

My personal airliner

Jersey to Athens in one hop – just one of the reasons James McDiarmid loves his Mooney Ovation 2GX

It all started in Los Angeles back in the summer of '94. I was sitting in the reception area of an FBO at Van Nuys Airport as a fledgling PPL. On the back cover of a glossy flying magazine was a full page advert for the Mooney entitled 'Mooney – your personal airliner'. At that time small aircraft all looked very similar to me, but the sleek red one in the advert grabbed my attention. Maybe it was the fact that it looked so sexy, maybe the suggestion that one might be able to use a light aircraft for fast, meaningful personal transport in most weather conditions. Or maybe it was just the fact that it looked like it had its tail on back to front, I don't recall. It certainly made an impact.

Fast forward to the summer of '99 and I am at Oshkosh with my father having flown there in my Europa monowheel (with a little help from a transatlantic car ferry). This was my first opportunity to see a recent model Mooney in the flesh. I hadn't seen many in the UK in the intervening years (but had chanced upon one parked on the apron in Dubai on my way back from a medical charity mission to Afghanistan – I thought that the lone star Texan flag colour scheme made it stand out very nicely indeed). The Oshkosh Mooney display was enough to convince me that if ever I was in a position to own a certified aircraft, this would be the one. It just ticked all the boxes in terms of speed, economy, safety, equipment – as far as I was aware it was the

only single piston to offer certified deicing as a factory option (a must for year-round ops in our cold wet corner of Europe).

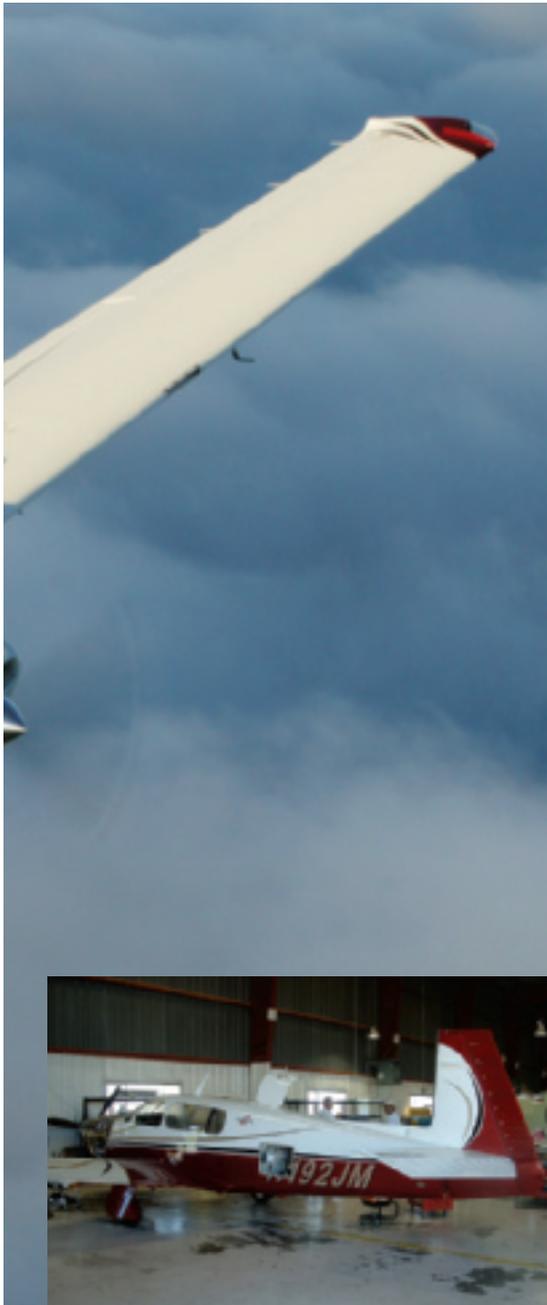
Sun 'n' Fun in 2000 gave me another opportunity to look over the ground hugging Texan beauty but my visit was too short to take a demo flight, so I took an info pack and resolved to make it my business to make time to fly a Mooney when the opportunity next arose. I did my FAA/IR that year in a C172 and promptly iced the rating for four years as I switched my attention to helicopters, initially doing the PPL(H) on my R22 Beta II G-OAVA then in 2004 trading it up for an R44 Clipper II G-OMCD, which I still own. In my humble opinion helicopters and fixed wing aircraft fulfill completely different roles – comparing them in terms of cost or efficiency is fallacious since they are as dissimilar as apples and oranges. A half decent apple will take you from your back garden hangar to a piece of land the size of a tennis court comparatively slowly and expensively, but the advantage is versatility and better tolerance of strong winds. Oranges on the other hand come into their own for long-range IFR tarmac to tarmac flights and are far safer at night and in IMC. I really did not want a fixed wing aircraft to fly short trips from grass to grass – that job was done very well by my R44. I wanted to be able to get into and out of the UK using my local ILS-equipped airport with long opening hours (Plymouth) and into the airways system (and

above most of the weather), preferably pointed toward somewhere warmer than Cornwall.

In 2004 I visited Dallas, Texas, for a surgical meeting. I emailed Mooney before leaving on the off-chance of getting a demo flight, telling them I had a three-hour window (on a Sunday!) between the congress ending and my check-in time for the return flight. Mooney were most obliging and met me at a suburban airport a five-minute taxi ride from my hotel with a gleaming example of their latest demonstrator.

We started with a discussion of the aircraft systems and options, then had an extremely thorough walk-round to demonstrate how the aircraft wrings more miles out of each drop of fuel than any competitor. I got the chance to fly the aircraft on a particularly hot, bumpy Dallas day and to land it at a small uncontrolled airport on the outskirts of the city with a stiff breeze blowing across the runway (I had foolishly mentioned to the demo pilot that I had heard Mooneys were not good in a crosswind so we did several approaches and landings in crosswinds of 15-20kts just to disprove this myth!) The grand finale was slotting into the parallel landing streams of heavies approaching DFW International for a high-speed approach. 'Mooney N-XXXX maintain 180kts until short final.' The factory team dropped me at the GA terminal and I was in plenty of time for my flight back to the UK.

The thing that really stuck in my mind was



went a couple of times (the norm, I guess, with new technology) and eventually Mooney decided that we should do the mandatory training course with FlightSafety in San Antonio, Texas, even though the aircraft was not yet certified.

Brick outhouse

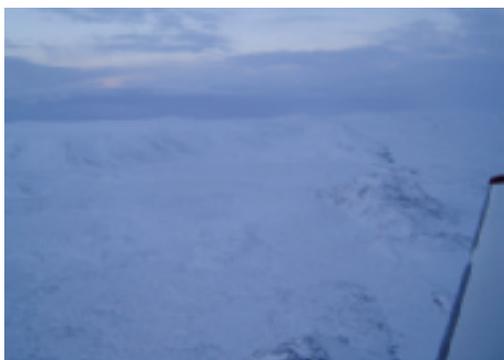
After the classroom training was completed Mooney kindly arranged a conventionally panelled demo aircraft and training pilot but the Texas weather was unseasonably inclement and precluded any training sorties. We took a day-long tour around the Kerrville factory instead and saw the way the aircraft is made. The solid design of the wing structure lends evidence to the Mooney lore that when a Mooney crashes you find all the bits in the same place – it really is built like the proverbial brick outhouse (a fact that I am eternally grateful for every time I am being tossed around in turbulence with sleet or rain hammering down on the windscreen) and we returned to the UK to better weather having

inspected my completed but not yet certified aircraft.

I had arranged for several factory options for the aircraft; G1000, TKS de-icing, Skywatch TCAS, Stormscope, speedbrakes and factory oxygen. I also wanted extra long range fuel tanks (120usg rather than 89usg) and Jose Monroy in Ft Lauderdale came strongly recommended. I called him, and he graciously agreed not only to fit the tanks but to ferry the aircraft back to the UK for me. In December 2004 Mooney delivered N192JM to his workshop in Florida for the tank installation. A short test flight later he was ready to go and in January 2005 set out up the Eastern seaboard of the USA to ferry the aircraft to Europe. The weather at St John's, Newfoundland was so poor he got stuck there for three days and as there was no possibility of things improving we cancelled any further attempt until mid February, when the next weather window opened up. At the second attempt Jose flew via Goose Bay and Reykjavik to Exeter where we met him on Valentine's Day. He had seen

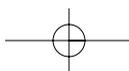


Main photo: Ovation 2 in Mooney's preferred colour scheme
Above left: James McDairmid's Ovation 2 GX in the finishing shop
Above: red carpet treatment - the Mooney is handed over in style on delivery day
Left: a view of icy Iceland on the ferry flight
Below: a much-needed pre-heat prior to starting at Goose Bay



that the aircraft performed exactly as published (how rare this is with many of today's aircraft). With neutral winds we saw 192kts at 6,000ft at max power with three heavy males and my heavy bags on board – very impressive. The news that the G1000 was becoming available as an option really made the deal for me and I ordered Mooney Ovation 2 GX (G denotes G1000 fit and X shows XM:WX radio compatibility) N192JM in April 2004 in Mooney red and white.

Several pictures followed of the aircraft under construction, but I was working so hard that I didn't have the opportunity to bother the Kerrville factory by turning up during construction. Although the aircraft was completed on schedule the expected certification date for the G1000 came and





Left: view of the Alps from FL160 en route from Jersey to Athens in one hop

nothing of the UK until he became visual with the runway at Exeter almost at minima and in a bitterly cold blustery crosswind – amazingly, the aircraft was still half full of expensive Reykjavik fuel, having come directly from Iceland! Work commitments had again prevented me from accompanying Jose on the trip but we were treated to some excellent pictures of Greenland,

Iceland and blizzard conditions in St John's that Jose had snapped during the crossing. After a night of Cornish hospitality we drove Jose to Heathrow and put him on a flight to Miami having sent his liferaft separately as cargo.

My plane was here at last, but I could not yet safely fly it. Although I had in excess of 600 hours fixed wing time at that point I

hadn't flown fixed wing since March of the previous year and only had one hour of Mooney time. So the task of easing me back into planes fell to Nick Chabbert (ex of Mooney now of EADS-Socata). Nick made the trip from Tarbes to the UK the next weekend and I tested his patience severely in the breezy skies around the south west as I not only reacquainted myself with fixed wing flying but also started to learn how to manage the complex systems of the Mooney.

Long range IFR

When I dropped him off at Bristol 48 hours later I was well aware that my piloting skill left a lot to be desired, and although I had been signed off for VFR I had a long way to go before I could use the Mooney for the long range IFR cruising purpose for which it was designed. Nick, knowing I needed further help from a Mooney aficionado, put me in touch with Andre Bouchet, a recently retired Air France 747 training captain (and Mooney owner) based at Persan Beaumont near Paris. With Andre's help and the investment of several weekends I finally got to grips with the aircraft and its systems. For three months Andre made himself available virtually every time I had a meeting to attend somewhere in Europe. I would drop in at Persan to collect him and off we would go. I gained the



Mooney's growing family

In 2006 Mooney introduced the Ovation 3, which is basically a 2GX with a 310 horsepower Continental IO 550-G/AP engine, giving it a shorter takeoff distance and a cruise speed some nine knots faster. Published max cruise for the 3 is 197 knots, and it is claimed to be the fastest normally-aspirated airplane available.

Top of the range is the turbocharged Acclaim, which is claimed to cruise in excess of 235 knots at FL270 on the 280 horsepower Continental TSIO-550-G. It has been well received by the market, with the only criticism concerning payload once all the options have been loaded. Air conditioning adds 65 lbs, the de-icing system when fully charged adds 90 lbs, and with 130 gallons in the long-range tanks there's no room left for a pilot. In the UK the aircon is a dispensable luxury, the TKS system will rarely need a full charge and unless you're crossing three countries you'll never need full tanks.

Above: Mooney Acclaim goes like a bat but has payload-range considerations

confidence to cross frontal systems in the airways and flew in pretty poor weather conditions using the full flight envelope of the aircraft. By mid 2005 I felt ready to launch in most weather to most places provided they had at least 800m of hard runway.

Destinations have included Athens in a single hop from Jersey, Italy on several occasions, Verona, Pavia, Perugia, and Milan twice since 2005. Munich, Monchengladbach and Berlin in Germany last year on separate trips, the last trip being to attend the first ever European Mooney maintenance workshop with Jerry Manthey, the Mooney aficionado's Mooney aficionado. In Spain I have visited Mallorca and Malaga. I have travelled widely in France, Cannes being a popular stop (to get to Nice) and Toussus or Persan for Paris. Jersey has become a mandatory stop on most trips to fill up those capacious Monroy tanks with lovely cheap CI fuel (my AOPA membership pays for itself with cumulative savings on discounted CI fuel, as does my Jersey Aero Club membership in reduced landing fees).

The aircraft performs as advertised. It is a very stable IFR platform but not an aircraft for grassy or short runways (at least in my hands). The cabin is plenty wide enough for two prosperously proportioned males and it handles as well in a crosswind as most other light singles. The in-ground-effect wing can cause a lot of float if the approach speed is not pegged precisely so the aircraft has to be flown by the numbers and cannot just be pointed at them when landing! The speedbrakes are absolutely essential when descending out of the airways otherwise you can have difficulty slowing down from speeds well in excess of 200kts (easily

attainable in a Mooney going downhill) to approach speed. I use about one tankful of TKS fluid (20L aeroshell compound 07) every year – I do not worry unduly about icing when flying above the freezing level even in moderate precipitation (unless the TKS tank is getting low) as the TKS system has a phenomenal ice-shedding ability and icing associated with most fronts that have tops too high for me to get above is usually a fairly short-lived affair at 180kts. The TCAS is great and helps me to understand why ATC sometimes vector me here and there rather than getting direct – it has also given me ample warning of conflicting traffic on more than one occasion and is a great comfort to have when in the soup with 'traffic on a reciprocal heading passing through your level'. The G1000 with integrated autopilot enables an amateur pilot like me to cope with very high workload situations (single pilot night IFR) and I would be lost without it – it'll take you right down the ILS, all you need to do is configure the aircraft, manage speed and supervise the big picture. I still throw flights away if the weather is looking very poor (maybe once a year) and choose my departure time, level and routing carefully, although Eurocontrol usually change it! The Mooney really is a personal airliner and I have no regrets about choosing it. This little plane not only has incomparable speed, efficiency and range (even without the long range tanks) but with the TKS option becomes by far the best equipped, most rugged and time-proven single engine piston airframe/engine combination in its class.

What would I change? There have been a couple of moments over the last two years when I would have paid a king's ransom to have en-route weather radar imagery so that I

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could see the smoothest route through the towering bumpy sleety darkness enveloping me (either XM:WX radio, which is unlikely to happen in Europe but is a must for serious IFR in the USA, or actual weather radar to augment the stormscope). Would I buy the Bravo or Acclaim turbocharged versions? Yes, if I regularly intended to cross the Alps or the Rockies but not otherwise – they have much thirstier engines and the Ovation is the better bet in terms of speed and efficiency below FL100 (20mpg – statute miles per imperial gallon – when operating lean of peak). The Ovation 3 is what I would buy if I were to purchase another Mooney at present. ■

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