



BASHING TO BIARRITZ

Peering through the study window at 6.30AM that Monday morning, it showed all the signs of a beautiful day for flying. As Metform 214 rolled off the printer, I was taken aback, over Scotland an endless procession of fronts promised rain, low cloud and strong winds for the next week. I scuttled upstairs and retrieved the French maps from the spare bedroom, stuffed them in my bag and headed for Popham.

On the way to Popham I picked up my mum and my auntie, who were to accompany me on the trip, and who could hardly disguise their relief on finding that we were diverting to the South of France. Both are much more at home propping up the bar in the Casino than roughing it in the Outer Hebrides. We filed a flight plan for Cherbourg via Ortac, and a week's careful planning for Scotland went in the bin.

Arriving at Cherbourg we found the place to be like the Marie Celeste until lunch had finished. "Avez vous un Delage guide?" stammered, the woman looked at me with that blank stare that I was soon to get used to, "un guide Delage?" I repeated slightly louder. This French flight guide (written not surprisingly in French) is abundant in England, but I was unable to buy one in France!

Mum and Auntie thought that La-Baule would be a good overnight stop, so I dutifully planned for St Nazaire. It was then that our luck changed. As I filled up with fuel another G registered AA5 pulled in behind, "Where are you from" I enquired. "We are returning to Old Sarum after our Holiday", they said "you should try La-Boule they added" "Is there an airfield there then?" I asked, and they showed me the approach plate in their Botlang touring guide. Once back in the terminal I examined the map more carefully and there indeed was La-Baule. French maps include quite adequate airfield information, so I modified the plan and off we went, routing around the "stay out zone" around Mont St Michael, and steering clear of Rennes airspace.

La Baule is a pretty enough seaside town somewhat reminiscent of Torquay. The airfield is home of the "Aeroclub de Cote d'Amour", rather romantic don't you think? Art deco logos are woven in to the club room carpet and painted on the hangar doors to reinforce the image. The airfield has a 900 metre hard runway and pleasant bar. Inside the hangar are a collection of aircraft, mostly rather French and rather uninspiring.

A hotel was booked over the phone so after mere 10 minute taxi ride into town, we were at last "on holiday". An evening spent sitting in a café, enjoying French food and coffee was followed by a morning shopping in the market and changing currency. The airfield was closed on Tuesday but we were told we could depart whenever we liked, and we headed south to Royan, twin town of Fareham and Gosport.

I had chosen this as a fuelling stop because it was positioned just to the North of an apparently straight trip down the coast to our destination of Biarritz, it looked just too easy, and you've guessed it, it was! We arrived at Royan to find the Tower deserted as is normal during lunch, and we positioned ourselves under a tree in the



Royan, a grand control tower for an airfield less busy than Popham!



shade to await the return of "Le Chef du Aerodrome" Luc Maze. Now this is not as bad as it sounds, like all French airfields there was a bar and restaurant, and we enjoyed our lunch, while occasional batches of parachutists were dropped by an ancient Turbo-Porter.

At last Luc returned and fuelled up Bash. I asked about the trip down the coast to be met with near panic. Merignac control was contacted, much guttural French was spoken and Luc announced that the ranges along the coast were open. At just that moment a Raphael dived into view and disappeared down the coast at 500ft and at what looked like mach 1. Luc told me that the locals follow the road along the side of the ranges. So it was back to our table under the tree and re-plan the route yet again, but IFR this time.

Without due incident we arrived at Biarritz having received a clearance through the Merignac zone "VFR as you like!" Biarritz was rather like a hot Southampton. We were met by a van and driven 30 yards all for a mere £18.00.

Biarritz is one of those 1930s art deco resorts which was frequented by glitterati, such as Noel Coward, Winston Churchill and the Prince of Wales. Our hotel was small and scruffy straight out of a George Simanon novel. At 1.00AM a local decided to play the bongos in the street, rather badly, which kept me awake. He had barely finished before the skateboarders started running through the streets with a car shuttle waiting at the beach, to take them back to the top of the town, I laid awake bitterly regretting that I had left my skateboard at home.



Typical Biarritz with Spain in the background



After a French breakfast I sat under a shade while the girls went shopping, and by 12.00 we were back at the airfield, timing our flight to arrive at Royan at 1.30 thus avoiding most of the French Lunch hour. At last we had found a met office and I asked the Meteorologist for a briefing. He stuck his head out of the window and told us that it was a nice day for flying. Pressed further he rummaged around and found us a French low level forecast-labelled 8042 and 8063. These are much more like synoptic charts than the UK's metform 214 and 215, but with 4 sheets of A4 decodes in unintelligible French I walked onto the apron glad that at least it was a very good day for flying!



This time Luc Maze knew us and flung the card key for the petrol pump from the top of the tower and told us to fill Bash up ourselves. In no time we were headed north again. 2 1/2 hours later I was established (illegally) on the Dinard ILS, and was then diverted to hold at "Sierra Whisky" (South West geddit?). I spotted a large bridge to the South West of the airfield and orbited it, which seemed to satisfy Air Traffic. We finally landed at Dinard with thunderstorms brewing in the distance.

I had always imagined the Master Race to be capable of looking after themselves, but we enjoyed a merry 45 minutes watching as 3 Germans tried to refuel an immaculate and very expensive looking Mooney. Having failed dismally they eventually dragged out a truculent French fireman to do it for them. He then cheerfully filled up Bash while mumbling bitterly about "les Alemandes".



A short taxi ride took us to St Malo, where we enjoyed sitting under the canopy in a pavement café eating a superb meal while the rain poured down. Apparently both the Germans and the Allies flattened St Malo during the war, so I guess it was very flat indeed by the time they had both finished. It has been rebuilt just as it was and really they should not have bothered. To rebuild such a depressing place was an act of true Gaelic stubbornness, and it was with great relief that we left Dinard and set heading for Caen. The visibility had improved with the overnight rain and we skimmed along the Normandy invasion beaches, sightseeing at 500ft.



I had never seen the Bayeux tapestry in real life and this was the opportunity I had been waiting for. The driver took us to a superb hotel only 100yards from the Tapisery so that we could be first in the Queue next morning. A fine evening was spent eating, and watching a drunk being carted off to hospital.

On time next morning we arrived and enjoyed the tapestry in while the crowds arrived and formed a queue. This unique piece of history is well worth a visit and is only 1 1/2 hours from Popham.

So finally we set heading via Mike Papa and the VFR route overhead Southampton at Flight Level 55. Arriving at Popham Dick asked the Girls if they had a nice time, "It was so hot I even took my vest off" exclaimed my 71 year old mother, much to Dick's horror. So was it a good holiday, well it was better than Scotland!