

East to the Steppes

Italian taxes force a change of direction for Angus Clark, who opts instead to the AOPA Ukraine summer fly-in.

Pictures: Feroz Wadia



This story starts at the turn of the year. My wife Alisma and I planned to do the Malta Air Rally with other members of the UK Section of the International Fellowship of Flying Rotarians, James Alexander and his wife Catherine, and Feroz Wadia. However the January IAOPA-Europe enews reported the Italian government's intention to impose a luxury tax on any aircraft that spent more than 48 hours in Italy. There was no real option to passing through Italy on the way to Malta. The risk of being delayed due to weather or maintenance issues and facing a bill, in the case of the Robin, of €2,750 was simply not worth taking.

In the same newsletter, AOPA Ukraine announced a summer fly-in at Uzhhorod, near the Slovakian border. This was to be a joint event involving AOPA, Uzhhorod Airport, the Padonki International Motorcycle Club and the Ukraine Development Institute of Flight Technologies. It promised a long weekend of excursions and entertainments. An attractive alternative to Malta, we decided. The Italians later relented on the tax, but by then we were committed to the Ukraine.



Top: Cesky Krumlov, seen from the castle
Above: our route through Europe

Gennadij Khazan of AOPA Ukraine was contacted. Registration was made, copies of licences, medical certificates and aircraft documents were sent as requested. Given the distance from the UK to the Ukraine we decided to make a week or so of it, stopping off at interesting places on the way. We settled on Aschaffenburg in Germany, Cesky Krumlov in the Czech Republic and Kosice in Slovakia.

At Netherthorpe on Sunday July 8 the omens were not good. The airfield had been closed the previous day due to a waterlogged runway. The weather forecast was poor, with low stratus in the UK and

heavy rain showers with the threat of thunderstorms on the Continent. As it was definitely not a day for a long sea crossing we opted to fly down the east of England, cross at Dover and then take stock at our first port of call - Kortrijk Wevelgem. Getting clear of the low cloud at Southend, the rest of the flight conditions were good although we landed in a heavy rain shower at Kortrijk. There we had the usual friendly and efficient reception. On checking the forward weather I was pleasantly surprised to find that the heavy rain had moved north and that it was VFR all the way to Aschaffenburg.

At Charleroi we had to dodge a few rain showers and a Ryanair 737 doing circuits. Over the Ardennes it became rather turbulent and as we crossed into Germany we had to track north to avoid some really black stuff. By the time we were cleared to



**Above: fence notice at Aschaffenburg - well worth replicating across the UK?
 Top right: arrival at Aschaffenburg
 Right: Johannsburg Castle, Aschaffenburg
 Bottom: on approach to Ceske Budovice's 2500 metre runway**



cross Frankfurt Hahn behind a landing 767 conditions were good, and so they remained as we flew to the south of Frankfurt on our way to Aschaffenburg. This was the first time that we had flown in there as opposed to the more business-orientated Egelsbach. We were not disappointed. An 840 metre hard runway, self service fuel, a very friendly welcome and an excellent airfield restaurant. You could not ask for anything more.

Our friends were already there when we arrived. Feroz's aircraft had developed a technical problem a week earlier so now we were two aircraft with Feroz flying with James and Catherine in the PA28R. James had picked Feroz up in Sandown and had come IFR at FL100 from Shoreham direct to Aschaffenburg, so they had avoided all the weather issues.

Aschaffenburg proved to be an inspired choice as a stopover. The town had been the scene of a bloody battle in the last days of the Second World War when the Germans chose to defend it strongly. This resulted in the US Infantry taking it with house-to-house fighting and brutal close combat. The town was extensively damaged but it has now been rebuilt. The following morning we took a self-guided walking tour of the town. It is dominated by the Johannsburg Castle, built in the 17th century on the banks of the Main. The theme of the walk was 'Then and Now'. Photographs at various points

showed the 'Then'. The mixture of old and new were clearly evident. A number of buildings had been restored to their past glory. Where new buildings had been built they blended in well with the old and showed real quality. The contrast with our 'concrete' monstrosities of the 60's was stark.

After lunch we left for our two-hour trip to Ceske Budovice in the Czech Republic. We had a fascinating flight, in excellent visibility, with the villages in the hills and

valleys being almost 'toy town' in appearance. Ceske Budovice was an old cold war airfield with the concrete runway of 2,500 metres standing out from some distance. This was ironic for on the ground the reinforced concrete aircraft shelters and many of the other buildings still showed their camouflage paint. What good that did with such an obvious runway one can only speculate. Incredibly, with an airfield with only two other aircraft present we had a 'Follow Me' van. Refuelling was done with



the refueller and two firemen complete with fire truck present – clearly no labour shortage there.

A 16-mile taxi ride took us to Cesky Krumlov. This town had come to my attention some two years previously in a travel article in one of the broadsheets. From the description I had put it on my “must visit” list. We were not to be disappointed. We could see immediately that this was an amazing place – a real film set of a town. A massive castle dominating the scene, churches, old houses, narrow streets and a river encircling the medieval town – truly magical!

The guided tour we took the next day was an excellent investment. We learned much of the history of the town and the families who were its masters over the centuries. Building of the town and castle began in the 13th Century. The castle is second in size only to the Hradcany castle complex in Prague for the simple reason that it was owned by the second most important family in the country! The town and the castle were undamaged in the two World Wars. They were however neglected after 1945 and fell into disrepair. The award of World Heritage Status in 1992 was a defining moment. Since then there has been steady refurbishment and it is now a mecca for tourists, many from Asia. There even a number of school parties from that region when we were there. It is a real gem of a place. The only graffiti was true graffiti – the building decoration that stretches back centuries. Yes, a tourist trap, but a quality one.

Early start

A close watch on the TAFs indicated an early start the next day. We were up at 6:30, in the taxi an hour later and ready for take-off before 9:00 to avoid the threatened thunder showers. Indeed the rain started as we rolled down the runway. After that it was a truly memorable flight at 5,500ft over forests, lakes, mountains and small farms – and absolutely smooth to boot. With a friendly tail wind we were in Kosice two hours later. The Czech and Slovak controllers deserve honourable mention for their clarity and helpfulness. The Slovak AIP had stated that avgas was unavailable at the airport. However in planning the trip I had made contact in Slovak (using the web facility of ‘Babel Fish’) with the Kosice Aero Club. They had agreed to us parking at their site through a gate in the airport fence and to supplying us with fuel. There we received another friendly welcome and enjoyed much needed liquid replacement!

After checking into our hotel we went off for a relaxed lunch in an open-air cafe on the main street. No tour guide was available but a self-guided tour took us round the main sites in the city centre. It is true to say that it still shows the signs of

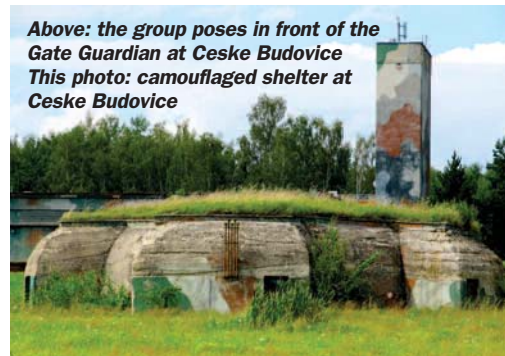
post war communist neglect that Cesky Krumlov has largely overcome. Nevertheless it was a city well worth the visit. The Technology Museum was particularly interesting with a special Leonardo da Vinci exhibition. He truly was the “father of flight” with an incredible vision which was only to become relevant centuries later.

Next day our first stop at the airport was at the Aviation Museum. This consisted of four halls where the exhibits took us from the early days of flight with a Bleriot replica through to the MiGs of the modern era. It was a truly comprehensive display of aviation history. There was also a hall with a collection of privately owned motor vehicles of interest. It was apparent however that budgetary constraints restricted the amount of preservation that could be done on the aircraft. In particular those aircraft housed under an overhead canopy in the open air were clearly subject to the rigours of the Central European winter. Sadly they will only deteriorate further. Perhaps we may have seen the museum at its best.

Back on the Aero Club side of the airport we met up with others from Germany, Belgium and Switzerland who were going to join the fly-in. To clear Passport and Customs we had to taxi the aircraft to other



**Above: the group poses in front of the Gate Guardian at Ceske Budovice
This photo: camouflaged shelter at Ceske Budovice**



**Right: Cesky Krumlov Castle at night
Below: Market Square at Cesky Krumlov**



side of the airport. There we also paid our landing and compulsory handling fees. The latter was €26 for absolutely nothing – we really must get behind AOPA on this issue. The cloud and rain of the earlier morning had by now cleared and we led the way to the Ukraine. The airfield was just over the border and on leaving Bratislava Information we contacted Uzzhorod Tower and were greeted in English but, understandably, with a very

strong Russian accent. We were efficiently marshalled to our parking spot. There we were met by a troop of officials – a customs man together with a dog handler whose ward was one of the most evil looking alsatians that I have set my eyes on, three policemen and three soldiers. One of the soldiers had a camera, whether for his own interest or officialdom I would not know. The customs official asked if I had any drugs or guns. I made the mistake

in answering in German – “nein”. “You have nine guns?” came the reply. Whether he was joking I don’t know, but we soon sorted it out. By this time others were arriving so things were getting busy. We were driven to the terminal building where we were greeted by TV crews and photographers. We were the celebrities they wanted to interview! The event had been partly sponsored by a vodka brand and that began to flow together with trout and bread appetisers handed out by pretty hostesses.

Organised mayhem

That was only the start. When we go out of the terminal organised mayhem took over. The vodka and beer flowed profusely. The bikers were arriving – around 2,000 were expected. One group that I talked to had ridden the thousand miles down from Moscow in a couple of days. Two of the hostesses, who were dressed in the most



Below: a fearsome troika at the Lenin Pub, Feroz Wadia, Bill Charney, James Alexander



Above: Angus and Alisma Clark, Catherine Alexander, Feroz Wadia and James Alexander welcomed by Gennadij Khasan at Uzhhorod
Left: Moskvich limousine – transport for Catherine and Alisma
Below: Alisma, Feros, Catherine, Bill Charney, Angus and James with the Staggerwing

revealing of blue outfits you can imagine, soon became the centre of attention of both bikers and pilots. It was all good natured and never quite got out of hand. By the end of the day over 50 aircraft arrived for the fly in. They came from Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Ukraine itself and the USA. The American representative was a real character – Bill Charney. Bill was on a slow round the world trip with his 1943 Beech Staggerwing. His journey had started in April 2009 in New Zealand. Full details of this remarkable man and his trip are available at <http://captainbiff.com/>. The evening, for the flyers, was spent in the Lenin Night Club, a communist era theme pub with all the artefacts – doorman in army uniform, wide brimmed officer’s hats and even facsimile copies of Pravda on the table!

The following afternoon we had an excursion into the surrounding countryside. A police escort with its siren bellowing led our bus all the way with a police motorcycle bringing up the rear. Traffic lights did not exist as far as they were concerned and vehicles parted in Red Sea fashion as we made our way. The



destination was a mountain resort consisting of a collection of stone and wood buildings in a beech forest. Among the facilities was a tub of water heated by burning logs underneath – not too dissimilar to a “cannibal’s pot”. After the “cooking” we jumped in the cold river – very refreshing!

The next day was truly amazing. There was a procession of bikers and pilots through the town. Following the obligatory

police car was a van with flag waving girls on the roof promoting the sponsor’s vodka. Then, in pride of place, came Alisma and Catherine in the lead car – a Moskvich limousine previously the property of the Polish President – Wojciech Jaruzelski. Not to be outdone Feroz and I commandeered the front seats of a 1950’s Russian Army truck which followed the Moskvich. Together with hundreds of bikers it made an amazing procession as it wended its



Left: Catherine, Alisma, Bill, Angus, James at the final BBQ complete with souvenir tee shirts

way around the town, greeted all the way by an enthusiastic populace. We eventually reached the airport where there was a motorcycle display and a short air show by a pair of Yaks.

In the evening we all moved to a stadium where there was a rock concert. Apart from numerous beer and food stalls there was a whole roast ox. The meat was served with vodka, bread and traditional soup. Bill Charney's achievement of flying the longest distance in his Staggerwing was recognized. He was brought on stage to receive a trophy and the inevitable bottle of vodka. He made a gracious acceptance speech which, when translated, went down very well with the crowd particularly when he said that his ancestors had hailed from this part of the world.

Homeward bound

Sunday July 15 was to be the start of our journey home. The prospects were not good - before we got up we could hear the thunder. Opening the curtains the clouds were thick and low and it was raining. Miracles! By the end of breakfast it was blue skies all round. Out to the airport the usual frustrations – pay the landing fee here, clear customs there, check the passports somewhere else and go through the security scanner. No matter, it was sunny and we were going to fly. Our flight plan time was 10.00 local so at 9.30 I called for departure, expecting the usual VFR latitude of +/- 30 minutes. But no – my flight plan time was 10.00 and that was that. The controller said that it was

about co-ordinating the border crossing. As the Slovakian border was all of 30 metres from the end of the runway I found this strange. At 10.00 we were on our way. An extremely pleasant flight took us over the Tatra Mountains out of Slovakia into Poland. I had carefully planned a VFR route to avoid the major control zones in Poland. However, almost immediately after crossing the border, the controller gave us a direct track to our final reporting point on the German border some 270 miles away. We crossed the Krakow zone at 4500ft without a single change in altitude or direction in spite of the controller being extremely busy handling considerable commercial traffic. This was an object lesson for those controllers in the UK who over zealously guard their less busy Class D airspace.

The only negative was the 20-25kt

headwinds we faced all the way. After a flight of just over three hours we landed at Bautzen, 15nm from the border, in Germany. We had emailed ahead for police and customs and we were met by a posse of three police and three customs officials in three vehicles. There was no problem with the formalities being handled as we re-fuelled. James's aircraft landed a short time later having had a later flight plan time. At that point we went our separate ways. We went west to Munster/Osnabruck and Holland. James's party went south west to Munchen Gladbach where they stayed the night before returning to the Isle of Wight the next day.

We decided to get on our way immediately to take advantage of the good weather and open up the possibility of getting home that day. The flight to Munster should have been relatively straightforward going to the north of Leipzig. After dodging a few showers however we met a solid wall of heavy rain. A 20 mile diversion to the south, over the Harz Mountains, solved the problem. At Munster we made the decision to refuel and then check the weather. The UK forecast made our decision an easy one. Monday was to be a day of low cloud and showers. Sunday, late afternoon and early evening, was to be good on both sides of the North Sea. We filed a flight plan and had a late lunch in the main terminal. Kitted out in our survival suits and life jackets we then got on our way. Apart from the continuing headwind we had a straightforward flight on to Holland and

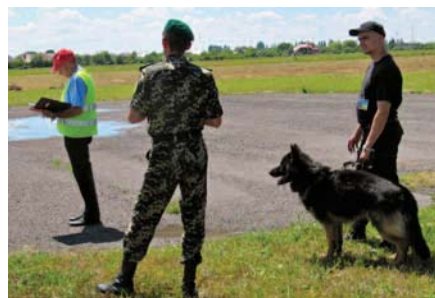


Left: a somewhat faster apron companion for the Robin

Middle left: Army, Customs and evil-looking

alsatian welcome us at Uzhhorod

Bottom left: pair of Ukranian YAKs at Uzhhorod



then from the north of Amsterdam over the sea to Norfolk. It was after 7.00 when we landed back at Netherthorpe. In all it had been an aggregate of just under 9 hours from start ups to shut downs. We were both remarkably fresh at the end - the benefit of both being pilots sharing the flying and other workload.

This completed an incredible eight days of flying, sightseeing, excellent company and fun in both old and new Europe. It would not have been possible had Gennadij Khazan of AOPA Ukraine not taken the initiative to organise a fly-in linked with bikers and rock music – an unlikely combination! He, with his two young helpers who acted as our guides and translators, made this an unforgettable experience. Thanks go to all concerned. How do you better this experience? ■

