

"Sur-l'herbe" or "on the grass" ?

The 2 Daves try circuits in France

Imagine the shock as David Esp announced to Bash News that he had been invited to his "French Teacher's" 40th Birthday Party in Bavay in Northern France. I selflessly resolved to save Dave from a life of sin and depravity. As it turned out I need not have worried. Marie Jo, her English husband Steve and family treated us with such charm and generosity to make this a weekend trip to remember.

Overhead SFD at FL45
photo Dave Esp

As always this summer, the weather men did not have a clue, so we set off wondering whether we would ever get back. With 3 others following the same route we joined downwind number 6 at Le-Touquet, to find that the ramp was packed with aircraft from Popham, a real home from home. We stopped to clear customs, but the airport relieved us of our landing fee, without any "Doanne" in sight. Le-Touquet is a mere shadow of its former self, when it was the French Terminal for Bristol Freighters plying their trade as car ferries from Lydd to Le-Touquet in an endless noisy procession. Was it the Carvairs or Bristolols which went under the grand title of "The Channel Air Bridge" ?

Dave bought himself the French equivalent of Pooleys and in no time we were headed due east into Lille's class C and D airspace. We had been warned about the abrupt ways of the French air traffic controllers, but found them helpful and considerate, however it is not until you can't understand what the rest of the traffic are saying to each other that the one becomes aware of the true value of situational awareness. Northern France seemed to be an endless procession of railway yards and spoil heaps but in less than an hour we approached our destination. A quick circle over the chateau to announce our arrival, and Dave joined downwind at Mauberge, right under a very black looking cloud. We parked Bash and booked in, just in time for Dave to get soaked chocking the wheels as the heavens opened and the thunder and lightning crashed around us.

A charming Belgian microlight pilot drove us to our hotel, despite the efforts of the FBO to dissuade him ! By the end of 3 days this individual had loosened up a little and even grudgingly filled BASH with fuel and wished us "bon voyage" with the "age" missing ! Perhaps he hoped we would crash just outside his zone rather than inside it !

The Chateaux at Bavay, a perfect setting for a Barbeque...but it rained



BAVAY...

La Cité Gallo-Romaine du Nord



We booked into our modest hotel (no breakfast on Sundays), and then straight to the party in a 14th century chateau complete with moat. Most of Guildford were there which was good news for a non French speaker.

Early next morning we visited the archaeological site at Bavay. Said to be some kind of sanctuary it seemed to have both shopping malls and temples, perhaps it was a Roman hypermarket ?

There were no landing fees and the beautiful tarmac runway at Mauberge just begged for us to fly circuits for a couple of hours, learning that "sur l'herbe" means landing on the grass. Dave took up some visitors while the visibility closed in and we finally left for the chateau again with the rain pouring down, and fears for our departure next day.

Next day dawned grey with broken cloud. The weather at Le-Touquet was passable so we left well prepared for diversions. The cloudbase held out at 1800 ft and we arrived at Le-Touquet for a straight in from 14 miles. After a coffee with some more Pophamites, we headed out over the channel. One sniff of the FIR boundary was enough to climb through the cloud to VFR on top at flight level 45 tracking Seaford then Goodwood for a descent through scattered clouds. With light rain as we approached Popham (it was sunshine in Southampton !) we crawled in at circuit height.