

ROB AND DOCK'S EUROPEAN ADVENTURE

Robin Parker relates the epic trip he and Dick Bastin took in July this year when flying their Eurofox G-FOKX to Nitra in Slovakia, where it had been (part) built.

About a year ago we were invited to join a visit to the factory in Slovakia where the Eurofox kit was made. We'd been there before when as part of 'the build', in Nitra, Slovakia. We had spent a pleasant two days over there 2 years ago meeting the people involved in making the Fox as our aircraft kit neared completion. Then it took the best part of another year for the syndicate to put it altogether.

But now we were going back with up 20 other aircraft, in our Eurofox. We attended a couple of planning meetings at Darlton GC. Their Fox would be flown by two of Darlton GC's gliding instructors. Keith Dykes and Dave Redfearn. The 20 aircraft going on the trip were to be subdivided into groups of 4. The other two aircraft in our group were a Fox based at Rhigos in South Wales flown by Martin Brockington plus one of the UK agents for Eurofox, Adrian Lloyd (in his Pioneer).

Dick and I both had to acquire our LAPL 'A' licences to enable us to fly in Europe. (An NPPL is only good for UK, France and Ireland). We would be flying across France, Germany, Austria and Slovakia (and possibly Luxembourg and the Czech republic). We also had acquired an ELT or PLB, (emergency location transmitter or personal location beacon) and life jackets, and all the appropriate European maps, both paper and electronic.

The weather leading up to the end of June was particularly poor; at one stage the trip looked in doubt, but luckily for us it started to improve on the afternoon the day before we were due to leave.



UK EuroFox's lined up for a Press Photo at Nitra airfield in Slovakia during their visit in July this year

Day One - Kirton to Abbeville

On the morning of 24th June, Dick and I arrived at Kirton early, checked over the Eurofox installed all of our gear, and set off to Darlton. Both Eurofox's set off in formation from there. My first attempt at formation flying took a bit to get the hang of keeping position at first, especially when some cloud got in the way. So we flew south keeping Stansted airport on our right, contacted Southend airport when we got near enough to get permission to fly straight over them and over the Thames estuary into Kent (passing over Leeds Castle) to Lashenden/Headcorn. This was a busy place wots of others preparing to cross the channel. The circuit was very busy, at one point about 7 or 8 Eurofox's in circuit, with parachute dropping on the other side of the circuit.

After a meeting with the rest of the group and a break we set off across the channel to Abbeville, France. Our first channel crossing in a light aircraft (and one that we'd put together!). In the event there were no problems. The other side of the channel was easy to see, cumulus at about 2500' to 3000'.

At first we flew over the clouds at 4000' but as they became more dense we descended underneath.

It got busy when we neared Abbeville, lots of GA aircraft and gliders, mostly talking French on the radio (most GA airfields on the continent have gliders as well as powered aircraft). We landed one after the other in formation.

Refuelled, signed in, saw the "Douane" or customs officers who checked our passports etc. Then to the bar, lots of drinks and a nice French dinner. Then off into Abbeville to the hotel, and then another bar. I took it a bit steadier after that night.....

Day Two - Abbeville to Longuyon

We set off intending to fly to Gunzenhausen in Germany. The weather wasn't as good we'd hoped for and about an hour down track the cloud base got lower and lower, and "walls" of rain and showers were blocking our route. After a bit of meandering around for a while we decided to diver to Laon, north east of Paris and where several of the other Eurofox's had already landed. Whilst we had a soft drink, Keith tried to cancel our flight plan. By now the weather had improved so we set off again. We flew for around another hour, but then started to catch up with the bad weather. There were a few hints on the radio from those at the back of the formation, like "we've just passed a nice airfield to our left".

(The formation was Keith and Dave in front, Dick and myself behind and to the left, Martin and Gilbert in their Eurofox behind and to our right and Adrian, with the fastest aircraft, at the back and to the left. (Our group, was known as "The tuggers" there being 3 tow planes in it).



EuroFox G-FOKX owners and builders Dick Bastin, Alan Spencer, Dick Hannigan and Robin Parker

Keith and Dave announced that they'd found a suitable diversion but with cloud base getting lower and lower none of us could see it as it was on top of a ridge and behind woods. So we all dropped in at Longuyon airfield instead after a quick radio call. We were made very welcome and had never had Brits in before. We were supplied with fuel, drinks, advice about our next leg, hangarage, a hotel and a lift to it. Could have been worse!!!



Above: The EuroFox's assemble at Headcorn in Kent ready for the Channel crossing.

Below: The fleet put to bed for the night at Abbeville, France.



Day 3 - Longuyon to Nitra

We were given a lift back in the morning by the hotel staff and the aircraft were sitting outside the hangars waiting for us. We said our fond farewells, and decided we were really going to have go for it, opting to fly to Vilshofen in Germany, just short of the Austrian border and then after a break straight onto Nitra. We had been advised to steer well clear of Luxembourg airspace.

So off we set, beautiful weather, clear blue skies with cumulus starting to build. I remember a few things about this leg, the changes in the landscape from busy built up areas to crossing over a range of 3000' plus; high wooded mountains over to flat lands and in particular when we changed heading to avoid some airspace and another formation of Eurofox's flew through ours.....

Eventually (this was a 3-hour leg) the land started to rise and a large river came into view. This was the Danube, and it wasn't blue! They had a lot of rain over there just before we went, just like the UK. Again good timing...

Vilshofen airfield is situated on the north bank of the Danube, a stones-throw from the river. With the high ground around we couldn't see it until we were nearly on top of it. After a few radio calls we got into formation and landed quite closely one after the other flying down the valley over the river and just at the last minute lining up with the runway; that was fun.

After a decent meal (a lot of the airfields have good quality restaurants) and filing a flight plan, (we were going to cross the Austrian and Slovakian borders on the next leg) refuelling etc., we set off. We'd opted to go for the slightly lower ground just north of Minz after hearing radio calls from the other Eurofox's saying things like "watch out for the cable car wires" and "I'm not sure if I can get over the top of the mountain under cloud ". It all sounded a bit too exciting to most of us.

The Danube was in view for quite a lot of this next leg and eventually we were told to descend to 1500' as we flew past a large city. This was Vienna and the Austrian border, Slovakia and Hungary all meet up near Vienna with the Danube meandering off to the south.

Again the landscape changed from being quite high to much flatter as we approached Slovakia, large areas covered in artesian wells. We had a bit of excitement when we had to cross a range of hills about 2500' high covered in cloud and got a bit separated. But we found each other again and with the clouds starting to die away in the evening sunlight we soon were at Nitra.

We parked the aircraft and said hello to everyone, got a lift into town and checked into the hotel. Out for an evening meal, and a recalling of our day.



Ready for departure from Longuyon

Day 4 - Day Off

We did the tourist thing, walked around, looked at the sights, did some shopping etc. We attended a photo session back at the airfield for the local press, and the factory put on some entertainment and a barbecue for us all. A nice rest.



Some of the group relaxing in Nitra



Day 5 - Nitra to Konstanz

More adventure. The return route was going to be (mostly) different to the way we came. The weather was still good so we set off in the morning, again a beautiful day.

We flew from Nitra to Vilshofen, but went over the higher ground this time. Cloud base was quite high as we climbed and I remember seeing Vienna in the morning sun. I decided I'll have to go there one day. Flying over Austria, it struck me how neat and tidy everything appeared, a beautiful landscape.

Nearing Vilshofen, we were given permission for a "Straight in" - no circuit as such, which meant us all flying down the Danube valley in formation. After landing etc., and another good meal we set off, this time headed south towards the Alps. Eventually looking to our right we could see Munich and on our left in the distance the Alps with snow on the tops standing out well. We were going to be landing at Konstanz airfield, on the banks of Lake Konstanz, with Switzerland in view. The lake is large, with ferries operating on it. After an uneventful landing we took a taxi into town and found the hotel. We met up with others in the group and had an evening meal looking out over the lake.

Day 6 - Konstanz to St. Quentin

This leg was Konstanz to Saarlouis, which is just inside Germany still, then onto St Quentin in France. We set off north with some 4000' high mountains in the distance. The thermals over this heavily wooded area were amazingly strong we were being bounced around all over the place but couldn't go above for airspace reasons. Turned out it was the Black Forest.... Eventually we came across flatter more industrial areas (the Ruhr) with the Rhine river crossing through it.

Over a range of hills and landing at Saarlouis was a tricky with large TV masts nearby, the airfield being situated on a piece of ground jutting out on a cliff. Seemed a bit like landing on an aircraft carrier to me. The crosswinds didn't help either.

After refuelling we set off, flying past Longuyon and the fort at Sedan, again seeing Luxembourg in the distance. After a couple of hours, we flew over St Quentin, the airfield being to the east of the city. We all dropped to the grass airfield, were given a welcome, and the contact details for a local taxi firm. There were some others from the group there and we all went out into the town for meal and a chat.

Day 7 - St. Quentin to Abbeville

Frustrating, the weather was getting worse as we got further north. We had 3 attempts at getting to Abbeville this day; we must have crossed the Somme River 5 times, having to turn back as our progress was hampered by heavy showers. We got separated whilst dodging cloud, and the GPS really came into its own here.



A pleasant early evening in St. Quentin

Eventually on our third attempt we were given permission to go between Albert and Amiens. Earlier in the day there had been commemorations for the Battle of the Somme going on, but now the airspace was open. We landed at Abbeville about 20.30hrs, the showers having abated somewhat. Fortunately, we didn't have to go far as we'd got some bunk rooms booked at the airfield.

Day 8 - Grounded

This day we didn't fly. The weather was just too poor. Martin, who'd left Nitra early on day 4 had been stuck here 3 days. He set off to try and cross the channel from further west but got stuck at Caen. We spent all day looking at the weather and concluded that we'd have to set off just after sunrise. A complication was that we had to make our first landing in the U.K. at a customs recognised airfield during official opening hours. That meant Rochester was out, didn't open early enough and too close. We decided to designate Nottingham airport as our destination, and declare that to Customs on our G.A.R. (General Aviation Report).



Dick and Keith contemplating the next move from Laon...

Day 9 - Abbeville to Kirton

We really had to be back this day. I was due at work 01.00 hours Sunday morning, and Keith was going on a family holiday on Sunday. So we were up before dawn prepping the aircraft and as soon as the sun rose we were off.

And it was already showery. We dodged around few showers on the way to the coast where there was a huge black cloud but I could just make out the White Cliffs of Dover and told everyone so.

Our lead aircraft had got some water in his comms systems, so all messages to London controls had to be relaying through our aircraft to Adrian at the back.

We cleared the cloud into the bright blue sky just off the French coast and took some video as we made our crossing and flew straight over Folkestone, eventually changing over to Southend again, later as we cleared Stansted, Adrian set off for Herefordshire.

We'd got separated from the other Eurofox. We radio's and met up over Newmarket Racecourse. By this Dick starting to suffer a bit - could do with landing, and he's not been the same since! It was a long flight and very bumpy as we got nearer Nottingham.



Landed, had breakfast. Said our Tata's and left for our home airfields.

Of course this is my recollections of an interesting eight days, I've kept it as short as I can. Some great memories, can't wait for next time.

Robin Parker