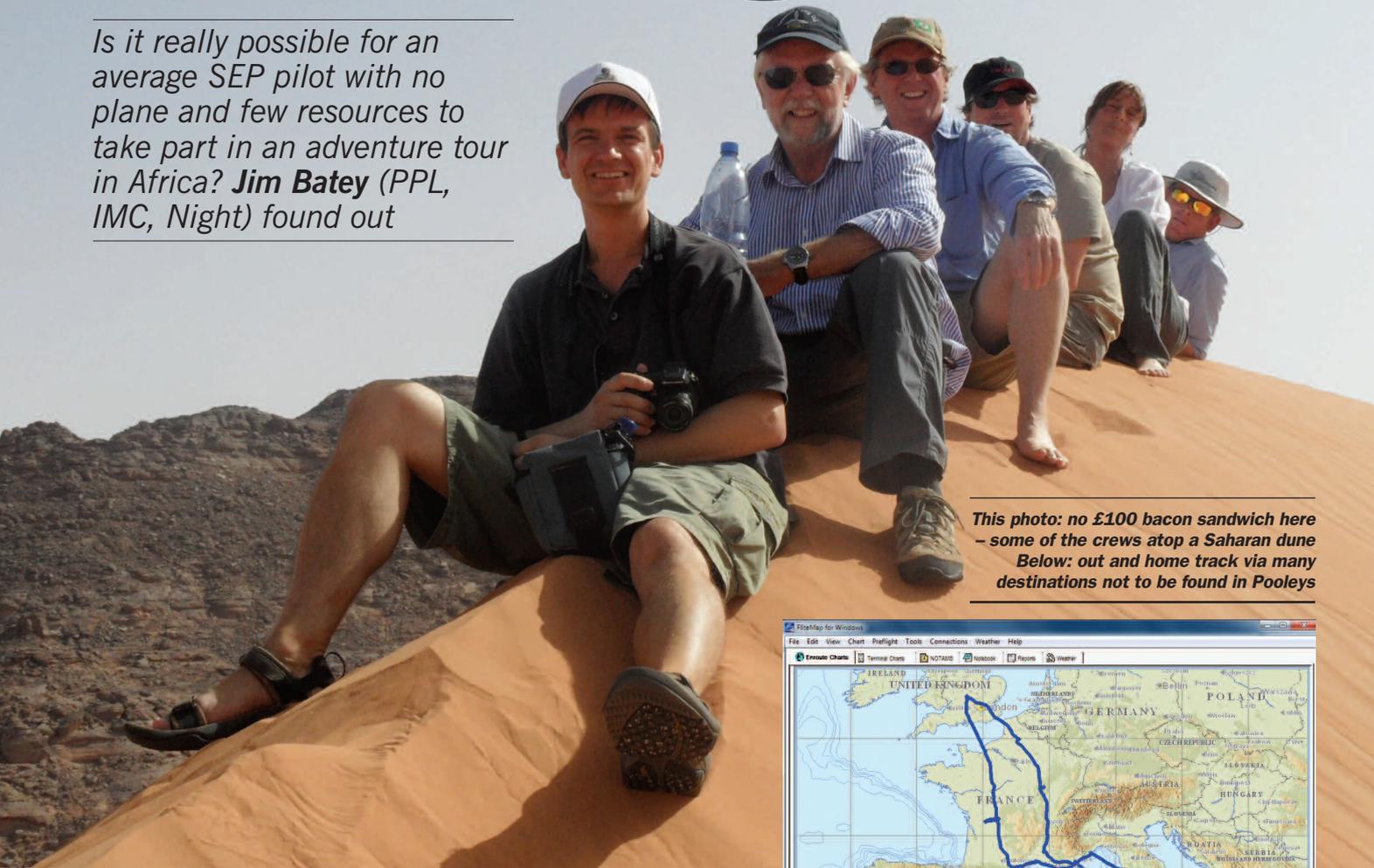


Shoestring Safari

Is it really possible for an average SEP pilot with no plane and few resources to take part in an adventure tour in Africa? **Jim Batey** (PPL, IMC, Night) found out



This photo: no £100 bacon sandwich here – some of the crews atop a Saharan dune
Below: out and home track via many destinations not to be found in Pooleys



In the autumn of 2009 a group of intrepid pilots pioneered a new route for a group of G and N registered aircraft over the Libyan Sahara. In the autumn of 2010, with the trail well and truly blazed, a follow up group styling themselves the 'Desert Foxes' repeated the experience.

Why don't more pilots make greater use of their hard earned skills to go touring? It's not too difficult to come up with reasons not to go adventure flying. Write down all the reasons why you've never been on a 'serious' flying tour and your objections will almost certainly include:

- I haven't got anybody to go with
- I don't know which destination to choose
- I don't have access to a suitable plane
- I can't afford it

Feel the fear, and do it anyway! As Socrates allegedly said "Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think".

It turns out that obstacles 1 and 2 are easily dealt with. Give Sam Rutherford a call at prepare2go.com and before you know where you are he'll have found you both a 'buddy' and a place on a trip that he's planning that will completely blow your mind, probably (but not exclusively) in Africa.

It's not going to be a highly regimented

trip, and you're going to have to be self-reliant for some parts of the tour. You're going to have to make your own way to and from the Mediterranean, for example.

In my case my 'buddy' turned out to be Aussie Simon Foxlee and the trip we found ourselves on was to Southern Libya as part of the 'Desert Foxes' tour.

Next you're going to need a low-cost plane (obstacle 3). Forget conventional hiring. You won't find a hirer that will let you have a reasonably priced plane with guaranteed availability for a non-specific

length of time, to go to a place that's way beyond the borders of Europe. All that, and on a start date brought forward at the last minute because of a change in the weather.

For Libya, read Algeria

If you've been living on another planet you may be unaware of recent events in Libya, which as well as killing a lot of people and making Gaddafi an international pariah have closed the country to outside aviators. Instead of Libya, Sam Rutherford is preparing2go to Algeria, where the conditions are similar but the political situation is more predictable. His next Safari will take place between November 7th and 16th, with participants flying to Algiers via Ibiza and coming back through Oran after a tour that takes you almost to the borders of Mali and Chad. sam@prepare2go.com, www.prepare2go.com



Top: definitely not Headcorn – Sam (left) and support crew Jamie Murray suitably attired for Saharan conditions

Above: buddies Simon Foxlee (left) and Jim Batey with the Grumman AA-5 which performed adequately in hot and high conditions

Left: Cheetah owner Brian Dainty, who wanted to fly to southern Europe but not into Africa

You'll have to find someone (with a plane, obviously) who wants to go part of the way, but doesn't want to go all the way. Sounds familiar from your teenage years? (Or was it the other way round? It's been so long...)

In our case that turned out to be Brian Dainty and his Grumman Cheetah G-BNVB. Brian doesn't want to go to Africa thank you very much, but he is very keen to push his personal envelope at least down as far as Southern Europe. Perfect. Job done.

Now for obstacle number 4 - money. Of course there's a small number of pilots in the UK for whom money is not a problem, and they do tend to dominate tours like

this. But you and I just haven't arrived there yet, have we?

You're already a pilot, so you're obviously willing to spend £150 on a bacon sandwich. A bumble up north (or down south) for a long weekend can set you back a grand. Why not combine a year's worth of two pilots' trips into one big tour?

You'll need to budget for three weekend-trips-worth from both pilots for Sam, one bacon sandwich for every three hours fuel, and £500 for the 50-hour maintenance you're going to use up. Brian and I spent 28 tacho hours positioning the plane in Southern Europe, and Simon and I spent 28 hours flying in Africa. That's about 19

bacon sandwiches worth of fuel, or one full year's sorties.

Now you'll need to get to the start point for the trip on the designated date, and you'll need to get back home from the end point once it's all over. Why not make a holiday out of the positioning, and have three holidays (maybe with different pilots) for the price of one?

On our tour we needed to get to Cannes for October 1st, and we needed to get back from Malta not before 11th October. Brian and I spread our trip down to the Mediterranean over a week and a half via Limoges. We called in on Sue Virr at NearlyHeaven.com for budget accommodation. We took a day trip to Angoulême with her with two of her PPL students for a 'fish and chips' lunch at the airport. From there we went on to Cannes via Carcassonne and Montpellier to skirt round the weather over the Massif Centrale.

Parking in Malta turned out to be cheap at €16 for a landing and a week's parking, and we came back on 20th October via Avignon and Semur-en-Aixois.

Navigation isn't really going to be a problem for you, as long as you've got a decent GPS. The horizon over the desert is a wide hazy band covering up to a third of your view, between the blue sky above and the sandy coloured desert below. Just keep the blue bit at the top and you'll be fine.

The turning points are mostly en route fixes, generally without corresponding ground features, as there aren't any. Except very occasionally you'll come across a major piece of history right out there in the desert. Otherwise, one bit of desert looks pretty much the same as another from 3000ft. That is, except for the mountains in the south, which are going to be unlike anywhere else you've ever visited, unless you've taken a holiday to Mars recently.

You'll have to follow the flight plan route negotiated between Sam and the Libyans just prior to takeoff. This leaves the bare minimum of time for GPS programming, lines on charts and flight log preparation, so you'll need to get pretty slick at planning. That said, the routes are very straightforward with only about half a dozen waypoints in largely unregulated airspace, and anyway I'd practiced a lot beforehand.

Now to the tour itself. You'll be allocated a 'Fox Formation' number. That's in order to make Sam's task of obtaining clearances for ten planes achievable, in the time available between arriving at the airport and the crews not wanting to get out from under the wing because of the heat. We were allocated 'Fox 8', or the slowest plane in the group. One plane hadn't been able to make it, and there was a helicopter that should have been slower than we were. He turned out to be faster because he doesn't need to bother with climbing – Fox 9.



**This photo: Cirrus SR22 off the Cheetah's wing, with the co-pilot taking pictures
Below: uninviting territory for a forced landing; alternates are scanty, and you need to keep a special eye on your fuel
Bottom: crews shelter from the sun under the Malibu's wing while Sam briefs for the next leg
Right: the fantastic Roman amphitheatre at Sidi Belal in Tunisia**



Here's an inescapable fact. Your older aeroplane isn't going to perform as well as the slick new machines up at the front. We fell so far behind on the first days that we thought they'd forgotten that we'd tagged along. The radio frequency we were using went crackly before going completely quiet. There's not too much radio traffic in the Sahara once the Desert Foxes have passed through, and that can leave you feeling a bit exposed. Luckily the refuelling arrangements are not the most efficient you'll encounter, and that holds everybody up for long enough for you to play catch-up.

The heat is going to play a bigger part than you imagined, and in ways that you never thought of. The highest OAT we saw was 48°C, waiting in the refuelling queue. And that was only because we glanced at the gauge thinking it was getting a little warmer than usual under the canopy. Goodness knows what it sneaked up to while we weren't looking.

You're going to need a good fuel range on your budget plane. G-BNVB has long range tanks giving 6+ hours endurance, which was just as well as the longest leg we did took 4.4 tacho hours.

'Alternate' landing airfields close to your destination are non-existent for most of the time, and unless you like landing on desert roads you need to calculate your fuel requirements very carefully. We found ourselves dipping the tanks and logging the results every time our plane came to rest, and repeating the exercise again before it started moving.

Which brings me to the subject of refuelling in the desert. You're not going to be able to use your credit card in a self service machine at Ghadames Airport. Surprisingly they hold avgas in egg-frying heat in the biggest bladders that you're ever likely to encounter, just lying on the desert floor. You'd think they'd blow up like balloons, but they don't. A fire hazard, you'd also think. The Health and Safety solution seems to be to position the fuel dump as far away from everything else as possible. That way if it does go up, it's just going to leave a big black stain on the otherwise flat and sand-coloured surroundings. A hand held fire extinguisher is placed optimistically nearby, should you spot a flame and feel inordinately brave. Just keep out of my way please as I run for



myself turning over the engine with the keys still on the shelf, in my hurry to get the big cooling fan at the front turning. You can talk all day about the effects of hypoxia, but the effects of heat on your judgement can be just as crippling.

After we left Ghat Airport we had to climb first over some big sand dunes, then over a ridge presenting itself to us as a cliff face. Imagine our surprise when we were unable to climb to the required height to follow the others over the cliff! The same plane that had struggled up to 9,500ft on the way to Carcassonne now couldn't even get to an indicated 5,000ft. At an angle of attack equivalent to 70 knots we sometimes went up, sometimes went down, and sometimes stayed at the same height. The density altitude (the thing you learned about in training long ago) suddenly assumes prominence. If the ridge in front of you is at 4,500ft real height, and the density altitude at the airfield you just took off from was 3,000ft above the pressure altitude, your poor old plane is going to have to climb to what it thinks is 7,500ft to get over the ridge. That's all very well over East Anglia on a spring day at zero degrees, but if the OAT is 40°C your engine is not going to get the cooling it's used to. It's going to run hotter, lose some power and not go as fast through the air as it normally does. That means less air over the engine to cool it, so the effect is compounded. The only way to stop the engine temperature from going into the red is to throttle back in the climb and accept the new, even lower performance.

Nothing else for it then but to miss out that day's 'attractions' and fly direct to the destination. At least we were the first to arrive.

Sam had organised a 'Desert Strip' landing, deep in the Sahara: the 'runway' was roughly 350m of 'hard sand' with about the same amount of softer sand at each end. Only STOL capable planes need



the open desert!

High air temperatures will affect your judgement, in ways that are not covered in 'Human Performance', or at least they weren't in my day. The overriding urge to get out of the heat leads you to do things that you otherwise wouldn't. Like trying to open the canopy in flight beyond the line marked 'Do Not Open Beyond This Line in Flight'.

Now I'm reasonably picky about using the checklist properly, but soon I found



From top: the fuel queue at Ghadames; the avgas bladder tank sitting in the scorching sun, with extinguisher optimistically placed; the cliff over which the Cheetah refused to climb in the heat; and the Robin DR400 taking off from a 350-metre desert strip





machines that provide their livelihood, and they stay well within them, only occasionally overstepping the mark.

As far as supplies are concerned, you're going to be asked to take all kinds of bizarre things along with you. You're going to need an engine cover for example to keep the sand out of all the orifices. The 10 litres of water (in separate containers) on the list is understandable, and maybe even the flares. The high energy bars make a great supplement when the restaurants are closed on the way back through France. But what exactly were the whistle and the mirror (unbreakable) for again? The Sahara is so vast that a five-day Glastonbury event would go unheard, and why would you need to check your appearance after you've put down in the desert? I think that maybe Sam as a boy scout took Lord Baden-Powell a *little* too seriously.

To recap on your upcoming adventure flying:

Don't be put off by all your self-imposed

Top left: our drivers produced a drum for an impromptu singalong at a market

Left: Touareg drivers knew what they were doing in the desert

Lower left: quick-change artists replace a punctured tyre

Bottom: our improvised engine cover kept out most of the sand

obstacles. Give prepare2go a call, and you'll find that Sam's 'can do' attitude is infectious

They'll find you someone to go with. The Desert Foxes crowd were great and we all got along just fine (once we'd finally caught up with them)

Get out of the UK more in preparation for your big trip. If you find that France is a bit daunting, give Sue Virr a call at NearlyHeaven.com and she'll be having you calling "vent arrière" in no time

You really can afford it if you're already a pilot, just allocate your budget a bit differently. Above all else, JFDI – JUST DO IT!

Remember, it's later than you think! ■



apply. Good old VB needs double that on a warm summer's day at Hinton-in-the-Hedges, so there was no way we could play with the other pilots at being Harrison Ford. We had to just travel by 4x4 with the other 'heavies' and marvel at the spectacle instead.

The people in Libya are just amazing, and seem to get ever more cheerful the further south you go. At the rest points the drivers produced a drum, huddle together and sang Libyan songs. That's something I've yet to see the taxi drivers doing around the Bletchley area!

The sand is actually much firmer than you think, and can easily support a full Toyota people carrier doing 70 miles an hour. They drive fast because the air conditioning filters are blocked with sand, and it's the best way to stay cool. Some of the windows are stuck up, and some are stuck down (the sand again), so you'll have to choose your seat carefully. It's all very scary at first, but you soon realise that the Touareg drivers know the limits of the

