



ABOVE: John & Liz Russell aboard their Cessna 182 amphibian

LEFT: in Poland, the seaplane 'eye candy' proved as popular as the organisers had hoped

A long way to go for a dip!

To Poland and back by amphibian, with history explored along the way

Words & photos: John Russell

Our annual invitation from Jakub Fajfer to the Mazury Air Show promised a special event. 2018 marked the twentieth airshow and was both the centenary of the founding of Poland as a separate country and of the Polish Air Force. The organisers hoped for a large seaplane presence—a relatively new dimension to the show—and the air display would be off the beach of Lake Niegocin at the resort town of Gizycko. The airshow is organised solely by volunteers, many providing financial support, along with sponsorship from other Polish aviation assets, local businesses and the Gizycko Council. It's the region's social event of the year, attracting many thousands of visitors. My wife Liz and I immediately accepted.

The Mazurian region is in the north-east of Poland, not far south of the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and only eighty

miles west of the borders of Lithuania and Belarus. The area has hundreds of lakes—a seaplane pilot's dream—and seaplanes are welcome on almost all of them! The seaplanes would provide 'eye-candy' on the water in front of the crowd during the August flying displays, the star being the Duxford-based 'Plane Sailing' Catalina, for the first time including Poland as part of its tour of European airshows. Aircraft would be based ten minutes' flying time from the lake at Ketrzyn Wilamowa (EPKE), a two-runway grass airfield opened in 1935 that later became famous as Hitler's airfield for flying into the adjacent Wolf's Lair HQ during WWII.

As Ketrzyn is some 1,000nm from our Blackbushe base, it required a lot of planning to find suitable stopover airfields within our Cessna 182 amphibian's normal operating radius of around two hours. We usually avoided routeing via Belgium

as the complicated airspace looks quite daunting but closer inspection proved it was possible to weave around the Military and Restricted Areas and get clearance through civilian controlled airspace by talking nicely to the relevant ATC. We like to leave plenty of time to get to airshow destinations and build in additional buffers; Antwerp was to be our first port of call to clear Customs, and the plan was to spend a couple of nights there to see the city.

After weeks of hot, dry weather in the UK, low cloud and rain came in, delaying our planned departure by two days, so Antwerp became just a waterhole en route to Poland. The cold front had gone through during the night but, as we prepared to depart at 0800, the westerly breeze was rapidly whipping up some turbulent cloud that threatened to spoil our departure. We maintained VFR below the 1,900ft cloudbase heading east

towards Sevenoaks, between LHR and LGW zones. Fortunately this somewhat constrained bit of airspace was devoid of other traffic—no other idiots were flying at that hour in those bumpy conditions!

Coasting out at Dover, the cumulus clouds eventually gave up, leaving the game to their Belgian counterparts. By the time we reached that coast, they were rapidly becoming towering Cu as the cool sea air blew over the warm land. We were talking to Koksyde Approach, who maintained separation from their active military traffic areas by clearing us through at 2,500ft. Unfortunately that level and above was now the domain of the clouds. Maintaining VMC just off the coast, we explained our predicament and immediately received clearance through their airspace below 1,500ft. Easing the amphibian into a gentle spiral descent to avoid shock cooling the engine, we were able to route low level through the Belgian coastal region in dappled sunshine and superb visibility.

Our routeing to Nicky VOR was much more relaxed, passing north of Ghent and crossing the impressive Ghent-Terneuzen Canal which connects the city to the Scheldt estuary. An early transfer to Antwerp obtained our inbound routeing via their RUPEL

Our appearance was greeted by a frosty policeman

BELOW: industrial sites along the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal



and KONTI Visual Reporting Points (VRP) to a left base for Rwy 29. The strengthening westerly wind as we flew across Belgium produced a turbulent approach with some low level wind shear which concentrated the mind on short final. Parked close to the Customs office, two bright orange-clad Customs ladies came out to admire the amphibian and seemed satisfied after a quick look in the cavernous floats. They then escorted us to the Immigration office, where the temperature drop in the building was not due to air conditioning. Our appearance was greeted by a frosty policeman. Why had we not sent a General Declaration before departure? My flabber was somewhat gasted, as on-site Customs facilities were shown in the AIP, and we had never been required to submit a 'Gen Dec' before landing at any other European Customs station. However, knowing from experience that arguing with Police and/or Customs will never be fruitful, after profuse apologies the terrible form was duly completed. We even asked for a blank one—to show willingness to comply with proper procedures in the future. This was grudgingly provided as if it were the last in the kingdom.

After paying the landing fee we went back through Security, who spotted a credit-card knife which had been buried in the depths of my flight bag for the last three years (undetected by numerous previous security checks). More profuse apologies, confiscation

offered and accepted, that seemed to satisfy Security but, as we prepared to taxi for fuel, our Police friend and his backup turned up claiming we had tried to smuggle a concealed weapon through Security! Eating humble pie didn't work this time; passports were photographed and we were informed an official report would be filed. The irony was that we later discovered my small Swiss knife had been in my pocket all the time, and undetected! Of course, these officials were only doing their job and, like it or not, airport security is a vital necessity to combat terrorism.

Refuelled, we departed for our next gas station—Münster/Osnabruck (EDDG). As we were crossing from Belgium into Germany, a flight plan was required and had been filed via SkyDemon the previous day. If you haven't tried this subscriber facility yet, the tiny cost avoids all the grief normally encountered trying to use the awful NATS flight plan filing system!

Routeing south of Eindhoven, we crossed the River Maas north of Venlo and a minute later entered Germany. This track kept us north of the Ruhr, below Düsseldorf's busy airspace, and direct to Münster's WHISKY VRP. From there we were cleared for a visual circuit onto their westerly runway. Some German provincial airports, including Münster, levy navigation fees irrespective of whether you used any services like a VOR, in addition to the normal handling charges and landing fee. An invoice is sent retrospectively although single-engined GA aircraft shouldn't have to pay more than €15.

The amphibian's limited range often dictates suitable airfields. We'd understood that there was no need to file a flight plan for flights within Germany, which was confirmed by the Tower, but the controller's tone indicated that this was unusual. Having bought more SkyDemon flight plan credits than we could possibly use in a year, filing a plan on future sectors would be nil cost and kept *Alles in Ordnung*.

Our route planning had deliberately avoided any high ground such as the Hartz →

Mountains and so far we'd flown at around 2,500ft. It was obvious that the same drought conditions in southern England had spread across most of northern Europe, judging from the half-empty reservoirs and rivers. It was also noticeable that the ex-military airfields we passed retained their long tarmac runways, even if only part was used for flying. This preservation of essential national assets seems lost on successive UK Governments in their continued 'selling-off of the family silver' by permitting housing development on irreplaceable airfield sites.

For a quiet life, we skirted just north of Hannover's airspace and thence on a direct track east to Eberswalde-Finow (EDAV), north-east of Berlin and our first nightstop of the trip. This airfield was probably the most interesting place we had visited for years! From a distance the field appears to be surrounded by water. Closer inspection revealed a 315 hectare 'sea' of photo-voltaic panels. Threatened with closure, a small group of local enthusiasts managed to persuade the owners of this former East German fighter field to utilise most of the area for power generation and thus enable the remainder to operate viably. The whole system, generating 84.7 gigawatts of power and costing €170m, was completed in the incredibly short time of six weeks! One of these local guys, Martin Knoll, met us on arrival having provided us with inbound ATC service. He gave us some background on the airfield, saying there were forty to fifty aircraft based there, along with ambulance and other medical flight operations. With visiting corporate aircraft, this resulted in around 10,000 movements each year. Martin picked us up from our hotel in the morning and took us on an airfield tour.



The airfield was built for Hitler's personal use in the 1930s, with paved runways added in 1940/41. It was used for flight training, personnel transport, and as a night fighter base when Bomber Command started to take a professional interest in Berlin. From September 1944 a detachment of the secret KG200 operated captured B17 Flying Fortresses from Eberswalde to drop agents into Poland and Russia. During the Cold War the Soviet Air Force built 62 hard shelters for fighter interceptors on the base, 32 still used today. These had massive concrete doors, each weighing up to fifty tonnes, and the electric motors that powered the doors still work. Each hard hangar can easily accommodate three light aircraft. At the back of each hangar were large tie-down ring-bolts set into the concrete floor. The MiG-23 and 25 fighters could run up their engines whilst inside the shelters, with the jet efflux being vented through 90 degrees out the side of the hangar.

At the western end of the airfield is the Finowfurt Aviation Museum, which contains a wealth of WWII artifacts and Cold War aircraft and equipment. We could have spent several hours there, but had to settle for a quick drive around as we were heading to Poland that afternoon.

ABOVE LEFT: view of solar panels on approach to Eberswalde/Finow Airport (EDAV)

ABOVE RIGHT: one of the largest solar arrays in Europe surrounds Eberswalde Airfield

The fighters could run up their engines inside

BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT: on the ramp at Eberswalde/Finow, with the Fire Department, café and Tower in background; partially restored MiG-23 in the Finow Museum; parking on the grass at Ketrzyn

Now we placed our navigation trust in SkyDemon, as we had been unable to source any Polish charts in the UK. The Belgian and German charts plus an upgrade for our Garmin panel-mounted GPS cost more than £150, expensive compared to an annual SkyDemon subscription which covers any route and is constantly updated, whereas the charts are out of date by the time they arrive.

Our first Polish destination was another ex-military, now a provincial civil airport called Bydgoszcz (scores 36 in Scrabble!), pronounced "Bidgosht". We'd been told there was no need to file an onward flight plan for interior flights but discovered this doesn't apply if your flight will enter or leave Controlled Airspace. Our ultimate destination of Ketrzyn was only just over an hour away, so we still had plenty of time before the late-July sunset.

Five miles out from Ketrzyn there was no reply to our radio calls, not unexpected as the main visiting airshow traffic wasn't due for a day or two. Overflying the field showed no sign of life and no parked aircraft. Curious, but all our documentation and technology said it was definitely the right place. After making standard blind transmissions we landed on Rwy 31 and a reception committee emerged to



John and Liz's 182 amphibian heads the seaplane line-up on the grass at Ketrzyn, their destination in Poland

greet us. The lack of aeroplanes was because some were already tucked inside the hangars, whilst others were yet to return from playing on one of the lakes. A little later, everything stopped to watch the arrival of our English colleagues in the Duxford Catalina, arriving after an *en route* diversion to Gdansk due to thunderstorms.

After a long day of flying in thirty degree temperatures, and it being well after 'half-past beer o'clock', we were looking forward to cooling down. Unfortunately, this had to wait until we had driven the fifteen kilometres in our hire car to the Castle Hotel in the town of Ryn: Polish drink-drive limits are four times stricter than those in the UK!

With a day in hand we did some sightseeing, learning that Hitler's 'Wolf's Lair' was only a couple of miles away. As mentioned earlier, this was Hitler's chosen airfield for his visits to Rastenberg (now Ketrzyn) and the other armoured headquarters in the local area. It covered an enormous expanse with eighty buildings, occupied by 2,000 staff, and was cleverly camouflaged with trees growing on top of the various

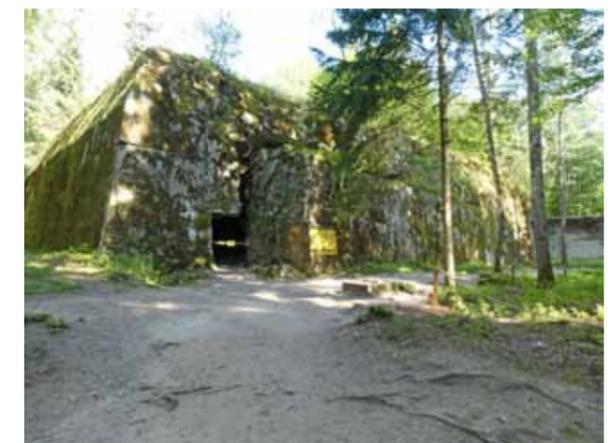
bunkers. Constructed with slave labour, it was the location of Claus von Stauffenberg's failed assassination attempt on Hitler on 20 July 1944. The Nazis demolished the bunkers in January 1945 as the Russian army approached, leaving behind 50,000 landmines in the surrounding forests, which took more than fifteen years to clear.

Next morning, a minor crisis. A stock of aviation fuel had been delivered but the pump that extracted it from the tank had failed so we had to fly back west to Olsztyn Mazury (EPSY) airfield and effectively tanker-in sufficient fuel. On the way back we splashed into several lakes, only curtailing the fun to preserve the fuel! That evening we were privileged to attend a ceremony celebrating the two centenaries, the assembled dignitaries also recognising the airshow's twentieth anniversary and local fallen aviation heroes, of which there seemed quite a few.

On day one of the airshow the seaplanes landing on the lake were towed to buoys off the beach. Unfortunately the water police who had volunteered to lay the buoys and manhandle →



The castle at Ryn, now the luxury Zamek Hotel



Massive communications bunker at the Wolf's Lair



PHOTO: ANDRZEJ AMERSKI



Beached securely, the Cessna 182 proved a popular background for many 'selfies'!



Seaplanes should never work with untrained support crews!



The Catalina takes off to perform its display



Departing the lake at the end of the Mazury Airshow

PHOTOS: ANDRZEJ AMERSKI

the seaplanes had little idea of seamanship and even less of basic physics. Our Cessna 182, being the largest and heaviest floatplane, was affected more by wind and wakes than the smaller craft and had already had its rudder dinked by swinging into the wingtip of a moored Piper Cub, due to the incompetence of the aforesaid waterplods. Fortunately the Duxford Catalina was moored well offshore on a sensibly-sized buoy, although they had similar problems when the mooring lines that they had laid earlier were found to have been cut! The problems were exacerbated by the constant stream of sightseeing boats passing close to the seaplanes, their wakes inducing the puny buoys to drag and, in our case, causing the aircraft to drift dangerously close to a concrete pier. As soon as we could set ourselves free we departed the show area early and returned to the airfield to lick our wounds. As a result of these problems, on day two it was decided to moor some of the floatplanes at suitable piers and beach the remaining ones. This was a much safer option and our aircraft proved an unusual backdrop for hundreds of 'selfies'.

Once the flying show was complete, there were presentations on the outdoor

theatre stage on the beach. Whilst we love the Poles, they do love speeches—many and long. The presentations were made by a lady who was the equivalent of the Town Council CEO. We were the first crew called forward and, with no guidance, caused a bit of a sensation by giving her the European double-kiss greeting. Following pilots simply shook hands and bowed... *quel cock-up!* Fortunately the locals found our *faux-pas* quite amusing, so our blushes were spared although quite visible. That evening, remaining pilots and crew were invited to dinner with Stanislaw Tolwinski, the businessman, pilot and originator of the airshow, at his historic home.

The following day we were the last visitors to leave Ketrzyn, heading south-west back to Olsztyn to uplift fuel. Our next destination was Schönhagen



International incident narrowly avoided after continental greeting!

(EDAZ), 20nm south of Berlin. We crossed the Polish border near Frankfurt-an-der-Oder, the city layout clearly showing its Eastern German origin and quite different from its namesake on the River Main. Some miles further west we passed the Aerium, the world's biggest single hall without internal pillars. Built on the Brand-Brieson military airfield site in 1992, at a cost of €78 million, to house a cargo-lifting airship, the company went bust in 2002 without ever building a dirigible. A year later a resort company snapped up the site for only €17.5m, which included a €10m subsidy from the local state government. It now houses the impressive Tropical Islands resort, Berlin's answer to Disneyland.

Twenty miles further on, we joined right base for Schönhagen's easterly runway. The area had been used for glider flying from the 1930s and continued as a glider school right through WWII. In 1952 work started on a new flying school and hangars. After German reunification the site was purchased by the local council which provided investment for further expansion and a

new 1,200m tarmac runway, subsequently extended to 1,550m. Nowadays, the modern FBO and Tower overlook an impressive executive and training airfield, home to 170 aircraft and 28 companies. Its proximity to the centre of Berlin makes it an attractive destination for business jets and visitors.

As Liz had not visited Berlin before, we took a day off to visit the capital, less than sixty minutes by rail into the impressive three-level Central Station. We strolled past the Chancellery and through the city to the river and on to the Brandenburg Gate. The redevelopment of the river area was impressive with modern government buildings, concert halls and conference centres. We chose just one to visit and spent an engrossed couple of hours in the Espionage Museum.

The next morning we continued westwards, carefully skirting the bird sanctuary west of the airfield on the extended runway centreline, our destination this time Paderborn/Lippstadt (EDLP). We routed south of Magdeburg and over the Harz mountains—quarried



for their limestone—which provided a visual respite from the monotony of the German plain. Away to the south was the Brocken, the highest point in northern Germany at 3,747 feet. Surrounded by cloud and fog for up to 300 days of the year, it was the origin of the Brocken Spectre phenomenon often seen by pilots when flying just above sunlit cloud tops. Paderborn was welcoming, switching on the runway lights to help us find the airfield through the occasional rain showers, and →

ABOVE: Government Scientific Centre in the revitalised River Spree area in the heart of Berlin, visited on the way home

BELOW: the Aerium - built to accommodate airships but now an indoor pleasure park



RIGHT: quirky 2007 design of the Teuge Control Tower



Every facet of a GA airport can be found at Deventer Teuge

for the first time in the whole trip the turnaround was painless and rapid. We wanted to visit Amsterdam, so our next destination was Deventer Teuge (EHTE), near Appeldoorn. It was a straightforward flight of less than one hour, crossing into Holland south of Rekken VOR. The airfield was quite busy with training aircraft, so a deadside join gave us easy entry into the

circuit traffic for the 1,199m long Rwy 26. We told the Tower we wanted to stay for two nights, and by the time we walked into the very modern and slightly quirkily-designed Tower building, the kettle was on and tea and biscuits were soon presented. Dennis Meinders and Andre Altena, the controllers responsible for this hospitality, proved to be a mine of local information. Opened in the 1930s, the airport

was rejuvenated in 2007 with the runway extension and new Control/Terminal building which attracted more businesses to the site. Every facet of a GA airport can be found here: three flying schools, two extensive maintenance organisations (one a Cessna Service Centre), private hangars with apartments above, a skydiving operation with three Cessna Caravans, and two restaurants! Finally,

BELOW: the tour route, as drawn by SkyDemon



PHOTO: SKYDEMON

on a historical note, there is an Ilyushin Il-18 converted into a hotel and a small aviation museum at the far end of the apron. Judging from the activity, this place is thriving and a business example which some of our UK GA airfields would love to emulate.

We forgot to leave a mobile number, however, and returned to our hotel in the evening to find that they had been trying to contact us. They were expecting strong winds and wondered how best to protect the aircraft. By the time we got the message it was too late to do anything, but we were not worried because the amphibian was parked into wind and well chocked. The high profile and spindly noselegs give the impression that she'd be susceptible in high winds, but the height of the wing off the ground reduces any ground effect that might lift the wing of a normal landplane.

The reason for the long day was our trip to Amsterdam. Neither of us had been there for years, so we were interested to see how it had changed. The main difference we found was the increase in the number of tourists and traffic—both two- and four-wheeled—so one needed to be really careful before stepping off a pavement. Away from the centre, much of the city is essentially unchanged, just much cleaner.

By the next morning the storm had blown itself out and our Angry Bird was where we left it. After refuelling and paying the fees we left for Ostend. We had hoped to make Calais Dunkerque airfield, but a thirty knot headwind put paid to that.

To avoid controlled airspace we flew at 1,200ft almost all the way, only climbing to 1,500 to comply with the Ostend arrival procedures and were cleared along the coast for a visual final onto their westerly runway. By now the windspeed on the ground was 25 gusting 35 knots which blew away the brain cobwebs. After going through Security and paying our dues, we visit the almost abandoned Met Office where the eventually-located Met man's prognosis was that the wind was only going to get worse, so we decided to gird our loins,



ABOVE: typical Amsterdam street transport, with possible seat upgrade?

empty our bladders and depart post-haste.

At that point I missed a trick. Our neighbour was going to pick us up at Blackbushe so we phoned him with an ETA. He said he didn't think we would come that day because of the weather. The correct question should have been "What weather?" Unfortunately, preoccupation with the departure had dulled my senses with regard to destination forecasts, which had deteriorated quite dramatically since we last looked.

By halfway across the Channel the cloudbase was reducing and precipitation could be seen in the distance. We fell off towards the west while London Information asked us our proposed routeing after Dover. We had flight planned via Sevenoaks and back through the gap between LHR and LGW but some kind soul listening out advised us that the cloudbase and rain in that area were worse than we were currently experiencing. Routeing around the south coast to come north from Chichester proved a bad move as the worst of the weather was actually aligned with the coastline. Now flying into a fifty knot headwind, we decided a safer bet was to divert into Lydd and pack up flying for the day. ATC was most helpful, giving us a straight-in approach

from twenty miles out, which seemed to take forever. The Tower suggested we park in the lee of the building, which we did but pointed the aircraft into wind. Apart from good airmanship, this allowed us—eventually—to open the doors without them departing the fuselage.

One theoretical advantage of Lydd was that it was a Customs Aerodrome, so it would be easier to explain why our GAR destination was different. In fact the Customs people had gone home, but the helpful ground staff gave us a new GAR to fill in and this was faxed to Customs HQ. After clearing, we organised lodgings for the night and one of the GS ladies kindly drove us into New Romney on her way home. Next morning was calm and clear and the 45-minute flight along the south coast and then via Midhurst and the Farnborough overhead to Blackbushe seemed a bit of an anti-climax.

Our total flight distance including local trips was 2,140 nautical miles, with a flight time of 25 hours. According to the dipstick we only burned one litre of oil, but we consumed almost 1,200 litres of avgas. A lot of expenditure but it was our annual holiday and an experience we will never forget.