

Sturgate to Poland via Greece

For reasons of his own, David Plange kept his Arrow on the Greek register – then Derrick Ings sold it to a chap in Poland, and a journey began



The alarm sounded at 5.30 and I looked out the window to gauge the potential for a good first leg en route to LGMG

Megara, just outside Athens. It was that time of year again to make my annual trip to renew the Aircraft Review Certificate for my Greek-registered Piper Arrow. I had thought it could have been carried out in the UK this year, but unfortunately the Part Ms aren't issued until September, or so I was led to believe.

Myself and Tim, a non-flying aviation enthusiast, carried out the pre-flight checks and I filled out the relevant documents in the club house. The flight plan had been sent to Manchester the previous evening and we wasted no time taxiing out and rolling off runway 27. A quick call to Doncaster approach saw our flight plan opened – next stop Auxerre LFLA. Our route took us down to Fenland at 3500ft to reduce R/T, then a slight left turn to CLN Clacton. We coasted out and called Manston who asked us to report 10 miles east abeam, then it was over to Lille as we coasted in at Calais. A slight headwind was giving us a ground speed of 128kts. The first leg was uneventful and we positioned for an ILS approach for runway 19 as the weather looked to be closing in a bit.

After a quick refuel and toilet break, we again checked the weather. We could see we were going to have a bit of rain to pass through, but further south along the Rhone valley the weather would improve. We filed direct to Corsica's Bastia Poretta LFKB and climbed out aiming for 7000. As I retracted the undercarriage I heard the customary clunk but the lights remained green. Strange, I thought. I recycled a couple of times and everything sounded as it should. On the third



attempt, the lights extinguished.

We climbed with Paris South to 7500 and sat on top of some thick cloud for over an hour as we routed towards St Etienne's Bourtheon. As the cloud broke, we followed the river towards the south of France and were offered a bumpy but direct routing to STP and the Riviera. We coasted out under the watchful eye of Nice approach and made the customary reports as we made the 100-plus mile stretch across the not-so-inviting water below. Handed to Bastia approach, we were instructed to route to point Whisky to join left downwind for runway 34 after being vectored out of the way of the departing 737. We taxied around to the pumps and after a bit of messing around, which seems to be the norm at KB, we managed to get refuelled and check out the en route weather. I also scrutinised the undercarriage, which seemed to be in order.

We departed runway 34 and climbed to 2500 before turning right towards the island of Elba. We eventually managed to contact Roma information, and as is par for the course, we

**Top: out first waypoint out of Megara was Tanagra airbase
Above: waiting for fuel at Thessalonika at 2.7 euros a litre!**

were bounced around for a bit until they got fed up with us and requested we continue and call in 30 minutes for operations normal and if no contact, try Brindisi, etc etc. From Paso Coresi, we had to climb up to 7000 to clear the mountains, although we ended up having to go to 9000 to clear the cloud that was quickly forming as dusk was starting to set in. We landed at Brindisi LIBR at around 2115 local time with our landing lights reflected in the puddles of standing water on the runway. This was going to be our home for the next 10 hours or so and a better choice we would have struggled to find. The handling agent went beyond the call of duty to assist us, booking our hotel rooms, calling for his taxi friend to escort us to our hotel and even booking us a table at what he considered to be the best fish



restaurant in town; it certainly did not disappoint. A walk around the harbour is a must, and some of the luxury yachts on display were breathtaking.

Bright and early next morning, we paid our fees but unfortunately found there was no avgas available, so we had to decide whether to go down to Lecce or direct to Kerkyre, some 55 minutes across the water. After some calculations, I decided LGKR was the best

option and we climbed out and set up for an economy cruise returning 9 gallons per hour, and in no time – although it seemed like hours – we were joining at point Pale for runway 34 at Kerkyre on the beautiful island of Corfu. Megara, where Greek Air Ltd are now based, is a shared military airfield, so its not possible to fly in from outside Greece. It's mandatory to make a stop at a customs airport first and it doesn't really matter which one you choose,

the process is a similar, drawn out affair. Customs, general declarations, fuel, flight plans, meteo etc etc usually take up almost two hours of your precious time so its good to get there with plenty of time to spare. The last leg is just a short hop but probably takes in the most picturesque scenery. The short way over the mountains takes less than 1hr 20 minutes.

We are met by Nikos as we land and he kindly puts the aircraft into the hangar. We hand over the relevant documents and head out for lunch, and I call Caroline back in England to let her know we arrived safely and to see if she can get us a flight back into the UK. Tim makes a call to his wife Linda to advise that she has drawn the short straw and will be required to collect us from Luton. We actually live in Lincolnshire but easyJet only seem to fly from Athens to Luton. The Air Review Certificate, as its known this year, usually takes around two to four weeks depending on what's needed. In that time I decided to market the aircraft with Derrick Ings' aircraft brokerage services, which came highly recommended. It's not hard to see why. The aircraft had recently benefited from a bare metal fancy respray courtesy of Eastern Air Executive. The avionics had been upgraded and the panel included HSI, Garmin 430 coupled to the HSI and the autopilot, Skymap 3C colour with topography, iPod connection, Garmin 340 audio panel, Garmin 330GTX mode S, ADF,DME, new carpets and grey leather. It's not too hard to see how desirable an aircraft this really was.

One very interested caller was from a small town in south east Poland, who offered to wire across 1000 Euros if I would be prepared to route that way on the return trip to the UK. After some discussions with Derrick I agreed to do this, on the proviso that it would be to view the aircraft and give a yes or no, as I didn't want to go there to negotiate. This was agreed and I made the reservation for the flight to Athens. Tim was unable to make the return

Top: climbing to clear the mountains, with Athens spread below us
Above left: we flew overhead Skopelos inbound to Thessalonika
Left: on finals to land at Thessalonika Makedonia airport

trip due to work commitments, so I thought it was a great opportunity for another friend who had just attained his PPL to join me. Andrew Knight jumped at the chance, and we flew out from Luton on Sunday August 10th. On arrival were picked up by Kostas, who is the main man at Greek Air Ltd and my usual contact. He explained it had been necessary to repair a mounting for the actuator of the nose wheel. Remember the issue after departing Auxerre? The panel that holds the actuator is held in place by eight rivets, and only two of them were still in place. Incorrect rivets that weren't long enough had been used in the past.

The trip to Rzeszow was going to take us northbound over Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Romania and Hungary so I pre-checked with the flight clearance specialists and was informed that while no permits were needed, I had to adhere to routings and file two hours in advance. We departed from Megara, turned right and climbed to clear the mountains as we routed north via Tanagra airbase then over Skiathos and Skopelos to Thessalonikas Makedonia airport to clear customs. We thought we may as well top up even though we had only been flying for an



hour. This proved to be a big mistake as they charged us 2.70 Euros per litre. Safe to say I won't be going back there in a hurry. Our plan took us over Macedonia, Serbia and into Romania's Arad airport, LRAR. I had sent details of our trip to both the airport authorities and the handling agents. We had confirmed the nature of our flight along with duration of stop, estimated arrival time, fuel requirements and so on, and once we had informed Thessalonika of these details, they agreed to send the flightplan. We soon entered Macedonian airspace and everything was going well as we listened to my vast array of music through the iPod connection. As we passed the next FIR into Serbia, we were surprised to hear that the Romanian authorities had refused to allow us into their airspace and we would need to divert. I did some quick calculations, and Nis appeared to be the most sensible option as I knew that with full tanks, I could make it direct to Rzeszow from there. A short pause and the controller informed us that some maintenance work was taking place at Nis, and would we be able to make Belgrade? This sounded quite appealing as a place to visit and it was well within our endurance capabilities, so we confirmed that we would be happy to route to LYBE. With 80 miles to run we were handed to Belgrade approach who vectored us for the ILS approach to runway 30.

Belgrade certainly looked pretty as it nestled beside the Danube and I saw the Red Star football stadium – I doubt it's called that but I remember Red Star Belgrade as a famous Yugoslav football team. The refuelling and handling was straightforward but when it came to getting a sandwich in the café bar it was a different story. Euros are no good here, and we were required to change a small amount of money from Euros to Dinars. It was strange to see the aircraft, still Yugoslav-registered, and the old Yugoslav currency. The old flag still had pride of place on most of the masts. When it came to hospitality and flight planning, they certainly were not up to the same standard as a lot of other places I have visited. There was nowhere for me to plug in my electronic flight bag to print out the routes, frequencies, flight plan etc so everything had to be rewritten manually. I couldn't even get a stamp in my log book, which seemed a bit strange, but eventually the route was plotted and the flight plan submitted. With the weather checked we were ready for the last leg to EPRZ, a relatively short three hour jaunt.

Our routing would take us north into Hungary and skirt the border of Romania before turning right and heading into Hungary and the Czech Republic and over Kosice before finally entering Polish airspace. We were descended by Krakow to 1800ft once we had cleared the high ground and passed to Rzeszow. The sun was setting as we lined up for runway 27 and we were looking forward to a hot shower and a nice meal. As we taxied to the marshal and shut down, a car, a military vehicle and a golf buggy were heading in our direction. After a quick show of our passports and a very warm welcome, our hosts from Fly Polska arrived and Waldemar Miskurka said we should taxi around to the flying school.

Top left: the sun sets on final approach to 27 at Rzeszow, JM's new home
Centre: crossing the river Danube for an unexpected visit to Belgrade
Left: on finals for Belgrade, Red Star stadium at right centre

Right: TISAK 2B departure out of Belgrade on the Garmin 430

Andy jumped into the golf buggy with Waldemar's companion and Waldemar jumped into the right hand seat next to me. We taxied around and shut down for the night. We were taken to our room at the aviation university campus. Now five star rooms they were not, but it was getting late and we were both tired and hungry. Waldemar said he would call for us at eight in the morning and then we could talk business, but for now we should eat and rest. What else he thought we might do in the middle of nowhere was anyone's guess. After a quick shower, I used my wet towel to eradicate from the room the array of insects that had assembled around the light shade and closed the window. We were a bit apprehensive as we entered the dining room but we were pleasantly surprised both by the décor and the quality of food and beer on offer.

Next morning when Waldemar arrived we had already checked out of the rooms. He was a bit surprised by this, as he thought we may stay a couple of nights if they wished to proceed with the purchase, as I had previously said I would need to remain there in order to confirm the wire transfer had been received. I explained that if we had to stay, we would take up residence in the town.

We drove back to the flying school where Waldemar had his mechanics on standby to go over the plane. As we looked around the clubhouse I noticed a world map with blue lines all over it. Waldemar explained that they were all his trips. He'd flown around the world! Not only that, but he'd done so in an Antonov An2 at 100 knots, taking 89 days. What a story this was. From that moment on, when he talked about flying, we stopped speaking and listened to his every word. He was actually the first Polish pilot to fly around the world, and only one of a very small number of pilots to do so in a biplane. He had also flown across the Atlantic seven times and the previous month had done so in a Velocity RG which really got our attention as we had discussed this aircraft as one we would consider for the future. He highlighted a few potential problems, the biggest being IFR. Despite being IFR-certified in the US, experimental aircraft cannot be flown IFR or at night in the UK, so that would be a big stumbling block. Waldemar has an FAA rating and the aircraft was N-registered which is how he managed to get around it.

After a few hours his mechanics had done their checks and compiled a list, and the fun and games started. This was an aircraft that had a fresh annual some two days before, but they were trying to tell me there was so much wrong with it that I should consider selling it for considerably less money than I had stated. To cut a long story a little bit shorter, I said I would fly back to the UK the following morning with the aircraft. This seemed to remedy the situation and the original deal was finally concluded. Next day was spent in the main town of Rzeszow, and what a lovely little place that is. Some lovely architecture was on display, and the town square had outdoor covered seating which spanned the whole outside of the square. Polish vodka is a must if

Above right: three Antonov An2s at Rzeszow - Waldemar had flown the white one around the world
Right: finally the deal is concluded and David (left) shakes hands with Waldemar



you want to wake up in the morning feeling sick and nursing a banging headache, and that's exactly where we both ended up.

I was genuinely sad to leave an exceptional aircraft behind, one that I had taken from being an ordinary aircraft to being one that more than stood out from the crowd, and I am sure she will do a fine job in helping Waldemar train future LOT airline pilots as they progress to complex singles and then on to twin engines.

I used to regularly be asked why I had my aircraft on the Greek register. By way of reply I always used to ask what the advantages were of paying extra money to have it placed on the G register? With the inception of EASA, don't the same advantages that used to be enjoyed by N registered aircraft now similarly apply to European registered ones? I did actually look into placing the aircraft on the G reg, but it

was a long-winded affair that was going to take time and cost money, and for what advantage? I couldn't find one, and I couldn't find anyone else who could find one. After speaking to the CAA, the DfT the HCAA and so on, it seemed the most cost effective route was to leave it on the Greek register and ferry her back to Greece for the annual, which was good for experience, and good for the log book. I have certainly seen some fantastic sights over the last three years. Any additional maintenance can be carried out by any JAR Part 145 maintenance facility, and from September this year, any Part 145 that has Part M issued will also be able to carry out the ARC. Although I won't be taking advantage of that, I personally think we will see more and more EU registered aircraft in the country and possibly fewer N-registered ones, but I am sure there are other schools of thought. ■

