

Luton, UK, to the Algarve, Portugal, 1986

I am writing this account of my trip from Luton to the Algarve, some 18 years after the event. Some would say that it is too long ago to have a fresh memory of such an event, but I disagree. I have found that all my memorable flying experiences are stored in my brain like video highlights and with the benefit of the passing years can be added to the sum total of flying knowledge attained. So back to 1986.....

It is the 3rd of August and I am departing Panshanger Airfield for Luton to clear Customs. For our younger pilots I should explain that in those far off days one had to go to a "Customs" airfield to complete the formalities. None of today's luxury of departing your home airfield direct. Back then I could afford to land at Luton but today only in an EasyJet.

I was in a rented PA 28-181 (Archer) with my elder son, Stephen, who was 19 at that time. He wasn't a pilot but was (and still is) a brilliant mathematician and a very cool character, just the right type for some practical help in the right-hand seat.



On the same day, my wife and my second son would be departing Luton for the Algarve on a Monarch 737. I airily said we would see them later down in the Algarve. I didn't realise how much later!

Back in 1986, the facilities to obtain the weather was limited to newspaper weather charts and TAFS and METARS from official sources. There was no

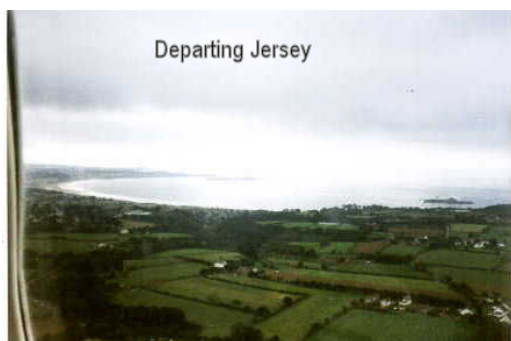
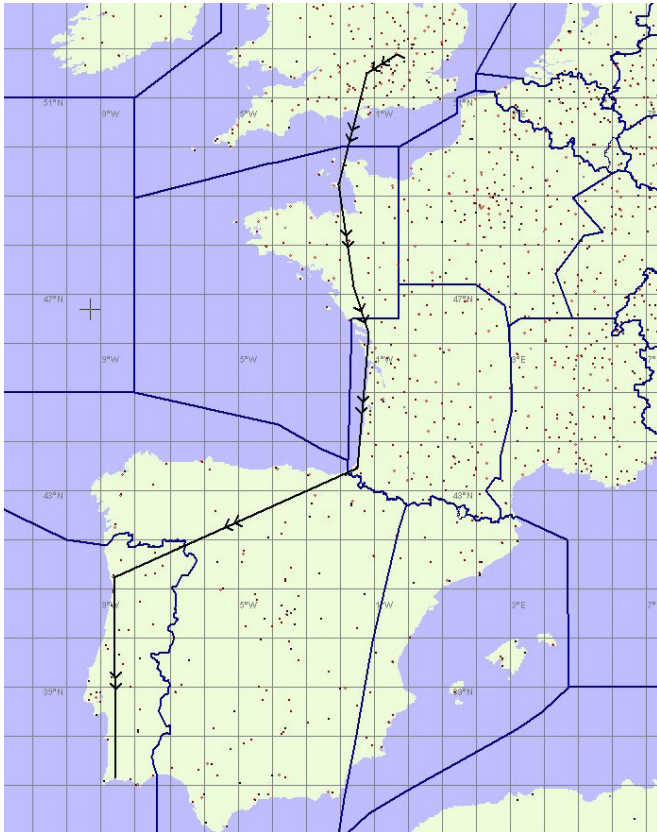
Internet to look up Radar/Infra Red satellite pictures etc. As for a route forecast for that trip – forget it. From memory I seem to recall that I probably figured out that the weather was fairly settled for the route, with high pressure in charge. I seem to remember looking out of the window at home; at the blue cloudless sky and thinking "all systems go". Also at this time I had been the proud owner of an Instrument Rating for the past 18 months and was confident in carrying out this trip in an expeditious manner.

After take off I was cleared to FL80 en-route to Southampton. Passing Southampton the sky seemed to be darker than it should have been and then it began to rain! What was happening? Lightning bolts – that's what. I asked Jersey control for lower and lower clearances to see if I could get under this mess. At 2000ft with no bright spots ahead, I decided to divert into Jersey. After parking the aircraft in lashing rain, we got nicely soaked running to the terminal. I have never flown in such heavy rain since that day.

You may now be thinking "this person didn't do much pre-flight planning" and you would be right. But it gets worse – all we had in the back of the aircraft was four sets of golf clubs. No spare underwear, no toothbrushes, no shavers, no credit cards (I do not know if they were in widespread use back then, but I was strictly a cheque and cash man) no cheque book and no mobile phone (not invented). You can see that I thought I could do this trip in one long day! I couldn't contact my wife to update her as she would be in our

timeshare apartment which did not have a phone. There was a hotel on the complex which could relay a message, but this was not possible on that first day.

The overall route, from Navbox:



Next morning, after consultation with Jersey Met, I filed IFR to Biarritz and set off, climbing through various cloud layers to our cruising level of FL90. Except for a gap in the cloud as we passed over La Rochelle, this leg was fairly uneventful. My logbook records an ILS approach into Biarritz with a 2000ft cloud base. Total leg time of 3hrs 55mins.

After refuelling which took forever and also used up some precious cash currency (French and English – no Euros) I filed IFR for Oporto, our first Customs stop in Portugal. After takeoff the procedure is to climb heading north away from Biarritz until reaching FL80 before doing a 180 and heading back towards the Pyrenees and continuing to climb to FL110, the minimum FL for crossing the mountains.

We were above cloud so could not see the pointy bits below.



After 2-hours enroute the cloud thinned and eventually disappeared. We landed at last light in VMC after a total leg time of 4-hours.

We had acquired shaving kit and toothbrushes in the Jersey hotel, but had not ventured out for anything else, due to the trauma of our situation etc so we were still in our original clothes. The Maitre d' in our Oporto hotel kept trying to make me understand something, which I eventually figured was to do with our invoice, but he may have been saying "you stink". I did manage to get through to the hotel in the Algarve and requested they pass a message to my, by now, frantic wife.

There was a recent article in GASCO Flight Safety Magazine, where the author was commenting on being an old not a bold pilot, and mentioning particularly that he always tried to flight plan to be over the flattest land in case of a forced landing. I must confess that this was my first trip where I was conscious of the fact that the ground in Portugal is quite bumpy, not to mention the Pyrenees.

Next morning, in perfect VMC, we departed IFR (it is much easier that way) and were asked by ATC to stop the climb at FL50, as they had an inbound airliner. I wish I had a camera to hand, but I still have the mental picture of the Lufthansa 727 with flaps and Dunlop's dangling, passing directly over us on the reciprocal heading at what seemed like a lot less than 500ft separation. After 2hrs 30mins we landed at Portimao to be greeted by a much relieved wife and number two son. After preliminary questions about what had gone wrong, I was ordered into the shower!



The Return Trip

Twelve days later and it was time for our return flight. I was convinced this could be done in one day. So takeoff was at the crack of dawn for the 2hrs 30mins to Oporto. It goes without saying that we had all the necessary kit for an unforeseen stopover! Oporto ATIS were reporting rain showers and 2000ft cloudbase.

I asked for the approach procedure as we did not have an approach plate for this airport. This is a VOR approach, which turned out to be very straightforward, and we landed in some fairly sharp rain, to refuel for the next leg. The rainsquall had passed through as we climbed to the east up to our cruising level of FL110, and at about 10,000ft we cleared the top of the cloud.

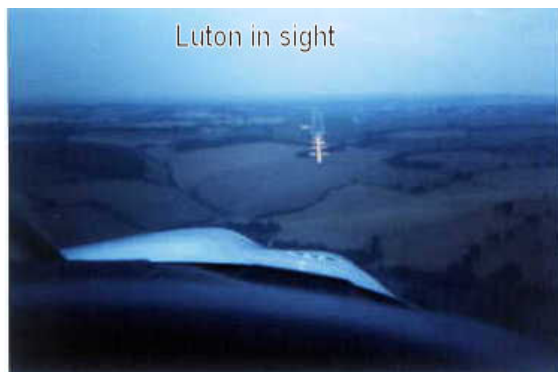
I looked back over my right shoulder and got a magnificent view of the head of the cloud at the centre of the squall. This time I did have a camera ready and got a great picture.



Now we got the benefit of what was causing the weather. Our indicated airspeed was 105kts. Our ground speed on the DME was 170kts! We were really moving! I had flight planned this leg, Oporto to Bordeaux, to take 4-hours.

After a couple of hours the cloud had all melted away. The next big fright was clear air turbulence, not something the average light aircraft gets involved with. It was just as if a giant had grabbed the end of a wing and was shaking it violently. I asked for a lower level but it made no difference. By now I could see below, the bend in the coast where Spain turns into France, so without further ado, I turned out over the sea, where I figured any updrafts from the mountains would disappear. I was right, for we immediately lost the turbulence. So on we flew, still with dreamed about ground-speeds, until we landed at Bordeaux, after 3hrs 30mins.

After refuelling we set off IFR for Luton at (according to my logbook) 15.20. I have always been in the habit of recording all my times in local times, unless there is a note otherwise. It was VMC and we still had great tailwinds, so the thing could be done in one day. Nothing much of note to report on this leg except Jersey Control asking us to climb from FL90 to FL110. As I did not fancy struggling up another 2000ft I suggested we could to descent to FL70, which they readily agreed to. I was pleased we could accommodate them. We landed at Luton at 19.10 with not a lot of daylight left after a leg time of 3hrs 50mins.



It now occurred to me that after such a magnificent effort on our part and on the part of the aircraft and the weather, it would be a great shame if we had to park the aircraft at Luton when we were only 10mins from base. So after a quick phone call to Panshanger School of Flying we set off and landed with the aid of car headlights lighting up the numbers after dark.

This last leg was carried out against all the rules of prudent airmanship. I knew we were low on fuel and this would have to be done right first time but, drunk on the achievements of the day, I pressed on. In the event it all turned out OK but could have been otherwise. In fact the next day I called at the club and enquired casually about the amount of fuel left in the tanks. The reply I got was "what fuel?" I took it as a facetious remark and left it at that.

Well I did it. It was a trip that has stuck in my memory modules all these years for lots of reasons. I wanted to do a long trip. I wanted to get back in one day. Snags: I only had crappy headsets in those days and I do not think 10hrs in one day was good for my eardrums. Also I felt that the discomfort was also due to flying at 11,000 feet for quite a long time and I was feeling the effects of lack of sufficient oxygen.

My original idea on getting an Instrument Rating was that I thought it would help me cope with adverse weather but, as the years have rolled by and my experience has grown, I find I fly IFR less and less. It definitely makes flying across Europe much easier, knowing you are under positive control and not having to worry about somebody coming the other way, as you do if you have to fly IMC in S.E. England.

My son, Stephen, flies all over the World these days in the course of his work and said recently that he still eats out on the retelling of that trip. It gives me a great glow of pleasure that we shared that experience.

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