

# Home from Rome in a Tecnam



*Club pilot Andy Raymond takes a long-distance flight in a VLA, and – for the most part – likes what he sees*

Like most PPLs I seem to spend most of my flying hours on some small adventure which I share with a like-minded club member, of something like forty minutes duration, generally from Fairoaks to the Isle of Wight, Popham or Headcorn. I do confess that I thoroughly enjoy such adventures, but when the weather becomes more clement I look to more challenging tasks, and do venture to nearby France to enjoy lunch.

My scenario is not uncommon, if the log books of the average club pilot are examined. Firstly, disposable income will only allow modest trips, probably with another pilot to share the workload and the cost. Secondly, the tales I hear of great cross-country journeys in aeroplanes capable of legs of many hours can't be completed with the average club pilot's bladder.

So with this in mind, my club has decided to order a Very Light Aeroplane. I mention this only in passing, as this is not the subject of the story. As part of the aeroplane selection process we tried different machines, one of which was the Tecnam Sierra. This was brought to our club at Fairoaks by the British sales representative Graham Slater. As one does when discussing delivery issues, I idly suggested that "should he ever need to have an aeroplane flown back from the factory in Italy, I would be his man", never of course thinking that it would happen. So a few months later when my mobile telephone rang and Graham asked "would I go with him to pick-up a flight from Bristol to Rome so that we might bring two aeroplanes back from the factory" I was initially surprised, and then reluctant to accept his invitation as my confidence suddenly deserted me. However, having considered it further and reminded myself of my ambitions, I thought "what the hell, I'll do it".



The two aeroplanes to be collected were a Tecnam Sierra, a type I had previously flown, and a Tecnam P92 JS (yes, I didn't know what it looked like either until I got there). All I knew was that it had a high wing and had been specially adapted with a release mechanism for banner towing. How difficult could it be for someone of my experience? That was the thought I consoled myself with on the way there. I suppose one small advantage of flying such an aeroplane on a ferry flight is that I got to try the machine over lots of hours with several take-offs and landings and many hours in the cruise, although the opportunity to try stalls and unusual attitudes never arose. This

story is being told by a club pilot like many others out there who (despite the drivel that can be read in some aviation journals, probably arranged to sell you something) is happy just to go flying in a safe and pleasant-to-fly aeroplane.

We had to travel to Capua by aeroplane, train and expensive taxi which took us all of the first day. Capua is one of the places where Rome trained its gladiators in days of old. On the following morning we reached the very modern Tecnam factory, then went on to the tiny grass field of Castel Voltano where Tecnam assemble and test fly their small aeroplanes. There, we were told that "an Airworthiness

Directive had been issued which demanded that the vacuum pumps would have to be changed" on our machines and unfortunately "there were no spares of the type required available". In addition, the gearboxes would have to be stripped and inspected. So back to the factory we went with the intention of booking flights home on the internet. As we were about to enter credit-card details an employee came in and said that the parts had been located and they would be sent by express delivery to arrive the next day.

After lunch on the third day we were finally able to get airborne. My familiarisation on type was a quick dual circuit over the water buffalo farm (mozzarella cheese) and a ridiculously short, grass-field landing. Graham had committed himself to exhibiting his aeroplanes at an event in the UK and was anxious to get home, so off we launched into the blue with the intention of tracking the coast at low level towards Rome. We had canvassed the advice of the Tecnam test pilot about the route and had agreed that we would fly in loose formation with Graham in the faster aeroplane leading the way and making radio calls for both of us. The Sierra had a fancy GPS system installed with lots of knobs to twiddle. I had taken my battery-driven Garmin GPS III with me, and a set of new maps.

Generally, at this stage of an article, most readers begin to think that they are about to

While refuelling I took the opportunity to investigate the first major problem I'd experienced, and that was that the right hand tank gauge was showing full and the left tank gauge was showing almost empty despite the fact that both the fuel cocks mounted on the windscreen pillars were showing 'on'. Refuelling confirmed that the right hand tank was still almost full. Inspection revealed that in addition, the decals mounted around the cocks seemed to have been incorrectly fitted – or were they? The right hand valve read 'left hand tank' and vice-versa for the left valve. In addition to this, the oil temperature on the journey was indicating excessively high; this was confirmed on the ground as the filler cap

Throughout the whole of the first part of the trip the constant pressure to get home was always with us, and on reflection this coloured our judgement. Arriving at Cannes somehow felt more comfortable, probably because I had been there before and also because it was cooler than the blast furnace of southern Italy.

The next stage gave us a dilemma – to go over the Alps, or to go around the south of France at low level to the Rhone Valley. As the weather in the Alps region didn't look inviting we decided to take the low-level route. It may be useful here to mention the obtaining of weather at Cannes. I was directed to a bank of computer monitors. Despite many tries I could not make any progress so I asked somebody



**Left: the Tecnam P92 JS has astoundingly good short-field performance**  
**Below left: Rotax-engined VLAs are 'the way of the future' for club pilots**



**Above: aircraft are assembled and test-flown at Castel Voltano**

**Left: panel was basic, and the author's AH was on the fritz**

**Below: Tecnam dealer Graham Slater - contact him on 07831 350928**



read a tedious travelogue about how somebody flew somewhere or other. However I will spare you this and try and concentrate on the interesting bits. It took us three hours to reach Massa Chinquale, which is well past Rome, to refuel. Following Graham had been very tiring in a much slower aeroplane with constant speeding up and slowing down required, with continual re-trimming. Also, the quick-change of radio frequencies, particularly in the Rome area, had me out-of-synchronisation and therefore out of touch for a lot of the way. My approach to Massa in an unfamiliar machine led to a go-around before landing on the second attempt.

was untouchably hot for some time. A 'cowl conference' was called and we decided (well, Graham did) that after take off I would isolate the left tank and run on the right tank whilst watching the fuel pressure gauge. Should there be no drop in pressure, then likely all was well.

The next leg involved flying to Cannes, with the first part over mountainous terrain (with doubtful fuel flow). This took two more hours; we arrived at 20:35 with me once again following Graham, having lost whatever frequency I should have been on. In the end I contacted Cannes approach whilst making an unorthodox circuit of the bay and went in to land.

who spoke excellent English. This did the trick, and we eventually obtained enough information to make an informed decision. Going around the south coast added a lot to our journey time and to Graham's anxiety to get back to Britain. For me the adventure of the low-level flying around some of the most remarkable coastline in Europe was both pleasurable and a little worrying, as we had to fly from point-to-point on many coves and bays and by my estimation we were sometimes at least a 'thumb' or five nautical miles away from the coast if the donkey had decided to die. Once in the Rhone Valley the turbulence began, and it was quite severe. By



this time we were talking to one and another on a common frequency and we both agreed that we had had enough and would land soon for more fuel and lunch. So as La Pujaut hove into view we made an approach and landing. We discovered that fuel was only available for jump school use. Anyway the baguettes and a cold drink were good, as was the welcome.

Once again we had a cowling conference to determine our strategy, only to be politely told that we should buzz-off quickly as they were expecting a jump. We had decided that due to the doubts we had with fuel availability and the need to press on as far as we could that day, we should land again at Pierre Latte as we were told that they had fuel – a flight of some thirty-five minutes. However, when we arrived no fuel was available, but we were told by some helpful people in the flying club that Macon definitely had fuel, so off we set. As I began the take-off run the artificial horizon decided to do strange things, and as I was in perfect VFR weather, it wasn't me. What concerned me was that it could be the vacuum system rather than just the AH. However, on to Macon and fuel. When we arrived, rightly enough there was fuel, but it was one of those French ones where you help yourself using a credit card. Yes, it didn't take British credit cards. Yet another cowling conference. By now my machine was getting worryingly short of fuel. The next likely fuel stop on-route was Chalon, some thirty miles and half-hour away. A helicopter pilot who happened to be strolling past advised us that if we wanted fuel at Chalon we should get there before 1800 local as everybody goes home after that. Now, I relate all of this to you merely to inform any prospective travellers to France that refuelling is a big issue and should be considered carefully before going. Off we went again, with me thinking that the possibility of running out of fuel was a real one. How often I have condemned others for running out of fuel or having allowed situations like this to arise, I thought as I flew over beautiful countryside. I consoled myself with the thought that I could land in a field and only had myself to injure if it all went wrong. Soon Chalon came into view – visibility was exceptional that afternoon. I

**Top: P92 JS felt stable and was particularly easy to land**  
**Right: the aircraft Andy flew back from Rome, home and dry**

called for a straight-in approach, and as there was nothing to conflict, straight in I went, landed and taxied to the pumps. The aerodrome fireman was to deliver the fuel, so I put the aeroplane to bed for the night and we went to find a hotel. Later fuel calculations from the fuel upload showed that I had had three litres usable left at re-fuelling; a sobering thought.

The fifth day saw us take off with a view to reaching Abbeville for fuel, lunch and customs. This took us three hours. However, we had forgotten that in France nothing happens between 12:00 and 14:00. We arrived at just after 12:00 to find nobody on the pumps and nobody to open our flight plan for the onward journey over the oggin, so we accepted the situation and enjoyed the lunch. I left my aeroplane right in front of the pumps in the vain hope that I would be the first to be fuelled, which would ease Graham's anxiety. On the refueller's return, he of course re-fuelled all of the French aeroplanes first before refuelling me. The next leg was familiar territory over the Channel, but without an artificial horizon it was a relief to be able to just about see the other side. I chose to follow the coast to our final ferry permit destination, Southampton.

What did I think of the aeroplane after more than 15 hours cross-country flying? Remember, this is the story of a club pilot who enjoys the 'feel' of an aeroplane and would look to fly such a machine over relatively short distances, so the flight manual's figures of all-up-weight, expected cruise speed and so on are of secondary importance. The things I liked were: the stick rather than a control wheel, a relatively roomy cabin, the incredible short field performance, the feeling of stability and the ease of achieving a good landing. A pilot would have to be very incompetent and very strong in

order to do any real damage. Things I didn't like were the electric trim and flaps. The trim is adjusted by means of two buttons mounted on top of the stick grip, but it never quite seemed to be right and needed constant attention. Also, the transmit button mounted on the front of the hand grip was just where you didn't want it and I had to consciously keep away from it to avoid accidentally transmitting. The flap application, by means of a flat switch mounted on the panel and an indicator, resulted in the nose pointing immediately skyward with the associated heavy shove forward on the stick to prevent a climb: the design of the wings to give such good short field performance was probably responsible. In addition, the braking was undertaken with a lever and lock system that took some getting used to. However, the club pilot is not to reason why but just to get in and fly. The aeroplane liked to cruise at about 80 to 85 knots and would happily approach at 55knots under 'standard' conditions. The fuel management, as previously mentioned, needs re-looking at. Something the club pilot does not need is a complicated fuel management problem.

Overall the Rotax-engined Very Light Aeroplane, I believe, is the way of the future for the club pilot. What do we need to get two people airborne in safety for training or touring that doesn't cost vast sums of money and is easier on the environment both in fuel consumption and noise levels?

What are the competitors to this machine and ones like it in the club environment? Probably the cheap to buy but expensive to maintain and operate shagged-out old Cessna 152 or Cherokee 140. This is the subject of yet another story.

Could I live with this aeroplane if it were for hire in a club for training or self-fly-hire? Yes I could. ■

