

FORMAGGIO'ED

OFF

FORMAGGIO'ED (TRANSLATED: "CHEESED OFF") WITH ENGLISH WEATHER, JOURNEYMAN BALLADEER ANDY OLIVER TAKES OFF FOR LA BELLA ITALIA



THE BIG IDEA

The idea struck me as I emerged into the cold July evening at Heathrow, fat and happy after two weeks pool-side, sun-filled and light-breezed, in southern Italy.

Family holiday duty done, my thoughts in the silent car heading home were searching for the destination for my annual flexwing tour for 2011. The 2010 one had seen my fourth attempt to complete the Scottish Western Isles. A big time luck-out had a two-day window opening as I reached Oban, and closing as I fled to Colin McKinnon's field at Strathaven. On a nine-day mission, two days had been unflyable, and two more what I call 'not by choice'.

Waiting at Colin's to get to Ireland, I bought and read his book *On a Wing and A Prayer*. In 1996 Colin shipped his Flash 2 to the US and flew from Kitty Hawk to California: 2794 miles. It came to me in a flash that this year I would fly to the good weather, rather than remain in the UK and hope the good weather would come to me.

SPOILER ALERT

Starting my own tale at its conclusion, I landed at Dunkeswell (Home of the Brave, as you may know) at 1305 on Friday 19 August.

I had taken off 13 days, 23h and 25min earlier. Whenever I land home after a mission (for example the 2550 miles to Warsaw and back in 2006) I always feel I deserve some brass bands and bunting to be waiting for me.

On this occasion there was a single microlight, which is one more than the usual empty airfield at dusk. I greeted the pilot, one of the club's new members, as any club chairman would, with a vocal enquiry about where he had been. A field no more than 50 miles way was named.

"Go on, ask me," I thought.

He did.

"Sicily," I said nonchalantly.

Yes! >

FEATURE
OF THE MONTH



WINS AN
AIRBOX AWARE 5



Above Day 5, deserted beaches
Facing page Resting up at Club Pegaso, near Frosinone, on Day 6

▷ **DAY 1: 145 MILES IN ONE LEG**

Day One is when the weather allows, and I always take it easy. Just getting over the Channel will suffice. I take my time to assemble kit, pack and check everything. Crossing Portland-Cherbourg, I am dining on oysters and Chablis in La Repère by the beach at Portbail for supper. The Channel Islands stand clear on the horizon against the setting sun. The 200m strip of the Viking Volants has been a first/last point on four occasions, not least because my father-in-law lives close by.

DAY 2: 120 MILES IN THREE LEGS

The low clouds and rain of the front pass through and it is a matter of following behind. I am a bit too eager to make progress across France for Italy. Departing a touch too early at 1500, I run into the back of the front. Good discipline had caused me to plan divers. Just as well, since the GPS fails after 20min. Would this stop you? Would you be confident to continue

“I FAVOUR SHORT LEGS: THIS AIDS CONCENTRATION, SERVES THE OLDER MAN’S BLADDER, AND ALLOWS NEW FIELDS TO BE BAGGED EN ROUTE”

into 3200 unknown miles? Two fingers to those who cannot navigate with map, compass and stopwatch.

Make small progress behind the rain, but bag some new fields, and into Alençon at last light. Walk the 200m to the petrol station. Pitch tent. Cook a meal. Snap off the transponder aerial while attaching the covers. Open bottle of Chateau Arnautan 2004. A fine flyer’s Fronsac. Use iPhone to check weather. Forecast and I are optimistic. Plan to be away just after dawn.

DAY 3: 401 MILES IN FOUR LEGS

Blaze a trail south-east, through a damp but clearing sky, to the Loire bend, past Orleans. Then follow the Loire and the Allier into the Massif Central. Perfect weather and landing at Le Puy, where the Meteo de France office gives me the forecast for the Alps. Despite being 6ft 5 in, I favour short legs; this aids the concentration on navigation, serves the older man’s bladder, and allows new fields to be bagged en route. Land at Pierrelatte on the Rhone. Foxed, slightly, by a notice that the facilities are closed for the next two days. Put jerrycan in rucksack and walk into town.

DAY 4: 201 MILES IN THREE LEGS

Put jerrycan in rucksack and walk into town again. The Alps cannot be seen from here, but I confirm that the forecast early cloud has gone, by calling Gap-Tailard. I am familiar with the complexity of this hub of alpine aviation (very specific reporting points and the downwind leg is behind a ridge). Blazing sunshine, as ever.

Depart Gap, flight plan filed, Italian map folded into the case. The Alp crossing is horrid. In such situations I ask: “What would Brian do?”

Then I usually do the opposite. Not this time. Blue skies and tailwinds, so just ride it. I dare not take my hands off the bar for photographs. Big downdrafts as I climb up through the valleys, and I have to copy the gliders from Barcelonnette to soar some ridges to gain height. At 1700hrs I bounce through the 7500ft pass and over the village of Argentera and slide down into Italy.

The wind dies in the lee of the Alps but the map reading is very challenging as I emerge onto the soft tones of an Italian evening. The terrain is flat, featureless and packed with myriad towns, villages and ▷



UK-SICILY-UK

FRIDAY 5 AUGUST TO FRIDAY 19 AUGUST 2011

The Journeyman Balladeer and G-GEMX Pegasus GT450

Total Miles = 3425

Flights = 42

Engine hours = 60

Estimate fuel consumed = 740 litres

Average speed = 65.3mph

Named cities on the map represent airspace that involves either submission to ATC or planned low-level sneaking and diversion from the direct route.

- Days 1-3** 666 miles to Pierrelatte, France, in nine legs
- Day 4** 201 miles to Acqui Terme (tent) in three legs
- Day 5** 157 miles to Pratello (hotel) in two legs
- Day 6** 232 miles to Frosinone (tent) in two legs
- Day 7** 283 miles to Rombiolo (clubhouse) in three legs
- Day 8** 160 miles to Ragusa (hotel) in two legs
46 hours rest
- Day 10** 344 miles to Castel del Monte (hotel) in three legs
- Day 11** 382 miles Ossuno/Bologna (tent) in three legs
- Day 12** 195 miles to Acqui Terme (tent) in five legs
- Days 13-15** 905 miles to Dunkeswell in nine legs





“ONWARDS AND UPWARDS, TO MASSA CINQUALE. THIS IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE I AM RUNNING OUT OF MAP. THE CONTROLLER TELLS ME THAT THE AIRPORT IS CLOSED...”

Above Day 8, and Mount Etna on Sicily hoves into view...

Facing page ...to recede again two days later, on Day 10

▷ hamlets that are indistinguishable on my AvioPortolano edition 1:500,000 map. Without a GPS, it takes time to find my marker and I miss the field first time. Spontaneous and dead reckoning, from a visible motorway crossing over a river, allow me to find Alpi Maritime at the second attempt.

This busy strip provides both welcome and assistance (and a degree of admiration) before I push on into the evening and into Acqui Terme. Five young flyers treat me to an al fresco meal, and brief me on microlighting in Italy.

DAY 5: 157 MILES IN TWO LEGS

Michele Albertino is one cool dude. Still in his 20s, he maintains and flies six aircraft, including three twin Partenavia 68s. His specialization is aerial survey, some of which he can't talk about. However, he and Claudio (an electronics engineer) fixed the GPS and the transponder, and also advised on the best fields for my style.

So off I set at lunchtime, for the first Italian ATC encounter. Misunderstanding the instruction to descend to maximum 2000ft to pass downwind of coastal Genova airport, I ended up a mile off the runway on a downwind leg at 500ft. To avoid confliction, I am told to head 5 miles out to sea. With no life-jacket and with 128° on the oil temperature gauge, it was an uncomfortable 20min.

But, onwards and upwards: to Massa Cinquale. This is an important landing because I am running out of map.

The controller can only tell me that “the airport is closed”, and does not complete the sentence with

“for lunch and will open in 15min”. This surprise is not in my guidebook, but the microlight strip of Delta Condor is just visible on the end of the map. The break is welcome, and I sleep in the shade for at least an hour.

The day ends in a golden Tuscan evening. Dinner on the terrace of the fine hillside Palazzo of the Pratello hotel with two other touring couples (Belgian, Austrian) is a pleasure: as are the first aircon, bed and shower in four days.

DAY 6: 232 MILES IN TWO LEGS

The sixth consecutive day of tailwind gets me off to a flying start across Tuscany, past Sienna and Montalcino, and into Terni. Lively winds require assistance at the pumps. Then press south, to the east of Rome, for Fly Club Pegaso, where the second sheet of Italian maps ends.

The controller at Frosinone is so surprised to hear from a UK aircraft that he does not tell me that the field closed in 2010. On the edge of the map I land on the faintly discerned strip, blowing the front tyre. A sunbeaten, wildflower-scented, insect-humming stillness descends.

Lucky boy that I am, a young couple see what, to them, looks like a crashed plane with bent wings, and take me to the helicopter workshop that is only a mile away. Having lost only 3h, I press on past the battle site of Monte Cassino and into a rising headwind.

Ahead, the valley bottom rises and the valley sides press in. I anticipate a venturi effect and am considering turning back when the wind grabs me and forces

THE FOUR ELEMENTS

AIR

Neck firmly extended, I venture to suggest that touring forces the pilot to deal with weather that would otherwise be avoided. After the 2009 Blériot bash, many were forced to face, perhaps for the first time, 25mph winds, and were surprised that it was manageable. The decision to go, or not, can be a tough one. Detailed knowledge of the conditions at small fields 100 miles away is very rare. Internet via a mobile phone is essential. Meteo de France has a great site for cloud and wind, with very granular detail. My calls and data invoice for 14 days was £155.

The final aide is the windsock on arrival, and then, if required, confidence and good technique have to serve. Remarkably, the less detailed www.enav.it site showed no cloud and only light winds for the nine days in Italy. Even more amazing: the winds were always behind me.

EARTH

The only mandatory part of any flight. The tour used 42 airfields, of which 27 were first-timers. I love a new field, especially the finding of it and the settling back on earth. Planning is important if one is to satisfy the three key criteria: (i) a town in walking distance, (ii) a gas station in walking distance (here Google Earth can pay dividends) and (iii) an airfield that is deserted.

Other pilots might find the third criterion strange. Personally, I like a totally private and silent evening, sitting in the camping chair, planning for the next day, then up and away in my own time. Only eight landings had a radio service in operation, the others were made using blind calls into total silence, and 19 fields were totally deserted from arrival to departure. This stresses the need for self sufficiency.

The other important point is a full awareness of all alternatives en route. Using airfields as waypoints adds to one's options, even if it increases journey time.

FIRE

Fuel was rarely a problem with a 65 litre tank, a 20 litre can and a rucksack. I always trim for about 65mph, and average under 12 l/h. The principle of filling at every opportunity is important. Established clubs often have a self-serve pump. Pilots usually assist with a lift or a sale from their stash. Fields with mogas and 91UL (avgas quality for Rotax at a slightly lower cost) was usually available. Avoiding the big fields meant that I only had to use avgas to top up on six occasions. Hitching a lift to a garage is accelerated by waving the jerrycan.

WATER

Here I refer to keeping the pilot going, not the aircraft. I lost just under a stone in weight, and thus claim microlight touring to be the best diet on the market. Hydration needs active management. I carry 4 litres of water, primarily to fill the pint mug with a brew of black tea twice on rising, once at midday and twice in the evening.

The day starts with porridge, sweetened with maple syrup. Lunch is dried sausage, dried fruit and nuts. Chocolate melts. The dinner aim is a restaurant, but I carry four meals as a reserve. Petrol stove is better than Gaz, but when topping up from the aircraft drain plug, be sure you are not on rich on avgas. A first aid for small cuts and burns is important; these can fester if untreated.

Flying with no headgear other than shades demands a good sunscreen. Lip salve is essential. A square of foam protects the bum when flying and the hip when camping. Two bottles of good red wine lend a touch of style to the sunset.

me downward. I cannot get the nose up, so I push it down, build up speed, and regain control of the buffeted flexwing. Since the field I was aiming for has the note: “Warning; Area often windy” and would be a close-run thing before darkness, I head back to the deserted Fly Club Pegaso.

DAY 7: 283 MILES IN THREE LEGS

I call Salerno before departing, giving my details, so am a bit surprised to be met with the statement “Have you come from England? It is not allowed. Not Schengen!”

The fact that an airport thinks a flexwing can do 1330 miles direct might indicate the infrequent arrival of this aircraft type. I am not actually arrested, although sitting between two policemen in the back seat of a car with roof lights gives this impression.

The touring pilot's need to have all papers ready for inspection on demand is proven. I am sent on my way, and as I change frequency I am told to contact Brindisi because of an emergency.

It is 120 miles off my route and, of course, I get no response as I pick my way along the coast, through columns of smoke from many forest and hill fires. Beneath me three yellow firefighting Canadairs are picking up water, white arrows in a blue sea, and dropping it about one mile from Scalea airfield.

I see several more on my way to the very toe of Italy, plus the smoking island volcano of Stromboli, before I line up to land at Rombiolo at last light. The owner, Giuseppe Pontoriero, himself a flexwing pilot, takes me home for an authentic dinner cooked by his wife Laura.

DAY 8: 160 MILES IN TWO LEGS

The Straits of Messina and the island of Sicily are visible soon after an early departure. A blissful 90min, hugging the side of Mount Etna, and then a low-level run, take me into Ragusa. I need the 48h R&R in this beautiful air hotel.

The owner tells me that we are actually south of Tunis, and that Tunisia was a regular day trip for him. Having failed to get approval for Malta (one has to fly at Luca before one is allowed to fly into Luca) and feeling somewhat played out, I take the sun, sleep, swim and beer option. ▷



“I AM NOT ACTUALLY ARRESTED, BUT SITTING BETWEEN TWO POLICEMEN IN THE BACK SEAT OF THEIR CAR CERTAINLY GIVES THAT IMPRESSION”



ITALIAN MICROLIGHT RULES FOR DUMMIES

"In summary, microlight aircraft must stay out of controlled airspace, at an altitude of 500-1000ft and are not permitted to land at official airports, but must only make use of airstrips and airfields." – *AeroTouring Flight Guide*.

The Italian regulators are aware that they have ended up with a framework that is a bit of a bolognese. Every time one flies above 500ft (measured from highest point within a 3km radius) one is committing an offence, unless it's the weekend, when 1000ft applies. To enter a controlled zone is illegal, yet 25% of Italian microlight fields are in a controlled zone. Yet this is Italy after all, so things are pretty pragmatic. The adopted policy for the 2011 tour was :

- 1 Stay out of the way where possible.
- 2 When out of the way, cruise at about 1500ft.
- 3 If not out of the way, the formal call sign (and a "squawking 7000" if so invested) is not challenged. The controller has no idea what a Pegasus GT is.
- 4 If landing at the controlled field, call ahead and get permission.
- 5 If it comes down to it, claim to have misunderstood that the new 'advanced ULM' and 'advanced pilot' proposals were not yet enacted.

Above Day 12, flying along the River Po
Facing page Italian hill town, Day 11

▷ I am made to feel the guest of honour at the owner's barbecue on the Saturday night. "Have you really flown here in a Delta Plano from L'Inghilterra? Have another Perroni!" That's more like it!

DAY 10: 344 MILES IN FOUR LEGS

Of all the touring days, in 53 pages of logbook, this is the best: 6.5h of sun, tailwind, and new views, from the toe to the heel of Italy. Mountains, coast, narrow passes, fertile fields, winding rivers, sun-blasted plateaux, shepherds, hill towns, ruins, waving farmers. Lunch with an Italian family; two pleasant stops for morning and afternoon brews. Comfortable evening and night at the Aviosuperficie Tenuta Tannoia, in view of the Castel del Monte, near Bari.

DAY 11: 382 MILES IN THREE LEGS

Three long legs, mainly with a tailwind; but two surprising bursts of confused and contradictory air that varied the airspeed from 90 to 45mph at random. Another abandoned airfield encountered, with only a faded sign to show evidence of the facilities printed in the 2010 pilots guide. Press on to Ossuna, the main GA field for Bologna, for a humid, insect-ridden night in the tent.

DAY 12: 195 MILES IN FIVE LEGS

It is a public holiday and four microlights, loaded with tentage, pass through on their way to southern beaches.

One is flown by the world champion motorcyclist, Mario Rinaldi. He shakes my hand in a congratulatory manner. I am, at last, on the lower steps of the

Pantheon of Heroes! Today is a touring day of the Padovan Plain, following the river Po to the sophisticated and well trimmed Club Astra near Milan.

The owner, one Nando Groppo (he was pictured sitting on the tail of his Groppo Trail in MF last August), flew a two-stroke from here to the Norwegian Cape in 1998. In front of a small group of local pilots he presents me with a Club Astra badge.

OK, its not an RAeC award, but it's my first trophy since the 400m hurdles at school.

DAY 13: 423 MILES IN FOUR LEGS

At the end of this monster day I've completed 1344 miles in four days. Hard going, and I am making mistakes. My phone is left in an Italian clubhouse, well charged. I do get it back two weeks later. While flying, I reach for the trim tab when the throttle is intended, and vice versa. My visual scanning deteriorates. I slump in my seat. I short-cut my flight planning. I fear I might have infringed the edge of Lyon airspace.

I have only done the equivalent of 25% of the trip to Australia, all in excellent conditions, and I raise my flying helmet (mentally only – I have not worn it since day three) to Dave Sykes. I am incoherent on landing at Chatillon-sur-Seine, according to the nice English couple who happened to be there, and who put me up for the night.

DAY 14: 335 MILES IN FOUR LEGS

Gethomeitis now fully developed. I get impatient with the passing thunderstorms, until lightning strikes the ground a mile in front of me. Flee into

"AT THE END OF THIS MONSTER DAY I'VE COMPLETED 1344 MILES IN FOUR DAYS. HARD GOING, AND I AM MAKING MISTAKES"

Sezzane, and talk sense into myself. In improving weather I make Abbeville by 1630. In worsening visibility and cloud, I decide to make the crossing to Lashenden-Headcorn. I must commend to you all the excellent service available from the Distress & Diversion cell at Farnborough, and thank Shoreham for the late opening.

DAY 15: 145 MILES IN ONE LEG

Beautiful day for a Channel crossing! For me it is a charming flight back to Dunkeswell, over known ground. Remarkably, this was the 15th consecutive day of friendly tailwinds. So not only did I find the sunshine, but the wind also. Landing at 1305, having left at 1330 two weeks previously, I met a new member whom I engaged in conversation. Which is where the tale started.

This summer trip was not the pinnacle of microlight aspiration, but it is in the reach of us all. I flew over 25% of the distance to Australia. However, compared to Dave Sykes, my planning was way less exhaustive, and his determination way more inexhaustible. □