.

Now Burgos sported immaculate, correctly-marked surfaces everywhere, presumably as a result and no doubt at enormous cost...

At quick turnaround was vital, with DAYO to leave first this time, to prepare the fuelling at Arcachon. Lyn backtracked the huge runway (with me doing the radio). When we had lined up for departure, we were told "G-DAYO Hold position, Vitoria will not let you take-off because there is a problem with your flight plan, we are trying to sort it out". With a few further unproductive exchanges we sat like a lemon (or banana perhaps!) blocking the runway while a bizjet and the Robins waited to enter. After a seemingly interminable wait, we were eventually offered the choice of taking off and remaining inside a five mile radius of Burgos or returning to the apron. Unsurprisingly, we chose the latter with me adding that we had a copy of our flight plan and there was definitely nothing wrong with it – had Vitoria or Madrid simply lost it? That produced a swift response and we were cleared to go, albeit after the bizjet and CCZX!



A superb flight ensued, taking us over mountains (as we were now so used to) and the sea, past San Sebastian, entering French airspace off Biarritz. "G-DAYO you are radar identified, turn right and route via point November Charlie" How wonderful to be under French control again!

There was a slight catch immediately obvious from the routing – Cazaux's Restricted Areas all along the coast must be active. I had been listening out on their frequency, hoping to hear the recorded message saying that they were closed but had heard nothing. "Would you like us to descend below 2000ft and route inland?" "No its ok we are trying to negotiate a clearance for you with Cazaux". "Merci, we have 3 DR400s following, same routing". "Ok, you continue along the coast at 5000ft and contact Cazaux on 119.6".

Duly contacted, Cazaux obligingly cleared us to Arcachon with minimal interference and we arrived in time to collect the fuelling card from the tower and get DAYO refuelled before the Robins hove into view.

We looked to have just enough daylight left to get to Dinan but had to make an instant decision as to whether to cancel the Dinan hotel (1800 deadline) and stay in Arcachon - or go for it.

We went for it of course. Taxying out, I heard in French on the radio that Cazaux was closed, but for the Robins' sake, asked the AFIS in English to confirm - which they did. So into the air heading for a new reporting point at the giant (350+ft high) "Dune de Pyla" sand dune then calling Aquitaine Information:

"Aquitaine Information bonjour, G-DAYO requesting flight information"

"Cazaux are active G-YO, you must call them immediately"

"We have just been told that they are closed" (already entering their restricted area)

"No they have just re-opened"

"Ok changing to 119.6"

"Cazaux G-DAYO request pass through R31"

"No problem G-YO we are closed"

"Aquitaine have just said that you are open"

"No we are definitely closed"

Just illustrates how not even the most thorough flight planning can provide for every eventuality!

So onwards for a superb evening flight, the Bonanza landing well ahead of the Robins but all safely down in legal daytime.

Sadly, no beers as the restaurant was closed, but worse still, no taxi! Multiple phone calls failed to persuade the local taxi population to put down their own beers and come and deliver us into town...

Here we were, immensely proud of having covered the best part of 1000 miles in the day despite every delay the Spanish could throw at us, then felled at the last hurdle – a ride into town!

Eventually the ever-resourceful Adam tracked down a Tesla taxi whose driver proved keen to show off its performance, shuttling us briskly to the Ibis in three loads. It was now 2200 but Lyn and Marie in the first taxi ride rushed out and got their feet in the door of a nearby Italian restaurant where we enjoyed a much - appreciated dinner.

Day 9: Suitably refreshed after a night in the RFG's most regularly frequented hotel, plus an appropriately late start, we had an easy, if slightly anti-climatic, flight home to conclude a wonderfully varied, challenging and supremely enjoyable fly-out. Where to next year?

## **BRITTANY FLY-OUT**

By contrast, last weekend's Brittany fly-out was a modest affair but not without its own challenges...

A fluctuating and inconsistent forecast in the days ahead suggested some instability but by our intended departure the forecast for France had got much worse. We waited for evidence of a significant improvement, then launched for a truncated itinerary, cutting out the western extremes.

As it turned out the weather proved far better than advertised, allowing a very pleasant formation Channel crossing, with LEOS setting a brisk pace comfortable for the larger aircraft. At Cherbourg the tension and excitement of a crosswind on limits was rewarded with coffee, madeleines and excellent sandwiches chez Luc and Edith and we were able to stock up on French charts. Sadly, Luc and Edith are retiring at Christmas which will leave Cherbourg Airport a pretty desolate venue.

On to Dinan, where the crosswind challenged again, making GORA's approach look heart-stopping from the ground, but all arrived safely. Then to Quiberon for another exciting approach followed by some well-earned beers and dinner.

A relaxed start on Sunday – a thoroughly relaxed day in fact - routing home via Dinard an Alderney in beautiful weather. In all a highly enjoyable trip and, as always, hard to believe that we had been away for under 30 hours!

**FORTHCOMING FLY-OUTS**

Our next French fly-out to the Normandy beaches is fully booked, but a 2 day/1 night French fly-out will probably be organised for mid-June, so please say early if you might be interested. Students and pilots of all levels of experience welcome – should make an ideal first fly-out abroad.

We also hope to make our regular pilgrimage to the Robin factory in the Summer – if we get invited!

**Lyn's Corner Shoppe**

Still a few of the latest CAA 1:500,000 Southern charts in stock but now only one Lightspeed Zulu 3 headset.

**GASCO SAFETY EVENING**

For those who missed out on the Dunkeswell event, Michael Benson is holding another GASCO Safety Evening tomorrow, Thursday, 9<sup>th</sup> May, at the Ley Arms, Kenn, hosted by the Devon Strut of the LAA. I believe that one of the tenets of these evenings is that all are welcome, not just members of the hosting club.

With best wishes,  
Dermot