

## The practicalities of flying VFR to Spain

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Having just returned from a VFR flight to San Sebastian what have I learned and what would I do differently next time? The original mission was clear: to fly from Stapleford (EGSG) to Portimao (LPPM) and back VFR within 9 days in a Diamond DA40tdi.

I undertook the preparation with gusto and a fair degree of military precision. For survival equipment I bought lifejackets and a life raft (bought second hand and then serviced by Servitec). For navigation, in addition to the installed Garmin GNS430's I brought my trusty Garmin GPS496, as well as SkyDemon installed on an old iPad and on a Samsung Note 3. In case of eventualities, and the need to land almost anywhere en route I had the Jeppesen Trip Kits for France, Spain and Portugal to hand, along with the IGN half mill. North West and South West France maps. After that we would turn to the Air Million Iberia map for sustenance.

Most of the route planning was done with SkyDemon, and this programme is worth its weight in gold. I'm not sure how I ever managed without it! The pilot log gives you all the flight leg details, along with all the relevant R/T and Nav frequencies. The lateral 'virtual radar' display shows controlled, danger, prohibited and restricted airspace wonderfully clearly, and the ability to download airfield plates is a huge advantage.

As our aircraft runs on Jet A1 I had to check each possible destination and alternate for availability, and the most practical way to do this was to refer to the National AIP information in the SkyDemon plates. You also need to make sure you have all the formalities ready in terms of the necessary documents as the police can suddenly turn up to check these on landing, including having a Noise Certificate, and a print of the Interception Procedures. I usually tend to want to avoid close proximity to any other aircraft while flying, so I took my small Zaon MRX portable collision avoidance system, which is still going strong even though the parent company is not. To help the iPad GPS fix, I also have a Garmin Glo to improve the accuracy of the location fix. The key equipment list was completed with a cigarette lighter/usb adapter with cables, and a McMurdo small personal locator beacon.

But there was even more homework to do before the day of departure. Flyer has published several excellent articles on R/T procedures in France, and while the larger regional hub airports do speak in English, this is not true for the local airfields. In fact I made a list of all key terms and phrases in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, to cover most eventualities. For weather I had registered for Olivia, Navigeo, Eurocontrol AIP, Ogimet and Aena.

As lift off day arrived, typically a warm front was passing so we lost the first day to bad weather. Day two was more promising with decent VFR conditions, so I emailed Le Touquet ([douane-aeroportletouquet@douane.finances.gouv.fr](mailto:douane-aeroportletouquet@douane.finances.gouv.fr)) to notify their Customs and Immigration people, checked that a UK GAR was not necessary for the outbound flight, and marvelled at how easy it is to file a flight plan with SkyDemon (I'm not sponsored by them- seriously!). Within an hour, despite the newly grossly enlarge Southend controlled airspace, we arrived in Le Touquet, although the forecast 3000 foot cloud base turned out to be an over-estimate and conditions were a little less kind. Just after landing we saw an ultra-light aircraft pitched over at a very

unfortunate angle on the runway because of the stiff cross wind. Looking very much like a write-off.

While abroad many of the challenges are very practical issues: how to find a WiFi signal with a password that works, how to avoid lunch time (usually 12-2 in France) when most things stop, such as refuelling, or finding a hotel with enough plug sockets to recharge all your gadgets. It's a good idea to bring an extension cable to recharge everything if needed from a single wall socket.

We continued on the first day to the beautiful west coast French town of La Rochelle – a mediaeval gem. The airport balances an active general aviation scene with a mix of regional jets and props serving France and the UK. We found an Ibis Budget hotel had rooms at good rates, despite the local music festival going at full swing.

By now it was clear that Plan A, to reach the Algarve in Southern Portugal, was not on. We had lost 2 days travel, the weather was closing in along our planned route via A Coruna in N.W. Spain, but more importantly we had realised that 2-3 hours flying each day was manageable and enjoyable, whereas our initially planned 4-5 hours a day would be taking on too much, potentially flying while tired, and all in all not a good idea. Plan B then consisted of getting at least to Spain, via Bergerac (LFBE). By now we were becoming familiar with the ways of the regional Flight Information Services eg Lille, Loire, Paris and Bordeaux. Generally they were courteous and helpful, but they offer less than the equivalent in Britain, even with a Basic Service, and you cannot expect much in the way of conflicting traffic advice. Occasionally they would not hand us over to the next regional service (betrayed by a period of radio silence), so it pays to know exactly which FIS region you are in at any one time.

South West France has a very challenging set of restrictions on where VFR traffic can go. The west coast route through and south of Bordeaux is replete with restrictions except at weekends, and the same is true of much of the area around Toulouse. Beware also of low level military tracks, Restricted Airspace (Temporary) areas, local 'parachutism' which seems to be a national sport at many small airfields in France. So the take home message is watch these areas, and the NOTAMS, like a hawk, and if you are not confident about requesting transits, steer a course well clear. Again, a good route planning programme on your laptop or tablet, using only the latest maps, is a godsend. In general it is vital to phone up each destination, and each alternate airfield, before take-off to see if they wish to receive you, and if they have fuel available on that day, and the airfield and fuel closing times. One famous regional airport said that they were busy, asked that I put my request to land in writing by email and then did not reply. We went elsewhere.

The advice often given by English pilots on flying to France, is to avoid the smaller airfields, even though they have very decent long hard runways, unless your French is sufficiently good to broadcast and understand what others say. This is wise advice. Several times we found that the radio service was not operational at smaller fields, so the procedure is to broadcast blind and tell every/any one listening what you are doing at frequent intervals.

By the end of day 3 we reached San Sebastian in N.E. Spain after a beautiful flight east-west along the foothills of the Pyrenees. I hadn't realised how busy Lourdes airport is, but their Approach services kept us reasonably well separated from the 737's and airbuses carrying pilgrims. As this was a border crossing we needed to request Customs and Immigration Clearance, as well as PPR.

Laura at LESO was unfailingly calm and helpful as we navigated the formalities. Do check the Visual Reporting Points as Approach advised us to avoid paragliders over the cliffs to the north of the field. The arrival procedure there is unusual in that once on the apron you taxi to a 'switch engine off' area, and from there you push the plane to your designated area. The usual advice is to refuel immediately on arrival and this is sound as it means one less thing to do the next day.

Despite somewhat obsessional preparation, I was unprepared for the fact the LESO is in fact 20km away from San Sebastian. But this was a blessing in disguise as just 15 minutes walk away from the airport is a small, ancient hilltop village called Hondarribia, with wonderful and affordable hotels, bars and restaurants. The Hotel Obispo and around the corner the Sebastian Restaurant (with its extraordinary local Hirutza wine, taken in great moderation) were quite wonderful.

The weather in the UK was changing for the worse, so it was time to head home. I had heard of the custom in Spain to need stamped and printed flight plans to be able to leave, but the reality was painless. I filed the flight plan via SkyDemon. The LESO general aviation office printed it, and stamped it, and this was sufficient for the police to allow us out to the ramp after a good look at our passports. It's worth knowing the exact weight of your plane, as this is often asked as you pay the landing fee, and a lighter plane brings a lower charge!

An incoming British Cessna 172 pilot at LESO complained about his SkyDemon not working because of the latest upgrade to the iPad operating system IOS 8.3, and this also put the jinx on my old iPad from working with the Garmin Glo and we had the dreaded 'waiting for location data' message. So the backup option of running SkyDemon on the Samsung Note 3 came into play and it worked reliably. Motto: have 1 (if not 2) backup/reserve options for critical issues. As we found at many airports, it was not clear where we should do the power checks. If in doubt ask. Indeed one (nameless) airport instructed us to do our power checks while on the runway ready for departure! Of course we complied with instructions.

The plan for day 4 was to head east for the United Nations World Heritage Site at Carcassonne (LFMK), a renowned mediaeval walled town. The flight was a little eventful as several airfields had parachuting that the NOTAMS had not revealed, as well as a number of conflicting helicopters appearing, not to mention a good deal of thermal activity which was detected by the DA40's long wing, so we were pleased to see the long runway of LFMK appear, even though we had to orbit to maintain sufficient clearance from an incoming Ryanair 737 to avoid any wake turbulence. As we found so often on our journey, wandering over the GA hangar, or to the Aeroclub meant that we found sympathetic and really helpful aviation colleagues, who helped us to find a taxi, gave advice about the local area, and generally showed themselves to be comrades of the air.

There was now a balance to be struck between filling the long range fuel tanks of the DA40 for maximum endurance, and staying comfortably within the weight and balance envelope so as to be able to manage to use a smaller runway en route if necessary. For refuelling, it worked best at most airports to have an AirBP card, and this means applying for this at least 2-3 months before departure to complete all the formalities. Do watch every refuelling to see that the correct fluid is going into you tanks, to check that fuel is not spilled over your valuable wings, and to see that the volume charged is correct.

Coming home we routed through Angouleme (LFBU) to Saumur (LFOD), which was all but deserted on the week day we were there- more blind transmissions with a very good look out at every turn! Not all the hotels we found during the week were memorable, but the Hotel Anne D'Anjou, next to the Loire river, with a wonderful small restaurant in the corner of the garden, certainly was.

Our last day began routing back to Le Touquet. Again this fine coastal airport had a stiff breeze, and we saw the ultra-light which had been tipped sideways on the runway a few days previously now unceremoniously slung an unnatural angle against the hanger, as a warning to us all keeping a very watchful eye on maximum crosswind component speeds. The reception staff at LFAT were welcoming as usual, even if the landing fee of about 20 euros was quite a bit more than the 4 euros we had paid at some of the smaller fields. After filing the GAR and flight plan, with good weather we climbed again up to flight level 65 for the channel crossing, remembering to duck down to under 2500 feet as London's familiar airspace restrictions came into play. Ending a great adventure, back at Stapleford a Beechcraft B18 landed just after us, and took off while we enjoyed a homely mug of tea on the terrace.

A few other lessons I learned. When travelling its often hard to be able to print, so copy out the flight plan manually, along with all way point abbreviations, as the FIS often asks for your routing, even if you have filed a flight plan, and also make a written note of the sequence of all FIS frequencies, as the electronic devices can give up the ghost, and some R/T do leave you without a hand-over. Despite my many preparation for weather, in fact this issue turned out to be simple- TopMeteo. It's a subscription service giving very detailed regional and site forecasts with enough information for every hour of the day to increase your ability to know which times and places allow VFR.

With detailed planning, good paper and online resources, enough reserve systems in place, good weather, hotels with WiFi, and carefully prepared French and Spanish aviation phrases, you can have a brilliant time exploring the Gallic and Iberian aviation scenes – what's stopping you?

## 1. The friendly Aeroclub La Rochelle



**2. Royan Airfield (LFCY) - with a busy club providing 'parachutism'**



### 3. The view near Poitiers from FL65



**4. The foothills of the Pyrenees appear near Pau, just west of Lourdes**



5. Allocated parking place at San Sebastian (with the 'engine off' area shown in red to the right)



## 6. The remarkable walled mediaeval city of Carcassone



## 7. Beautiful sunset in Carcassonne





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## 8. Near Le Havre- almost home!



## 9. Coasting out just west of Calais



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10. Dover- and we didn't need to use the liferaft...



11. A Beech B18 visits Stapleford to round off a great trip#

