FLYING ABROAD

I’d like to fly abroad but it’s much too difficult, there’s way too much complicated paperwork and planning to deal with.” How many times have you heard such comments, but more importantly, have you believed them and shied away from that first trip across the Channel as a result? Well, it’s not true. Flying in mainland Europe is not only one of life’s pleasures, it’s also very easy; the additional ‘paperwork’ required will take only moments to complete once you know the ropes.

This article is going to concentrate on the delights of France, our nearest neighbour and typically the tyro’s first foray to foreign shores. Almost three times the size of the United Kingdom, with a population of the same, France has a great deal to offer the aerial tourist, from the flatlands of the north to the mountains of the south and east. Beautiful scenery, unspoilt towns and villages, generally more reliable weather as you head south, fine food and wine and warm, friendly people. To have never flown in France is to have missed out on a huge slice of incredible flying experience.

We will also only be dealing with day VFR flying; let’s face it, if you are IR rated in France is to have missed out on a huge delight that awaits you across the Channel, anyway. So, before we share some of the delights that await you across the Channel, let’s get going on answering some of the more basic concerns that pilots have about venturing outside of their comfort zone.

DO I NEED PERMISSION TO FLY A PERMIT AIRCRAFT IN FRANCE?

Short answer for 99% of us – no. There is a blanket permission for LAA Permit to Fly aircraft to operate in France, whether the aircraft is owned or hired, that is not a factory-built, unairfielded aircraft and is registered in the UK.

CAN I SPEAK ENGLISH ON THE RADIO?

Generally yes. English is the language of aviation across the world and certainly for en route services and at most airfields that have a controller, English is spoken. You may well hear them speaking in French to local pilots, but on contact in English they will use English to respond. Certainly for a first trip where you might plan to go to Calais or any of the larger airports, the controller will be happy to deal with you in English, the controller might come back to you in French with instructions you do not understand!

There are also a relatively small number of airfields with controllers that expect you to speak only French (the airfield plate will state that French only is spoken on ATC) – Amiens in northern France is one that springs to mind. If I wanted to visit such an airfield and couldn’t speak French I’d give them a ring and ask if they’d make an exception. Thankfully, there is no ATC at Amiens on weekends and the flying club operates the field. They use the ATC frequencies as if it were a club frequency and I know that English-speaking pilots go on in a regular basis, though I have no knowledge of whether this is legal or not. Finally, be aware that there are also a number of airfields that appear on the charts and in the flight guides which are open only to home-based aircraft. Again, if you would like to fly-in it’s worth giving them a ring to see if they’ll make an exception.

WE’RE PART OF THE EU, SO IS CUSTOMS AN ISSUE?

Another short answer – yes. This isn’t the time or place to get into politics but the UK decided not to sign the Schengen Agreement way back in 1985 that led to the abolition of controls at member states’ common borders. As a result, UK (and Irish) residents must clear border controls into and out of mainland Europe, and then they can then travel freely between states. This requirement is generally referred to as ‘Customs’ but really has more to do with immigration. This all became slightly more problematic a couple of years ago when, as a cost-saving measure, the French government decided to greatly reduce the number of airfields that could offer Customs facilities but it quickly settled down and we still have what were always the most popular clearance airfields of Calais, Le Touquet and Abbeville available. Sadly Dieppe, a very pleasant day trip destination, was a victim of the cuts and can no longer offer Customs. Please note that you cannot always just turn up and expect Customs to be in attendance; more often than not you will have to give prior notice of your requirement for Customs – see ‘Flight Guides’ farther on.

SO, LET’S PLAN A TRIP TO FRANCE!

OK, we’ve dealt with the fundamental worries a beginner might have, let’s now take a look at what you have to do to plan your first trip to France.

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FLYING ABROAD

John Dean and Brian Hope offer some advice on taking that first tentative step to European touring – a trip to nearby France.

Coasting in at Cap Gris Nez and looking back across the Channel. You don’t get too many days when the channel is this clear!
FLYING ABROAD

As far as VFR flight plans are concerned, it helps if you remember that it is only a message to various people telling them about your flight. Whilst it is satisfying to get it absolutely correct, you would be surprised how many flight plans are completed incorrectly and cause no problems with the flight. There is a good CAA Safety Leaflet (20c) on how to complete the flight plan at www.caa.co.uk.

FLIGHT PLANS

As per any flight you will need charts and airfield data, weather and Notam information. Below are some useful tips and website links.

ACCESSING PLANNING INFORMATION

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BORDER FORCE GENERAL DECLARATION

As mentioned, the other extra you have to do is inform Border Force of your inbound flight, note that you do NOT have to inform them of your outbound flight. If you are going on a day trip, doing it before you go is often the best bet. If weather or other matters change your planned return, you can always amend your original instructions. You must, however, give a minimum of four hours’ notice of your return.

A form called a General Aviation Report (GAR), sometimes referred to as a General Declaration (Gen Dec) must be completed and can either be emailed to the Border Force at nationals@cf.gov.uk or many UK airfields will send it for you. Google ‘GAR aviation’ or ‘General Declaration aviation’ and you’ll readily find a printable form.

However, Border Force is now very keen to encourage the use of their new online system known as Olivia, olivia.aviation-civile.gouv.fr. Again you have to register but it is free and easy to do. Although it is not as powerful as AFPEx, many people find it easier to file a flight plan with this system.

There are also a number of commercial programs which will file plans for you at a cost – Sky Demon (www.skydemon.aero) and Rocket Route (www.rocketroute.com) for example.

As per any flight you will need charts and airfield data, weather and Notam information. Below are some useful tips and website links.

CHARTS AND FLIGHT GUIDES

France is divided into four official ICAO halfmil charts, NE, NW, SE and SW. The ones you are likely to buy in the UK are paper; laminated ones are available at extra cost. They are replaced as a set each year around March. There are differences to UK charts but they are not difficult to understand. The Jeppesen VFR/GPS charts for France are no longer available. I’m not sure what the current legal situation is re. relying solely on electronic charts as provided by the Sky Demon and other available planning and navigation software, the CAA simply says...
that you must carry a current chart. Personally I wouldn’t be without a paper chart – paper still works when the electronics play up!

Fortunately the coastal airfields of Calais (LFC), Le Touquet (LFAT) and Abbeville (LFOI), which we are considering for this first trip, are included on the Southern England half mil but the CAA does not guarantee the veracity of the air data beyond the UK boundary, so officially you will need the NE French chart.

FLIGHT GUIDES
Probably the most popular Flight Guide is French language-only Delage, which is available from some of the UK Pilot’s supply companies but it does now cost over £60. For a simple first trip, most UK flight guides contain the popular nearby French airfields, and if what you want isn’t included you can access airfield plates from the internet.

Go to the French SIA site at www.sia.aviation-civile.gouv.fr/default.uk.htm and click on AIP-Charts on the left hand side. It is then self-explanatory to get to the airfield information. This not only provides an aerodrome chart but also information as to whether it is able to accept flights from abroad and if so whether notice for Customs is required, and for Calais two hours. Note that on a Wednesday there is no ATS notice is required, and for Calais two hours. It is then self-explanatory to get to the airfield information. This not only provides an aerodrome chart but also information as to whether it is able to accept flights from abroad and if so whether notice for Customs is required, and for Calais two hours.

WEATHER
Some weather information can be obtained from the UK Met Office website which gives the Tafs and Metars for Le Touquet and a number of other French airfields. However, although the weather 22 miles across the Channel may often appear no different to that on the English coast, you should be prepared for the unexpected and be willing and able to return if conditions are not as forecast (just as you would for an internal UK flight). It is certainly true that Le Touquet can be fogged in when Calais is CAVOK and vice versa. You may also get low level fog covering the water with both sides of the channel in good weather. The most common weather phenomena likely to be a problem is heat haze. If you can’t get above it, I find it best to stay lower, say 1,500ft, so you can see the surface of the water but don’t push your luck; if you don’t fancy the weather, don’t go. Wait for a better day.

Weather information for your return trip is available at most airfields in nearby France with many having internet access to enable you to access your usual weather channels.

NOTAM
It’s as important to check Notam in France as it is in the UK. If you use the UK AIS site www.nats-uk.ead-it.com/lwfl-natsuk/public/ user/account/login.faces to obtain your Notam in the UK there is no reason why you can’t use it for routes in and around France. Notam are also available on the French Oliva site mentioned earlier.

I find metufl.appspot.com/static/maps/NotamMap_EGTL_EGPK_2DAY_WR.htm useful for the UK and metufl.appspot.com/static/maps/NotamMap_LFXX_2DAY_WR.htm for France.

RESTRICTED ZONES
Once you start spreading your wings in France, you will need to know about the Restricted, Danger and Prohibited (LF-R, LF-D and LF-P) zones that can sometimes seem to dominate the charts. A 1,000,000 DAY VFR chart is available that gives details of operational hours and/or who to phone or contact on the radio about the status of these zones – available in the UK from Transair and other suppliers. Website www.sia.aviation-civile.gouv.fr/aspt/frameset-fr.asp?m=39 gives a useful daily update of the status of the AZBA (very low altitude military area network).

Also note that since 9/11 nuclear power stations have had restricted zones around them, typically three to four thousand feet above the surface on a radius of three NM. Stay well clear, as penalties for infringement will make more than your eyes water. Notwithstanding all of the above, another good website for flying in France is flyinfrance.free.fr which is in English and has a lot of very useful information.

PASSPORT AND DOCUMENTS
You will need to take your passport, your pilot’s licence, medical and the aircraft documents – registration, Permit etc. (but not the log books). Copies are not deemed acceptable so take photocopies to leave at home should some mishap occur to the originals on your travels.

SKYDEMON, ETC
Most of the above suggestions for Notam, weather, planning et al are available at little or no cost but if you subscribe to one of the commercial flight planning programs then life becomes very easy indeed. Taking the popular SkyDemon as an example (sorry, but it’s the one I have personal experience of), it can not only help you plan your route and provide charts, airfield plates, weather information and Notams etc., but for a small additional fee it will even produce and file your Flight plan. And, if rumours are correct, it will also shortly be able to deal with sending your GAR to Border Force.

AND FINALLY…
We hope this article inspires you to give foreign touring a go, even if it’s just a day or weekend trip this coming summer. Le Touquet is a particularly good first-time destination; as it is an easy day (you can also hire a bicycle at the airport) into a very pleasant seaside town with a magnificent beach and some good restaurants. Only downside is that there is now only a single runway – 32/14 so hard be aware of your crosswind limits. Calais as one of your alternates has 24/06 hard and supposedly grass though they don’t always keep the grass very well cut. Abbeville as another alternate has hard and grass 20/02 and a grass cross runway 31/13 (only 570m long though). When you only want to clear Customs and have a coffee before heading deeper into France or return home, Abbeville is a good choice as the landing fee is only €6, the restaurant is very good and there is a motel on site should you get weather-bound.

Once you’ve made that first trip to nearby France, the world will be your oyster having realised that it’s not as complicated as some would have you believe. Bon vol!

AND FINALLY, FINALLY!
We are both in the Kent Strut and several years ago we ran some ‘learning the ropes’ days (usually a Saturday) where pilots flew into Rochester and we would guide them through the procedure and send them on their way to France for the day or weekend. If there is sufficient interest from members, the Strut would be happy to organise a similar event for this summer. Please drop Brian an email if you’d be interested.

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