

A YEAR ACROSS EUROPE

Julian Sanders and Helen Coker build a Jabiru J430 for an 80-airfield European tour



With a sad lack of anything more productive to do in the dispirited London of 2010, my girlfriend Helen and I decided to make the best of a bad situation and undertake an aviation adventure. What began with delivery of our Jabiru J430 kit through the snows of early January, ended with the aeroplane tucked away safe and warm amid the snows of early December. In between, with 90 short flights, and a total of 7,000nm, between 80 destinations, we battled the rugged terrain and wicked weather of Norway, larked around with cheerful aviators in the Danish summer, circled shipwrecks in Stockholm's archipelago, watched parascenders float off

a grassy hilltop airfield in Germany, gasped our way over Swiss Alpine glaciers on the way to Italy, rolled out on fragrant herbs in Provence and buzzed the oyster beds of France's tidal Arcachon basin.

Building the aircraft took six months. We arranged a short-term tenancy of a council industrial unit in Norfolk, where we worked together, full-time plus 50%, on construction of the kit. Although factory guidance indicates a 500hr build-time, the two of us spent at least 600hr together which doesn't include time spent by Murray Flint on excellent surface preparation and paintwork. By installing a webcam in the corner of the factory, taking shots every minute for the four months, we produced some hilarious time-lapse footage,

which is viewable on the Bank Left website at www.bankleft.com

Our build inspector, Gary Cotterell, who has contributed much to the development of the Jabiru type and engine over the past decade, was endlessly supportive with advice, machine skills and a brisk foot in the posterior when he thought that we were procrastinating. With a background in the idealised world of engineering consultancy, I found the construction process an education in practicality and pragmatism.

Gary and I took the opportunity during flight testing to improve and balance the cooling along each bank of the 3300cc air-cooled Jabiru six. The modern avionics allowed easy and low-cost instrumentation of CHT and



The sensational Swiss Alps

EGT on all cylinders and, unexpectedly, the rear cooled better than the front. This was improved by gluing small air dams inside the ram-air ducts to bring the flow restriction forward, forcing more of the cooling air down over the front cylinders. Aluminium 'butterflies' wired over the gaps between cylinder barrels forced air outboard, over the heads where it was most needed.

In light of the long trip ahead of us, including legs over cold water and inhospitable terrain, we jetted the carburettor in favour of reliability and longevity rather than fuel efficiency. As the engine bedded in and loosened up over the first 50hr, it ran a little cooler again and has been purring away faultlessly since. Flying north during the

Taking a break at Kumlinge



> TOURING

final week of the trip, we met continuous sub-zero temperatures. Not yet being privy to the Scandinavian cold weather starting improvement of drilling a hole in the throttle butterfly, we had to make do with removing the cowl and pouring hot water over the carburettor to enable starting each morning. Thank goodness for modern multigrade oil!

A six-month journey would take far more space to recount than a single article, so here's a handful of highlights. We hope they give a flavour of the tremendous enjoyment we gained from this adventure.

LANGUEDOC

Located on a plain just north of the Pyrenees foothills, the peculiar local terrain at Lézignan-Corbières funnels hooligan-strength winds across the airfield. Similar to the Mistral in the Rhone Valley, the wind phenomenon here between the Pyrenees and the Central Massif is known as the Tramontane.

It is indeed phenomenal. Although my checks for the three larger airports around Lézignan-Corbières showed 15G25kt or similar, Lézignan-Corbières itself had a steady 50kt. This would be all well and good, except that when the motorway was built around the town in the 70s, it was deemed necessary to reorientate the runway 30° away from the predominant wind direction. The only flight training here is Air France crews in PA-28s practising crosswind landings.

We found the limit of rudder authority and had to crab the plane with a wing down to maintain the approach path. After what seemed like an age on final, still configured clean and sweating profusely, I asked Helen, "Have you ever seen 100kt airspeed on short final before?"

Helen nonchalantly replied, "Don't worry, GPS only showing 50kt over the ground."

Once on the ground, we had to approach a vast flock of migratory birds – on their way to Africa, we were told – they rose from the runway and blackened the sky, appearing almost as a single, vast compound bird. The flock performed a large circuit overhead while we vacated their temporary roost.

DENMARK AND FINLAND

Samsø is a small Danish island with a day population of several thousand. A formerly little-known summer-holiday berry-picking wonderland, the island is now renowned for being energy self-sufficient through wind and solar generation.

The idyllic grass airfield is overseen by Rune Ballen, a dynamo of enthusiasm for all things aviation. With the kind loan of some kayaks, we set out to paddle around the island's large, shallow, central fjord. The scar of an ancient channel cut to allow Viking boats passage from the fjord can be seen from the air. Oak pier pillars from 50AD are barely covered by the silt beneath the shallow water.

We invited my sister and her boyfriend to holiday with us and spent three days at Ekeskov, a castle on the large island of Fyn, landing and camping on the airstrip cut into the estate's peripheral wheat fields. I recommend this as a fabulously entertaining destination. By making ferry flights, I was able to lift everyone and everything 40min north to Samsø, where we cycled all over the island, picking berries and mushrooms and buying vegetables from the ubiquitous house-front stalls.

One of those must-see French flyovers, the Millau Viaduct which spans the valley of the river Tarn in southern France



Above: a summer's flight over the waterways of Copenhagen
Right: the Sogndal Fjord in Norway



Flying east for an hour to Finland from the archipelago that is Stockholm, a smooth continuum of islands melted into the sea as we progressed. The earth's surface changed smoothly from mostly islands with a small amount of water, to mostly water with a small number of tiny islands, to nothing but water. Our destination was Kumlinge, one of the Åland Islands, which has an excellent hard runway (but no based aircraft) for a population of 238. With only two general stores and an apothecary, most of the action on the island seemed to be generated by the yacht harbour and visitors arriving by car ferry. We drew water from the hand pump in the centre of the village and picked up some wonderful smoked fish from the weekly market. We rate Kumlinge as the most dangerous place... having been almost struck by lightning and then being attacked by a tick. No more naked bathing in rock pools in torrential rain storms for us anymore.

On to Denmark, where Endelave is the spiritual hub of recreational flying, at the island farm strip of the legendary Jens Toft. On a fine summer Saturday this must be close to aviation nirvana, with locals arriving in vintage

Danish planes – and chatting in the farm courtyard's dappled sunlight with Germans and Swedes who fly in for the weekend to camp in the forest. Jens arrived in his open-top Model A Ford and invited us for afternoon tea with his wife, children and grandchildren. We assisted him with repairing some bicycle tyres – he has about 50 bright red bikes for loan – when the single pub on the island closed several years ago, prominent residents, including him, stepped in to purchase it, and he is keen to see it patronised!

NORWEGIAN MOUNTAINS

The conditions on the morning of our mountain crossing, westbound from Gol to Sogndal, were not ideal. From our camp, the good visibility served only to make obvious the clouds lapping the 5,500ft mountain peaks 20nm away. The west coast of Norway must see about as much weather as anywhere else on the planet. In light of a forecast of deteriorating weather for the next week, we figured that the current conditions were as good as we could expect. Summer air temperatures rarely enter the 30s and, given the endless moist air rolling in off the sea, any

The towering spires of Lubeck in Germany stand out among the red-roofed houses



chance of clear skies above the mountain range seemed remote.

With an agreed Plan B of turning around and returning to our point of departure, and a Plan C of climbing through the cloud layer and descending out over the ocean off the west coast, we took off toward the range.

We lofted over the edge of the aerodrome's plateau, one of Norway's highest at 2,720 ft amsl. A vast and desolate landscape opened out below us, confirming that Gol is the last piece of civilisation east of the ferocious mountains. Photographs of landscapes never really capture the breathtaking magnitude of distance and height. All I can say is that the hour airborne over the top was the most amazing and terrifying that I have yet lived. It alone was easily worth the six months of aeroplane construction.

Flying on the updraught side of the valleys in the fluky mountain winds, we were climbing with reference to moss-speckled granite out of one window, with a sheer canyon drop of 4,000ft out of the other. Snow patches dotted the rock landscape at the top of the range, even in the last month of summer. About five times on the ascent, I said aloud, "I'm turning around in ten seconds," intending to maintain VMC by retreating from the clouds and rain – but each time, a clear spot appeared ahead in a direction that combined suitably with the terrain. The instrument panel's moving map terrain detail was hugely helpful, showing me clearly which ravine led to the pass I was aiming for. I was surprised by the sensation of flying low in valleys with mountains towering above me in all directions. It was something

that we would experience again in the Swiss Alps. As we throttled back to descend into the fjord, an eerie sense of isolation sunk deep into me. The top of that mountain range is inhumanly desolate.

SOUTHERN FRANCE

Our friends from the Annecy flying club escorted us on a picturesque flight down the Rhone Valley past Grenoble and Gap Tallard to Mont Dauphin on the clear morning after the first snow for the year. The crisp clear dry air and light snow dusting from the first snowfall of the season the previous night provided unparalleled conditions.

Family friends had recently moved to Annecy from Somerset and it was with excitement that we took their four-year-old son Elliot for his first flight in a small aeroplane. Already attuned by PC flight simulator, the lad asked earnest questions about each of the 'clocks' on the panel. Upon returning I approached Adam Shaw, one half of the aerobatics display team based at the lake, the Cap Tens. He took me aloft into the Alps to make sure that I could chandelle a plane around in a tight space, as defence against flying into a valley too steep to climb out of, which seems to be most of them. We landed at an altiport above Sallanches and flew up over the mighty glaciers under the Mont Blanc peak, which are mind-bendingly awesome. Adam pointed out the areas where he lands on skis in winter.

As the days grew short and cold in November, we booked into four gîtes in southern France for a week each, in Carpentras (Vaucluse), Butenac (Languedoc),

Albi (Midi-Pyrénées) and Bordeaux. Speaking to the characters who owned each of these was as much fun as looking around the areas. The return journey north to catch scheduled flights from London coincided with the large and unseasonal freeze of southern England and northern France. This made things a little interesting. Starting the plane necessitated cowl removal to pour warm water over carburettor. Temperatures were low, viability was poor and cockpit temperature remained below zero. The regular French Air Force training was cancelled due to the weather and we were allowed to fly directly over their air bases, replete with row upon row of snow covered fighter jets. Snow showers over the Thames estuary made the final legs of the year the most difficult and I had nightmares about the plane having to travel under the Channel on a trailer. As it happened, with a few diversions and delays I managed to finally land back at the grass airstrip from which I first flew the plane six months earlier. It seemed to have grown several times wider and longer during our absence.

The year was arduous, but the trip was incomparably rewarding. We have decided to fly for six months this year, from Finland, through the Baltic and Eastern Europe to Croatia and Italy.

Oscar Lima has performed faultlessly, so it's with resigned sadness that we offer her for sale at the end of the year. Meanwhile, a huge thank you is well due to the many people who assisted us in this undertaking, in particular to all those who contribute to the LAA to make such adventures possible. ■