



Light aircraft intercontinental

Flying to North Africa is a challenge, but it can be done and it's worth the effort, says OPA member Dr Sahib Bleher photos by Abdu-I-Muqtadir Mustaqim

This summer my aircraft, a Grumman AA5 Cheetah, was going to take me outside Europe for the first time – to Morocco to be precise, and I was taking with me my son, not a pilot but an experienced right seat passenger put in charge of the camera. On the face of it, it is only four times the distance from central England to the North of Scotland, a trip I have done regularly, but in practice it was anything but as simple as this. Whilst my official service ceiling is somewhere around 12,000 feet, I'd have to look for thermals to get me up there. The plane, especially when loaded, struggles to make it to flight level 100, and besides I do not carry oxygen. There are some seriously high mountains, particularly in Spain as well as in Morocco, so direct routings were not always an option.

Another compounding problem was the introduction of Mode S as a requirement to fly IFR in the London TMA and in France. I prefer flying IFR across borders as it takes the strain out of trying to negotiate with foreign controllers and straying into local exclusion zones. However, I had put the Mode S installation off until an affordable kit was available which would also offer subsequent

upgradeability to ADS-B. The Filser TRT800A does indeed meet the bill, but so far it only has European approvals, and my aircraft is on the N register. As an IFR flight plan into France without Mode S was likely to be rejected I decided to file VFR but selected my waypoints to correlate with the ones I would have flown

on instruments, albeit below airways. The idea was to upgrade to IFR en route should the need arise.

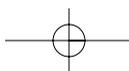
As it happens, the weather turned decidedly bad mid-May when I departed from Turweston at low level towards Southampton. Not wanting to continue sandwiched between low clouds and the sea I radioed Southampton with a change in flight conditions and upgraded to IFR, something of a privilege we enjoy in the UK that pilots from continental Europe might envy us for. Just as I was pleased with having got around the rules whilst only carrying a mode C transponder, French ATC enquired about my IFR flight plan which they could not find. After explaining that I had changed from VFR to IFR with Southampton they stated that a new flight plan would have to be filed, but immediately offered to sort this out. Obviously they have ways of getting a plan past the watchful eye of Brussels computers which we ordinary pilots do not have. The remainder of the flight to Nantes, my first stop, was pleasant since the weather improved greatly after coasting into France.

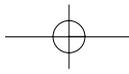
A short break for a sandwich and coffee – plus filling in a form at the designated handling agent promising to pay the as yet undisclosed landing fee upon arrival of an invoice – we filed our flight plan, this time VFR without much concern about adverse weather, to Pamplona, Northern Spain. I've had heard many tales before that flying in Spain was restrictive and the system was bureaucratic, but other than every invoice and flight plan copy having to be officially stamped, I found the Spanish airport staff friendly and helpful and did not encounter any serious obstacles of the type described by others.

Within walking distance from Pamplona airport was a small industrial estate housing the Husa Hotel which had been recommended to us at the airport, and it was indeed good value for money, including the add-on of a 24 hour internet connection for a mere 2 Euro 50. English travellers in Europe are, I suppose, all too familiar with the thin and soft single pillows found in continental hotels making a good night's sleep after a long flight somewhat problematic, but I am pleased to report that this Spanish hotel, whilst still only providing a single pillow per occupant, featured a pillow double the length of a standard one, so it



Above: author and plane at their first stopover in Morocco, at Tanger
Right: mountains generating turbulence, high altitude airports and sloping runways are common in Morocco and Spain. This is Pamplona





Left: slowly creeping past the Sierra Nevada mountain range just before nightfall may be tiring, but the view is stunning

could easily be folded into two. We got up the next morning refreshed and ready to fly over the rest of Spain.

The intended next stop was Albacete, but luckily we were advised by staff at the airport that there was no avgas available at that field, so rerouting was required, adding to the total distance to be flown. We selected Alicante instead, and since Spain has not yet caught the Mode S fever, we filed IFR. Replanning had already delayed us, and the considerable head wind lost us further time. Since we had wanted to complete the journey over an extended weekend, we did not want to spend another night in Spain, however tempting the provided pillow might be, and pressed on with the second leg of the day to Malaga. This journey proved quite an endurance test.

Malaga is a busy airfield, comparable to Heathrow, but they do not ban general aviation. However, the Notam advised for aircraft below two tonnes to "assume delays". VFR flights were not permitted into Malaga on

the weekend, so again we filed IFR. This meant we could not fly low level along the coast, which in turn implied an increase in the unfavourable winds. Although our routing was not far from the coast, via Almeria, the nearby presence of the towering and snow-capped Sierra Nevada mountains meant that the MSA was nowhere below 10,000 feet. Our 110 knot airspeed was reduced to a ground speed of not much more than a third of that figure! When it was safe to do so and I was sure to maintain visual contact with the ground I asked for a descent to FL80, which was granted and gained us 10 knots, pushing up our ground speed to between 45 and 50 knots. By the time we got close to Malaga night crept in.

The approach and landing at Malaga was the most interesting I have done in my 500 plus hours of flying. Being advised to expect delays was an understatement. The controller had wanted us to route direct to UBEDO, a waypoint on the STAR procedure, but this was

not available in our GPS outside the STAR procedure, and the radio frequency was far too busy to ask for detailed guidance, so the controller decided to route us out to sea and make us hold, or rather orbit, at 1000 feet until he could fit us in between a never-ending line-up of jumbo jets. When we were finally given a heading to intercept the localiser it felt like creeping onto the runway in a hovercraft. On touch down we had a mere 20 litres of fuel left, not enough for a go-around, but the runway is, of course, long enough to allow for a sequence of aborted landings should the need arise before considering heading back out to the sea! I was also glad that I had a habit of using up fuel from the two tanks equally. Running a tank dry at night whilst orbiting just above the waves was definitely something we could do without.

Asking for the best place to stay the Novotel was recommended to us and we took a taxi there. The lady at the reception was busy in a lengthy phone call which she only interrupted long enough to indicate that she did have a room for two and how much it would cost, but not long enough to complete a booking. When she finally got off the phone half an hour later she added that one of the beds would be a make-shift pull-out sofa bed. We declined and asked for a taxi to be called, so we could go and find another hotel. Waiting for the taxi took another 20 minutes or more until we gave up and decided to simply walk ahead. Just round the corner we encountered an Ibis hotel belonging to the same chain of hotels but for half the price and with proper beds. We didn't regret having declined the first offer, but by now it had got far too late on a Sunday night to get anything to eat. We made do with some left-over snacks from the journey, too tired to worry about anything else.

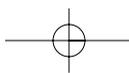
If the landing at Malaga had been interesting, the takeoff from Malaga was a challenge of another type. We accepted a clearance including a SID but upon takeoff were given a direct to PIMOS, our next waypoint en route to Tangiers. This led us straight over 3000 feet of mountain at the

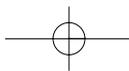


Left: expect delays on landing and takeoff when mixing with big birds at Malaga

edge of the sea and the turbulence with barely a thousand feet between us and the mountain tops tossed us about like a little dinghy on a stormy ocean. I must say, I am glad I didn't have to do this in IMC or reduced visibility nor with passengers who were not experienced flyers.

Tangiers probably does not have radar, and since another plane was approaching using the runway in the opposite direction we were constantly asked for update position reports as we flew along the Gibraltar strait. Europe was now behind us, and the first realisation of this fact came with the arrival of customs officers at the plane just as we had pulled up at the fuel pumps. They made us fill in immigration forms there and then rather than let us go inside the terminal building first, and petty bureaucracy seems almost a way of life intended to slow everything down. Luckily, the next planned trip to Fez, our intended destination, was only just over an hour's journey, and it was still mid-morning.





Left: as peaceful as these mountains on the departure from Malaga out to sea may look, they generate an awful lot of turbulence

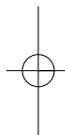
Morocco is also quite mountainous and many of the airports are high altitude and have serious slopes. Landing up or down a hill can be quite a challenge for pilots spoiled by perfectly even landing grounds in the UK. The mountains also meant that instead of routing direct we had to fly along the coast first, past Rabat and Casablanca. We could have taken a more direct IFR route, but the minimum level for the airway would have been 15,000 feet. VFR flight in Morocco also has to follow designated routes which the staff at the airport

helpfully provided, including coordinates for the visual reporting points, since none of that detail could be found on our Tactical Pilotage Chart (TCP), the only VFR chart I managed to buy beforehand. Even inside Morocco it is quite difficult to get hold of official VFR charts. Flying here is still quite restricted and in its infancy. Although our final leg was a domestic trip, another immigration card had to be filled in at Fez, minus the customs people and sniffer dog, however.

My son went back to the UK on one of the

cheap and cheerful airlines offering tickets for next to nothing, covering the distance in just over three hours but minus the adventure, whilst I ventured out to sample a few more Moroccan airports. One of those was the main Casablanca airport (Mohammed V) which, whilst quite docile compared to, for example, Malaga, fancies itself a big airport, and this is felt by added layers of bureaucracy. People flying their own little planes are not the norm here, and thus nobody wanted to take responsibility for us. This turned into a real problem when I wanted to get access to my own plane for the return journey to Fez. One very helpful police officer even suggested I go and buy a ticket at Lufthansa so he could let me through the controls! I managed in the end without buying a ticket for my own plane, but the whole process took well in excess of an hour, never mind the additional immigration cards to be filled at both ends.

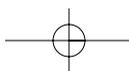
From the airport I had earlier taken the train into town, and outside the train station were two cafes next to each other, one called Café Arrival, the other Café Departure. I skipped both of them but wondered what might happen should one inadvertently go and have a drink at the wrong one. When it is time for my departure back to the UK, I hope I can ride some tailwinds for a change, and I'll give Malaga a miss. Going intercontinental in a light aircraft may not always be the easiest thing to do, but it can be done and is worth the experience. ■



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