



The author Leo Deuel defines 'baksheesh' as "lavish remuneration and bribes, rudely demanded but ever so graciously accepted by the natives in return for little or no services rendered" in Egypt and parts of South East Asia. Anyone who has lived in these parts of the world will be familiar with the concept and will no doubt concur with the definition; as someone who has worked in the Middle East and South East Asia I am well acquainted with the baksheesh system, but it seems to be applied with extra vigour to the general aviation pilot, who will find himself getting nowhere unless he has a bottomless sack of cash with which to grease the innumerable palms that line the runways in warmer climes.

My experience of living and flying in the region was what led ferry pilot David Plange to ask me along when he was offered a contract to fly a 2007 Mooney Acclaim from San Diego to Bangkok via the UK, and I was very pleased to accept his invitation. Memories of the 'red tape' came flooding back to me, but the opportunity was too good to miss.

The range on this Mooney is very good at seven hours duration, and when also fitted with the latest Garmin 1000 the flight management is exceptional. In only five legs, David flew the Mooney across the USA, Canada, Greenland and Iceland, arriving at Sturgate in mid-July. It was time for a maintenance stop and some quality time at home before we set off for Thailand four days later.

We departed Sturgate with enough fuel to reach the Channel Islands. In only 75 minutes

the Mooney had taken us to Alderney where the service is good, with fuel at a good price. After a brief picnic and a wait to activate the flight plan we were away. At FL13 the route took us into the airways directly across France to St Tropez, Monaco and into Italy. A short sea crossing and we entered Italy just north of Rome as the sun began to sink in the sky. Halfway through Italy the daylight gave way to moonlight. It was a lovely summer evening with the occasional clouds reflecting the moon, and a thousand stars visible. After four hours we started to watch the fuel status and were thankful that the altitude had provided cruising

speeds of up to 200 kt. Over the heel of Italy we had 100 miles to go across the sea into Greece and we could just make out the coast ahead. As we approach Kerkira we could hear the holiday flights going in and out, with familiar names such as easyJet and Ryanair. We land at midnight; it has taken just 6 hr 20 min from Alderney.

On Tuesday morning we had an early start. I asked Dave if he slept well, and he declared: "Not at all." During the night he had received a phone call to say that his friend, mentor and business partner Dustin Rabe had suffered a fatal crash during a ferry flight in the US. This



Above: Mooney Acclaim has seven hours' endurance and a fabulous Garmin 1000 fit
Right: David took this picture in Greenland en route to Sturgate



Above: Garmin's synthetic vision system proved helpful in Indian storms
Right: David on oxygen, when we managed to find some
Below: the Garmin aircraft management system display

was devastating news, and we had to decide whether we should proceed to Bangkok. Dave decided that we would continue. It was a hard decision, but Dave said he would just have to focus on the job.

The Mooney was refuelled to the top and an oxygen top-up was requested but unfortunately was not available, so we left Kerkira for Luxor, Egypt. First we had to clear Athens airspace and climb to 9,000ft. Ideally it would have been better to climb higher but without oxygen this was not possible. The sky was blue and the Greek islands looked very inviting as we headed towards Crete. Once clear of Crete, the next coast would be Africa with a crossing between Alexandria and Tobruk, and into the dusty landscape of the desert. This was to be our outlook for the next two days as we crossed barren landscapes. Heading south over the Egyptian desert, the sand dunes were all pointing in the same direction; it was clear to see which way the winds blow here. We asked for a short cut direct to Luxor but this was rejected and we had to continue to Daklha before turning left towards the river Nile and Luxor.

It was early evening as we landed and were greeted by the agent and his entourage, all of whom wanted some payment. The service was pleasant, everything with a smile but the price was horrendous, not least the fuel at US\$5.50 per litre! We were taken to obtain an Egyptian visa, then transported to the Sofitel on the banks of the Nile. We could afford an 8am start next day as the agent would not pick us up earlier, so there was time for a relaxing breakfast. In the distance could be seen the hills where the Valley of the Kings is located. The journey back to the airport allowed a couple of stops for photographs of this ancient city. Back at Luxor airport, the agent guided us through immigration and passport control and I noticed that he was paying everyone we made contact with. The bus waiting to take us

to the Mooney was large enough to carry an airliner passenger load! Then the fuel truck arrived, the fire engine arrived, the customs arrived and the agent's team arrived and they all wanted paying! Just as we thought it was time to leave, the agent presents Dave with a substantial bill for his services on top of all the others, plus a fee for over-flying Saudi Arabia!

We departed at 07:35 UTC and headed out over the Red Sea, where container ships and large tankers could be seen heading to the Suez canal. Crossing the coast into Saudi Arabia I got flashbacks from the time I spent in this country in late 1980s – the vast, barren land and the large roads with little traffic. In Jeddah airspace we are asked to climb to FL15 but have to decline. I wondered if the controllers are aware of the aircraft type. Towards the centre of Saudi Arabia the desert is fertile but lacks water. With the aid of wells it has been possible to extract water and spray it onto the desert with large arms to create circles in which alfalfa is grown. There are hundreds of these circles making a very unusual landscape and creating the agricultural city of Gassim just north of the capital Riyadh. The second half of our crossing



over Saudi desert finds us heading into sand storms. Visibility deteriorates badly but the Mooney synthetic display still shows the landscape. We are now reaching into the industrial east side of Saudi Arabia with more aerial activity over Dharhan. As we cross the coast into the Persian Gulf, the Bahrain controller issues instructions for the approach into Bahrain. It is just as well because the visibility is poor and not improving as we descend to 4,000ft. I can just make out the skyline of Bahrain as we head downwind. On finals it still not possible to see the runway but the controller is very helpful. I get the first sight of the runway when we are at 300 ft. As we touch down the instruction is to take the next left and park next to a cargo 747 and Hercules on the north apron. It is getting dark and the ground temperature is 43 degrees. Goodness knows what the tarmac temperature is but it burns the feet.

The agent arrives after 30 minutes and takes us to the terminal, which means a long ride around the perimeter track. We are escorted through the immigration passport control and, as we do not have the local currency, the officer kindly accepts £10 sterling. We chose the Golden Tulip hotel in Manama. I remember it as the Hilton Hotel in the 90s. Bingo! It is seafood buffet night. The finest array of seafood, vegetables, salads, and Arabic starters that could be seen. The chef explains that all is inclusive of drinks for the equivalent of £18. We feast on lobster, prawns, and local fish.

After the costly exercise in Luxor, we



anticipated that India would also want payment in US dollars and took a taxi to the local HSBC bank. Two scruffy looking individuals, we asked to withdraw \$5,000. "Certainly sir. We will need some ID and proof of account." It took a while, but they were obliging and served us Arabic coffee with dates while we waited. Back at Manama airport – formerly known as RAF Muharraq in the 1960s – the agent took us around the perimeter to the Mooney where the fuel bowser was just arriving. The bad news was that it came in 200 litre drums and the whole drum had to be purchased. The good news was that oxygen was also available and we filled the oxygen tanks to 1,500psi. Departure from Bahrain was at 13:15 local time, and we had a 5 hr 50 min leg to get to Muscat in Oman, a route that would take us past the Straits of Hormuz, past Qatar and over Abu Dhabi. As we climbed out over the Persian Gulf we could see the large oil terminals in the sea, reminding us how rich this part of the world is. Abu Dhabi also displayed some of its wealth, with large skyscrapers built on reclaimed land on the sea shore. Over the UAE the desert turns into rugged hills with sharp contours, the large hill at Al Ain is below us

Top right: coasting in over an arid and uninviting Egypt

Bottom right: David at Luxor, where everyone had to be paid for everything

with the Hatta Fort hotel looking out over the spectacular landscape. As we reach Ar Rustaq it is time to turn east and into the Muscat control zone. Even with the dust and haze the runway could be seen in the distance.

Muscat is the home of Sinbad the Sailor. It is a very pleasant city with a fort on the harbour and some lovely hotels for holidays. The RAF are also on the airbase with AWACs and VC10s, this being a close base for the war in Afghanistan.

It would have been nice to stay longer but we left our hotel at 5am to get to the airport. The first visit was to the operations room where a very helpful Filipino arranged the flight plan and organised some weather charts for the next leg to Ahmadabad in north west India. The agent quickly had us through the immigration and customs, although there were some questions from security about our intentions. As we were being transported to the Mooney I noticed an RAF VC10 starting to taxi out from the base; it looked like our fellow countrymen also had an early start this morning.

Everything seemed to be running well until we found out that the fuel promised for 5:30am had not materialised. The avgas bowser had first to be filled from the 200 litre drums; this would then be transported to the Mooney and pumped into the tanks. It was going to take at least an hour so the flight plan was delayed until 07:15 (04:15 UTC). Even at this early hour the sun was hot and the apron reflected the heat like a hotplate. We took some 'shelter' in Oman Air Services' air conditioned office and waited for the fuel to arrive.

With the Mooney fully loaded with fuel we were cleared for takeoff and climb to 4000ft, with our route taking us over the sea off the coast of Pakistan. There were plenty of ATC conversations with other civil aircraft but we also could listen to US and British pilots who would suddenly announce "going tactical now, good day," and that made us think just



how close we were to the action in this part of the world. Pakistan control handed us over to Mumbai control with just over an hour to go before Ahmadabad. As predicted, the sky started to produce some clouds for the first time since we departed the UK. By the time we reached the airport there was broken cloud at 1,000ft and some light showers. It was reported in the notams that the runway was prone to bird activity although it did not say what type of bird, only that regular attempts were made to scare them away. Just as we reached the threshold, we saw what type – they were buzzards with three-foot wingspans and they were on the runway! What a scare to see them rising in front of our landing aircraft.

What followed was a fiasco with the local agent. A party of almost 25 people, all wanting their photo taken next to the Mooney. Each had a small task and each required paying. The fuel was expensive, and again came in 200 litre drums. The tractor that brought it wanting paying, the trailer it came on wanted

paying, the man who hand-pumped it into the aircraft needed paying. Then I had to go to the tower for the flight plan and landing fee. The van that took me across the apron wanted paying and when I asked for latest weather I was shown a BBC report which also elicited payment. As I got back to the Mooney I found a very frustrated Dave eager to get out of the place. Just as we were getting on board the agent passed us a very large bill for his services. What had we just paid all these people for? Do they make it all up?

It was to be a long leg to Kolkata and the lack of refreshment and toilet stop would be missed. Once again it was desirable to climb up to FL130 to take advantage of the thinner air and favourable tailwinds. The weather slowly got worse and our sight of the ground diminished. As we reached the halfway point across northern India, with four hours to run, the sky started to fill with storms and clouds that were towering pillars of activity. It was approaching dusk, and the sun setting behind





us in the clearer sky was beaming spectacular colours on the clouds. An occasional flash of lightning became a regular flash, and from different locations. Sometimes travelling sideways between the clouds, the display was impressive and somewhat frightening. We knew that we had to get through this and if possible around the big pillars. At first it was not too difficult, but as darkness arrived we could only make use of the lightning flashes to get a snap shot of where the worst clouds were. Once the darkness of night had arrived we could hear the airliners above asking for 20 mile track deviations due to weather. The Mooney continued at FL13 until we eventually hit a bad storm. The first indication of danger came when the propeller described a white circle, and it was clear that ice was forming. The landing lights were switched on and indicated that it was also there on the leading edge. Not good in an aircraft without ant-icing! Dave descended to FLO90 where the ice dispersed. No choice now – we had to remain at the lower level and persevere in the stormy weather. Ice on the antennae had killed our communication and we attempted to restore communication. It was too far for our VHF set to reach Kolkota or Mumbai but an Emirates

Top left: felucas on the Nile – the hills in the distance surround the Valley of the Kings
Left: the journey back into the city allowed for a couple of photography stops, including one at the Temple of Luxor
Bottom left: the view from our Sofitel hotel balcony in Luxor



airliner picked up our message and relayed that we were now at a lower altitude with operations normal. We were halfway to Kolkota and we needed to watch the fuel closely for the rest of the leg, having lost the assistance of altitude and favourable winds. If the Mooney lacked the luxury of de-icing it certainly made it up with the Garmin 1000 and its wealth of management information. The map display showed that with the current fuel consumption there would be enough to reach Kolkota. The next two hours saw a constant lookout for clear patches through the storms, every lightning flash giving us a clue, occasionally helped by a clear air patch that allowed the moon to shine on the clouds. Communications were lost again until about an hour later when we heard the Emirates airliner asking Kolkota control if they had heard any further from us. They had not, but they soon did – thanks to our friendly Emirates captain.

With just over 100 miles to go, the storms lost some of their strength and the clouds started to break. We could see the moon shining on the ground, and the pink/orange light that could be made out in the distance was Kolkota coming into range. The fuel status was showing that we could land within the reserves but the caution yellow light started to display. Provided that no further detours were required the fuel state was manageable. Communications had now been established with Kolkota and we had 50 miles to run. As we reached the outskirts of the city the controller gave instructions for us to join the pattern, and we would be number four for landing. This unfortunately would take us well past Kolkota before joining a long approach to land, a situation that would take valuable fuel to achieve. Dave announced that due to adverse weather diversions and a lower altitude we were requesting priority handling,



which was duly given, and we were slotted in for the ILS approach to runway 19L. It was 11pm local time and we had completed the longest and most difficult sectors of the trip. Or so we thought!

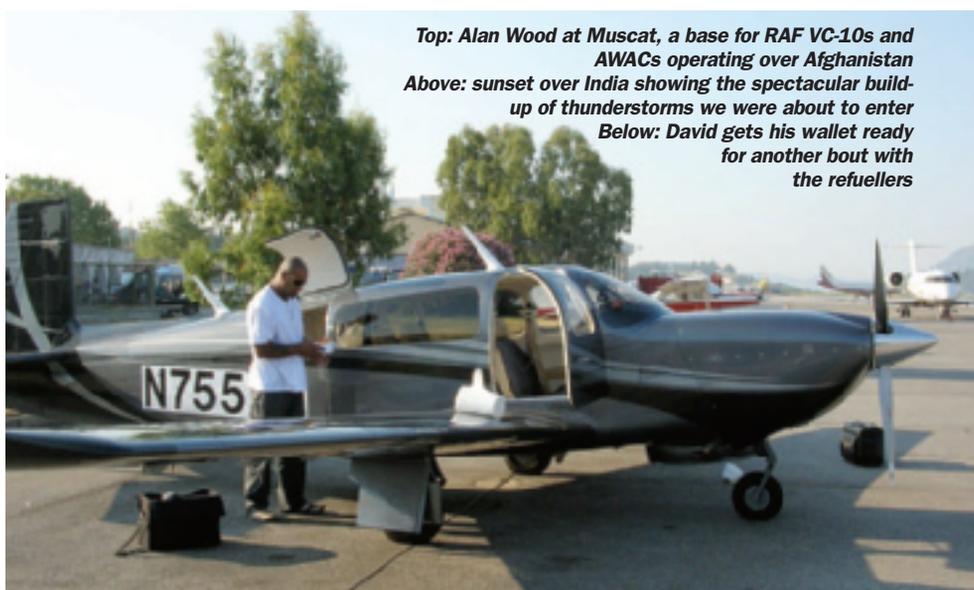
The reception at Kolkota also brought several people to the aircraft. At first it seemed better than our experience in Ahmadabad, but we soon learned this was to be another 'pay all the way' exercise. This time only rupees were accepted and Dave was taken to the exchange counter to convert some US dollars. The fuel arrived in 50 gallon drums and once again it needed a tractor, trailer and pump. All needed paying for, in addition to the fuel price. Both the 50 gallon drums were used to fill the Mooney, with a surplus of about 20 to 30 litres. What happened to this surplus, I enquired. Would it go to the flying club? No they would not accept it, I was told. So where did it go?

The night did not get any better: we had difficulty getting into India and were required to pay the equivalent of £40 and leave our passports at immigration. The taxi took us to a weird hotel that was the worst and most expensive on our journey. It was too late to get anything to eat, so we had gone from 5am to midnight with only water and a snack. The room was noisy with fans and air conditioner, cars were sounding their horns all night and dogs were barking back at them. The only good news was that the curry breakfast was good and reminded me of my time in Malaysia.

The taxi took us the three miles to the airport and charged us \$76 for the privilege. Our desire to make a swift departure was blocked when we arrived. To get our passports back and process through immigration meant that we had even more forms to fill in, and we needed to produce some boarding cards for our flight. Finally we made it back to the Mooney. The agent was still looking at all the forms and was about to give us another surprise. In spite of being asked on the previous evening if he had taken payment for everything, he was ready to provide the agents' handling fees bill, just like Ahmadabad and from the same company. We began to wonder if this was the genuine bill, and if so, what were all the other handling bills for? A lesson learned – anyone transiting India must have a contract agreement with handling agents before they arrive in the country.

As we took off and headed towards the Bengal Bight we could still see the ground at 9000ft but as we fly over the sea to Myanmar the cloud increases. Kolkota control handed us over to Rangoon control who were very helpful in allowing a short cut past the next turning point. This proves to be a blessing as the sky turns stormy. There is little option but to go through the stormy weather. Again and again we hit turbulence. We look out for a chance to go around the storms. It is monsoon season and we do expect to meet some storms, but it seems we are meeting them all as we transit over the Myanmar jungle.

As we cross the border into Thailand it's almost as if the weather welcomes the Mooney to its new home. The clouds break up and we can see the ground again, then the air settles and opens up spectacular scenery. The meandering rivers, the lakes with small islands dotted in the jungle landscape are truly a fantastic sight. For the last 100 miles of this trip the weather is kind and the sun is shining through white fluffy clouds. Bangkok control provides instructions for arrival as the outskirts of the city become visible, the familiar grid



Top: Alan Wood at Muscat, a base for RAF VC-10s and AWACs operating over Afghanistan
Above: sunset over India showing the spectacular build-up of thunderstorms we were about to enter
Below: David gets his wallet ready for another bout with the refuellers



The Mooney stands next to an abandoned Antonov AN-2 with a Hungarian registration



**This photo: parked next to a Qatari Airbus in Muscat
Below: synthetic vision on left and Garmin 1000 GPS and aircraft management on right
Below right: David and Alan next to the Intercontinental Hotel's island shuttle aircraft**



temples dotted around the city.

Our final destination is the former international airport Don Meung, which has given way to the new Bangkok International and is now the domestic airport. Don Meung doubles as a base for the Royal Thailand Air Force; it is also base for general aviation in Bangkok. The Bangkok controller gives us instructions for landing on runway 21L, which is on the opposite side to the civilian terminal. The two runways are separated by a golf course. It seems to be a strange place to put a golf course but it has been there for many years, even while the airport was a busy international terminal. The runway is clearly visible as we join long finals, and the last landing of this ferry flight is in perfect conditions, giving the new owner the first sight of his new Mooney making a text book landing and taxiing into the Siam Air Services apron.

For the first time we are greeted with smiling faces and a cold bottle of water. What a difference it would have made if we had received a similar reception at other airports in India and the Middle East. It is not long before the party increases with everyone coming out to see the Mooney. It needs a clean but it does not look as dusty as it did in the desert – the rain had washed it off.

On to the hotel for a shower and change of clothing, then a meeting with the new owner in the bar before sitting at a table for an excellent meal and a celebration birthday cake for Dave. It will certainly be a birthday that he will remember! We discuss the GA situation in Thailand and the region. During my expatriate days in Malaysia I owned a Musketeer and later a Cherokee 235 that were based at Ipoh airport. Being an active member of Perak Aero Club I organised several events and fly-ins. As we reminisced it was clear that the new owner was familiar with many people that I knew. It was a memorable night in Bangkok, but we had to leave in the morning. We booked tickets to England on Qatar Air but there was another test for us at the new Bangkok international airport. As we had arrived at the domestic airport, our passports did not have an entry visa. There was some discussion with immigration about aircrew but this was resolved when they contacted their colleagues at the domestic airport. It was an expensive, same day purchase ticket but it did get us back to England quickly and in comfort. So, one night in Bangkok and back to the UK by the following morning – a bit different to the 42-plus hours to fly out there in the Mooney! ■

