

It was late afternoon on our third day when John, in the right hand seat handling the radio and navigation, turned pale and took on the expression of Clouseau's Chief Inspector in the Pink Panther films. Approaching Marbella on Spain's Costa del Sol, we hoped for a simple response to our request for a crossing of the Malaga zone at 2500 feet along the coast.

Instead a fiery, female voice rattled in fractured English 'Golf Alpha Romeo Yankee Romeo descend not above 1000 feet, route whiskey1, sierra1, echo1, report at whisky1'. What did she say John asked? Not having understood a word I stayed silent admiring the stupendous coastal views knowing John would sort it out.

Our adventure had started two days earlier. Having had a small holiday home in south west Spain for a few years, I have always relied on Ryanair to transport me to Jerez. Each time as we taxied towards the terminal, I would peer through the window at the PA28's on the GA apron and think how exciting it would be to fly here in G-ARYR.

G-ARYR was the first Cherokee 180 to arrive in the UK in 1963 and is much loved by a group of five at Turweston. One of the members, John Richardson, has an apartment near Murcia in south east Spain and so, timed for the end of May when we hoped the weather would be kind, the plan was formed – first to Jerez then east along the Costa del Sol to Murcia, returning via the eastern coast. Oh, and since Morocco is not far from Jerez, let's land at Tangier so that we can log Africa.

Both of us have flown in France several times but not having ventured to Spain, we hoped the Spanish controllers would be as relaxed as their French counterparts.

DAY 1

With G-ARYR gleaming after a recent wash, it frankly looks in better shape than we do as we arrive before 8am at Turweston. We want to get to northern Spain by tonight and our destination is San Sebastian. The first 3 days have been planned to allow 5 hours flying time each day with each of us at the controls for equal time. Radio, VOR, NDB frequencies were written down, lines drawn on maps and with our flight plan for Cherbourg filed the previous day, we were ready to go.

The forecast had been good and we departed at 08.30 on a bright, sunny morning with a westerly breeze.

Stopping at La Rochelle after Cherbourg for refreshments and to change pilots, we are reminded what a pleasure it is to fly in France. Initial contact with ATC and announcement of our intentions was usually our only communication before being handed on to the next ATSU.

5 hours flying time after leaving Turweston and we are descending over the bay to the west of Biarritz and lining up for runway 22. The approach is truly picturesque but as the threshold adjoins the bay, an undershoot would completely spoil your day.

Parking on the small GA apron, we realise we have reached Spain and quickly head to the nearest bar for a celebratory cerveza or two.

DAY 2 – SAN SEBASTIAN TO JEREZ

Every flight within Spain has to be flight planned. Each airport has an office, always upstairs, in which sits an identical terminal for preparation and submission of the plan. Whilst never having been able to ‘crack’ the French ones and always having to submit our plan by phone, this was John’s first opportunity to get to grips with the infernal Spanish machines.

With a bit of help (OK, a lot of help) from a staff member, after about half an hour our flight plan is in – San Sebastian to Valladolid.

We depart on a beautiful, calm morning, climb to 5000 feet and set a straight line, south westerly course to route overhead Burgos. The rather bored sounding Burgos controller had no other traffic on frequency. We get the impression she isn’t aware how small a PA28 is and seems to think we are a Boeing PA28 with 100 or so passengers. In fact, we had this impression many times in Spain where, except for a few locations, GA hardly seems to exist. We never heard anybody on frequency announcing they were a C172 or PA28. Apart from the immediate vicinity of the airports, the radio remains silent.

After 2 hours we land at Valladolid on their 3000 metre runway, park near yet another Ryanair 737 (they are everywhere) refuel and walk to the terminal for a disappointing sandwich.

With John now getting to grips with the flight plan machine, except for entering the speed, our next plan is completed in 15 minutes. If entering, for example 100 knots, you enter N0100. Any other combination is rejected.

VALLADOLID TO CORDOBA

This was the leg that we thought would concentrate our minds the most. Fully two and a half hours and, avoiding the highest peaks of the Cabeza Nevada at 8500 feet to our right, our route via the Toledo VOR took us inside the Madrid TMA and over peaks in excess of 4000 feet, more or less through central Spain.

The scenery, constantly changing, was magnificent, Madrid were completely uninterested in us and we purred along at 6000 feet achieving slightly better than N0100. Eventually instructed by Madrid to call Sevilla approach on 120.00 we tried and were met by silence. Now on our new Jeppesen chart, Sevilla approach have 3 different frequencies but they were all broadcasting silence.

Cordoba sits 40 miles within the Sevilla TMA boundary and 50 miles north east of Seville but as every attempt to contact them failed, we put it down to distance and terrain. Nearing Cordoba I call their frequency and am met by.....silence. Check the volume knob, check the switches...is it working?....well it was working before. Try again....silence. I make calls to traffic and the airport comes in to view. A steep S turn descent is required as the land falls sharply away towards the threshold of runway 21, which we assume is the correct one.

Cordoba airfield is delightful. The runway is comparatively short at 1380 metres and is the first genuine GA airfield we have seen. We taxi past Cessnas and Tomahawks to the parking area, still in silence and are relieved there is no irate marshaller or Guardia Civil driving out to meet us. We walk to the office to pay landing fee and file our flight plan. The silence is explained simply by there being no one operating the radio this afternoon. After raiding the vending machine, we embark for the final leg of day 2, the one I had come to make.

CORDOBA TO JEREZ

Only one hour to Jerez now and we plan another straight line course. Departing Cordoba we finally make contact with Sevilla North on a frequency advised to us by Cordoba and not published on our charts or VFR manual and speak to another strict sounding female controller.

Excitement at nearing Jerez getting the better of me, I momentarily stray off track to the west – towards Seville. I am soon reprimanded by this dragon and given a course to steer towards point echo, an arrival point 6 miles to the east of Jerez airport. As we found out, the Spanish love their reporting points and arrivals, departures and transits are normally always via these points.

Although we are again the only aircraft on frequency and hope for a straight in approach, we are told to contact Jerez tower at point echo, not above 1000 feet. We join left base as instructed and at 5pm we taxied off the 2,300 metre runway behind the 'Follow Me' car and park on the sparsely populated GA apron. Mission, or at least the first part, accomplished.

That night we celebrate with secreto iberico and chips at the little restaurant opposite my house and the accompanying Rioja tastes very good. If time permits, a visit to Jerez, in the province of Cadiz, is worthwhile. A lovely, historical city a few miles from the fabulous beaches of the Costa de la Luz. The birthplace of flamenco, it has become famous for its numerous sherry and brandy bodegas which are well worth inspecting.

JEREZ TO TANGIER

Next morning we depart Jerez to the east, remaining below 1000 feet to take photos of stunning Arcos de la Frontera and my village of Algar before climbing and heading south for the 20 mile sea crossing to Africa.

In no time we are crossing the deserted beach next to the threshold of the massive runway 10 and are directed to the GA parking, a scorching 300 metre walk from the terminal. G-ARYR has reached Africa. Forgetting to take the aircraft papers to the office, John has another scorching 300 metre walk each way to fetch them while I complete umpteen forms in triplicate.

After satisfying the local police/customs official that we are legitimate, paying our landing fee of 10 dirhams, which converted to all of 3 euros, we have a quick bite to eat and flight plan Almeria. We start the engine and receive taxi clearance and notice a car with yellow flashing light speeding towards us. Out steps the girl from the office clutching a piece of paper.

We shut down and she hands us the fax just received from Almeria which says 'please advise pilot to request handling which is obliged before take off'. There are 3 telephone numbers. I switch on the mobile and ring the first number to be told handling will be 160 euros.

We trek the scorching 300 metres back to the terminal to reconsider our plan. We look at Granada but to get there, we would have to cross some seriously high mountains in the Sierra Nevada. Phoning the second number, we get a fee of 80 euros and decide to 'bite the bullet' and stick with the original plan. It is explained handling is a very recent requirement caused by building work at Almeria airport.

Leaving Tangier approach we initially make contact with Sevilla before they again give us a silent frequency so as our route takes us just east of the Gibraltar zone we give them a call for a basic service. After so much pidgen English, it is a relief to hear a clear and concise Britisher again. If he could, John would have stayed on this frequency all the way back to Turweston.

After fabulous views of the 'Rock' we join the Costa del Sol at Estepona and route east, hugging the coast, passing Marbella and contacting Malaga approach for our zone transit. As I knew he would, John sorts out the reporting points at Malaga and, apart from a couple of orbits to avoid departing traffic, we continue peacefully, admiring the fabulous beaches with their mountainous backdrops.

After nearly two and a half hours we arrive at Almeria to be told our transponder is not working.

'I have not seen your squark since you joined my frequency. If it is not working you can not leave'. In Spain a squark is allocated prior to taxi and is often retained throughout the entire flight. A functioning transponder is, therefore, mandatory. Now on a 50 year old aircraft, things do sometimes need replacing but our transponder is something we have never had a problem with so we put it down to Spanish eccentricity. AGA handling and Guardia Civil meet us and tell us our transponder is not working. The fueller arrives and tells us our transponder is not working. Everyone in Spain seems to know about our dodgy transponder. With a Geordie and a Scouser arriving in a light aircraft from Tangier, you can not blame the policeman for searching our bags and the aircraft which he does.

We walk miles around the building work to the handler's office to complete the paperwork, file our flight plan for Murcia San Javier and drain his water cooler. Returning to the aircraft we check the transponder fuse which seems OK, radio for taxi clearance, confirm we have fixed the transponder and are given squark 3702. As we reach the taxiway, this time a soothing female voice tells us 'just to let you know, I have your squark' and we breathe a collective sigh of relief.

ALMERIA TO MURCIA

A relaxed, scenic one hour flight and we are approaching San Javier via sierra, sierra and echo (the Spanish just love those reporting points) across the Mar Menor peninsula and as a Jet2 737 taxis out for departure, John touches down on rwy 26 at 20.15 local time and it is his turn to experience the 'mission accomplished' emotion.

We take the next day off for much needed rest and recuperation and regular meals and visit the nearby naval seaport of Cartagena. Most of its oldest monuments date from the Roman empire including the recently restored Roman theatre of Carthago Nova, now one of the city's landmarks. On the promenade is the Peral submarine, launched in 1888 and one of the first ever U-Boats.

MURCIA TO CARCASSONNE

Today we start our return journey and plan two long legs, first to Reus, the airport Ryanair call Barcelona but which is actually 40 miles away, and then to Carcassonne in south east France for our overnight stop.

We therefore arrive early at San Javier and see military jets roaring around the circuit doing touch and go's. At the office the pleasant senora greets us with 'you know because

San Javier is used by the military, the airport is closed to civilian traffic until 15.00 every weekday except for two slots between 11.25 – 11.45 and 13.40 – 14.00 when departures are possible but permission must be requested the previous day'. Er, no we didn't know that and nothing in our flight guide or email from the airport prior to our trip told us so. Furthermore if we want fuel before 15.00, there will be a 95 euro 'handling fee' in addition to the cost of the fuel.

Feeling the previous day's suntan draining from our faces, we calculate and recalculate we have enough fuel for Reus and, looking as pitiful as we can, we request permission for an 11.25 departure. 'I'll see what I can do' the senora tells us and gets on the phone to the military.

By now, with fingers a blur of efficiency over the keyboard, John completes our flight plan with a hopeful departure time of 11.25.

At 11.25 we are still sitting on the office sofa and the prospect of dinner tonight is looking bleak. One hour later, the nice senora announces we have been given a departure slot at 13.40, our plan has been amended and at 13.40 on the dot, sandwiched between two military jets, we taxi to the hold and line up.

Anticipating possible difficulty routing through Alicante, we had planned to head further inland until we were north of Valencia adding unwanted time. However, the Alicante controller could not have been more helpful and cleared us at 1000 feet directly overhead Alicante airport as a passenger jet landed below us, before allowing us to climb to 3,500 feet and sending us up the coast before handing us to Valencia. Descending again to 1000 feet, we were cleared through the low level VFR route, off the coast, and we continued, first with Barcelona approach and finally Reus, arriving at 16.10 having made up some of the lost time but with dinner still in doubt.

REUS TO CARCASSONNE

Departing Reus at 18.15 having refuelled and paid the huge landing fee of 11 euros 24 cents, we head north east towards Perpignan as our way around the Pyrennese. We try and stay above the patchy cloud now forming near the mountains and climb to 7000 feet. To our left the peaks rise to 9500 feet and are snow capped even at the beginning of June. 20 miles before Perpignan we turn north west towards Carcassonne and are buffeted by strong winds and turbulence. Our GPS tells us we are making just 59 knots groundspeed despite an indicated airspeed of 100.

As the terrain falls away to 3000 feet, we descend but our speed hardly increases until we are within a few miles of our destination. We touch down at 20.15. The tower have remained open for us although the airport closes at 20.00. They wish us bon nuit and call a taxi. We just make dinner after all.

In my ignorance, I had not heard of the medieval city of Carcassonne but it is one of France's top tourist destinations. The old town, La Cite, is entirely enclosed within the castle walls in which there are museums, shops, hotels, restaurants and the Basilica of Saint Nazaire. Carcassonne and surrounding countryside come highly recommended.

CARCASSONNE TO TURWESTON

We plan two days to get home. Carcassonne to La Rochelle for overnight stop via Brive and finally La Rochelle to Turweston via Shoreham to comply with customs. Back in

France our flights are uneventful except having a message relayed by a Ryanair captain after we had lost contact with ATC (you can't escape Ryanair anywhere).

We cross the Dordogne and enjoy the wonderful rolling and wooded hillsides below and reflect on the myriad of sights and experiences the last few days have given us and try and commit them to memory.

Over 6 days we flew 2,500 nmls in 15 legs and logged 25 hours 45 minutes time in the air. The weather was fantastic throughout, even leaving and returning to the UK. Landing fees in France and Spain are cheap, averaging 12 euros including tax. Giving it various pep talks along the way, the aeroplane behaved impeccably and we feel we had a real adventure. If you have ever thought of flying to Spain or beyond....do it!



Old City of Carcossonne



Rock of Gibraltar



SW Spain near Algar



Approach to Rwy 10 Tangier