

52nd Young Pilots Tour of France



Edd Shields from Lydd Aeroclub was AOPA's 2005 candidate in this prestigious competition for young pilots



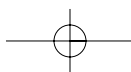
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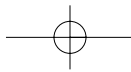


Learning that I had been given the opportunity to participate in the 52nd Young Pilots Tour of France came as quite a shock. My main concern was that with only a few hours under my belt, my navigation skills were not going to be sufficient against the French pilots who had completed regional selections to gain a place on the tour – not to mention the hurdle of being the only Brit among 42 pilots.

The day before the tour I flew to the start point of Chatellerault via Le Touquet in my 172 G-BIBW, which is based at Lydd Aeroclub. The flight took about four hours and was the only time in the next two weeks that I had to pay for any flying. The tour is funded by companies such as Air France, Meteo France and Total, who cover the costs of all flying, food, accommodation and anything else you can think of. After the first day of the ten-day tour, my fears had been put to rest and I had settled in to the daily routine of 6.30am wake-ups, a very in-depth briefing covering the met, the route and radio procedures, then about a two hour flight, a debriefing including the route for the following day, dinner with the obligatory 45 minute speeches every night and then eventually bed.

From Chatellerault the first flight was to Couhe Verac. This was the first navigation exercise in which we had to fly via waypoints, and an on-board plotter recorded how accurately we flew in terms of height, heading and timing. Part of the competition was to also estimate fuel consumption. Flying with me was a French pilot who operated the radio, as most of the airfields were French-speaking only. Unfortunately he didn't help me with my flying, and that was clear from looking at the printouts with our plotter information and scores from the first day. It made me realise how accurately they were expecting us to fly and how hard the competition was. Points





were awarded throughout for landings, approaches and even how well kept your plane was.

The tour continued to the mountainous region of Vesoul in the east. This time, however, the flight was just a transit and the plotters were not used, although fuel consumption was still scored. The next competition was my favourite as the pilots were paired up and flew a rally. One pilot flew their plane and the other acted as navigator, giving headings to turn as well as looking for locations en-route that had been given to us in photo form. Once the photo had been identified we had to record the grid reference. My pilot and I had great success and came in first place (though this somehow made little difference to my overall placing).

The next stop was Luxeuil air base where we were treated to a night display of Mirages and had the chance to clamber around the jets and talk to the pilots. The tour then flew in transit to Le Touquet for a well-deserved break. It was a relief for me to visit an airfield I was familiar with and to forget about the competition for a day. Here we watched a large air show that included a B-17, RAF Tornados, aerobatics and the Patrouille de France. As with the other airfields



we were given VIP status, dining with all the display pilots receiving passes for visiting family, and being given tours of all the planes. The aerobatics pilot told us that he had taken part in the tour when he was younger and was now displaying for the French air force pulling + 10 and - 8g in a Cap.

Our next stop was Evreux air base, which houses a large fleet of Transall transport aircraft, similar to our Hercules with only two engines. The weather was deteriorating by now and we were forced to stay there an extra day. This meant we could fly their Transall simulator, which was fantastic - though the standard of our landings in it was quite the opposite. To occupy ourselves while we waited for the weather, we played cards and had a 42-person game of frisbee inside one of the

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huge hangars, and having to spend an extra night at the air base didn't bother anyone as it was the best accommodation on the tour.

Our final flight was another navigation competition to Avranches, a small grass strip situated on an estuary on the west coast with great views of Mont St Michel. The estuary causes the airfield to be completely submerged during the winter months but that didn't stop a fly-in of around 80 aircraft while we were there. Here we had the final de-briefing and

various prizes were awarded, with the top three pilots receiving numerous awards and cash prizes.

I was pleased with my final place though the competition side of the tour had never been of great importance to me. The most enjoyable part was the experience I had gained, the improvement of my basic navigation skills, meeting a lot of new friends and being given a lot of fun opportunities, such as 30 minutes in a Cap-10. The tour is a great idea and is a very prestigious event in France, giving young pilots the chance to improve their skills and to gain some free flying. I had heard from Total's English rep on the tour their support for having something similar in England, if only the authorities could be as open-minded! ■

