



NORTH AFRICA FLYING ADVENTURE

Joining the French rally that follows St Exupéry's fabled 2,500km Aéropostale route from Toulouse to Senegal

FIRST LOOK: BATMAN'S AEROPLANE?

Stuffed with safety features, the curious NEXTH is 'cleverer than it looks'



Pilot

Est. 1967

Britain's best selling General Aviation magazine

January 2024



**Playing
the Red
Baron**
in a Fokker
Dr.1 replica

The French commemorate their heroic aviators with excellence. For nearly forty years, a flying rally for single engine aircraft has retraced the route pioneered in the early 1920s by heroic French aviators who established a regular 2,500km airmail service from Toulouse to St Louis in Senegal in the years from the early 1920s.

Julian, who lives in France and shares our Piper Arrow, G-BBFD, registered us for the rally. We were insanely excited about it. Kelvin, who bored his non-flying friends for six months before departure, was banned by his partner from mentioning the rally in social situations. Julian took care of the French side of the planning, involving hundred of pages of information.

Kelvin, who lives in the UK, took care of supplying the necessary English documentation, spares, pre-rally maintenance and flying the aircraft to and from France. We were provided in advance with draft electronic route plans for each section, which we and, surprisingly, many of the French Pilots too, loaded into our SkyDemon apps. This

allowed us to plan the routes, in principle, in advance. (They were often modified on the day by ATC, as we were many aircraft and ATC needed to avoid overload.)

Finally, on 16 September, we set off from Montauban, Julian's home airfield in France, to Toulouse Lasbordes as the first arrivals to register for the rally. The start was inauspicious; the aircraft had picked up a puncture at Montauban and the rally mechanic, Ishmael, kindly replaced the inner tube at Lasbordes, while Julian collected our rally kit, including packaged meals, and attached numerous sponsor stickers to our aircraft. Importantly, we were also provided with ten easily opened Air Million VFR charts covering the *whole* of the event.

The inaugural evening was held at the Aéropostale museum in Toulouse, with encouraging speeches from the senior directors of the Rally, sponsors and the mayor of Toulouse. We realised that this was a very serious business indeed for the French aviation community. We were asked to introduce ourselves, and Julian, a fluent French speaker, raised laughs and applause for his amusing presentation of our small group of two.



The route (red for outbound, green for return) and timings, published by the rally's French organisers



Limited options, should the engine have failed over the Pyrenees

DEPARTING TOULOUSE FOR ALICANTE

Saturday 17 September began a daily pattern: briefing at the airport, flight plans submitted by Daniel Vacher, the highly impressive flight director, for the whole group of 27 aircraft (23 rally aircraft and four management and support).

Departures were in order of cruise speed, fastest first, over the Pyrenees. The Spanish air traffic authorities had instructed us to monitor radio frequencies for ATC at Barcelona and Valencia, the second and third biggest airports in Spain, but *not* to call them, as this would likely overload the control capabilities of these airports. This provided a gentle introduction to English R/T for those French colleagues whose were used to communicating with ATC in French.

We took command for alternate legs, and the co-pilot checked weather, and emergency landing locations in the event of engine failure. Generally, we had tailwinds on the way down to our goal in Senegal, St Louis, and headwinds at



lower levels for the return trip. So, on the way back we climbed to FL 75 or above where we could to pick up tailwinds.

ALICANTE – CASABLANCA

Day Two, the flight from Muchamiel, Alicante, Spain dawned with heavy rain and low cloud, so delayed our

departure until late morning. Then, the first crisis came. A Beechcraft Bonanza, which carried some of the management team as well as their equipment, had a fuel pump failure. The crew and their forcibly reduced luggage were shared out among the remaining aircraft.

The route, along the coast of Southern Spain, entailed VFR at 800 feet around the international airports of Alicante, Murcia and Almeria, before a climb to 5000ft from Almeria to cross the Mediterranean to Tetouan, Morocco.

This was the longest sea crossing either of us had ever done, and we were slightly apprehensive. The risks of the rally came home to us vividly with a radio call from American fellow rallyists to Almeria Approach. They, like us, set off to cross the Med in their Cirrus, but developed a problem controlling engine



Morocco – our first sight of the seemingly endless North African desert



On approach to Tarfaya's desert runway





Goal of the Rallye

- The Toulouse to Senegal Rallye commemorates the Crews of Aeropostale, the company that provided regular airmail between Toulouse and the French African Colonies.
- The airmail service is famous in France partly due to Antoine de St Exupery, an Aeropostale pilot, famous author, Chevalier of the Legion of Honour and winner of the US national book award. St-Ex's most famous book was *The Little Prince*.

◀ Kelvin with Jean-Jacques Galy, Director of the Rallye, relaxing over Pernod...and water

speed, so turned back to Almeria, who afforded them priority. "We have you on radar, 24 nautical miles out, cleared to land Runway 07." They landed safely but took no further part in the rally.

Julian, ever the helpful co-pilot, enthused over the calm water in the wake of the many ships near the straights of Gibraltar as suitable locations for ditching, if such became necessary. Kelvin thought he did not need to be quite so enthusiastic about the possibility!

The first refuelling at Tetouan was the old-fashioned way, with manual pumps in 200 gallon drums full of avgas, using a dipstick to determine fuel used. We became experts over the course of the rally at helping the organisers and each other. Pumping, say, 100 litres each into 27 aircraft is jolly hard work...but it does create great teamwork and bonding.

The afternoon flight to Casablanca Tit Mellil was super – and we were in Africa!! This leg was a little tense for the slower aircraft, however, as we all had to land before sunset (when airfields close to VFR traffic) and we were two hours behind schedule due to the morning storm in Muchamiel.

CASABLANCA – TARFAYA

The Monday flight took us, via an Ocean detour around Casablanca and into Canaries airspace alongside commercial traffic, on the way to Agadir. Up to now, we had landed on long asphalt runways at "proper" airports. The next leg, Agadir

to Tarfaya, was very, very different.

Tarfaya is a small historic town at Cap Juby, on the corner of Africa. St Exupéry was station chief there for three years, lived in the Fort, and wrote movingly of the experience. Today, the "runway" is still the same

St Exupéry was station chief... lived in the Fort, and wrote movingly of the experience

strip of compressed sand and stones as used by the Aéropostale pilots.

Our visit was clearly the biggest thing to have happened in Tarfaya this year. The runway was surprisingly smooth, and we were directed to park at the far end

of it. Children from the local school had come to greet us. They were excited to be taken as passengers as we taxied to the take-off end of the runway for overnight parking, with one child in each aeroplane. The town provided a 24-hour police guard, together with the local fire brigade and ambulance service to look after our aircraft.

No French trip would be complete without some alcohol at the end of a long day's flying: we often had drinks after landing. Pernod Ricard of course and surprisingly whisky as well. Julian and I stuck to Pernod and water, lots of water. Afterwards we walked through the town to visit the Saint Exupéry



▲ Children from a local school came to greet us

museum, surrounded by enthusiastic local boys who welcomed us as visitors.

Our overnight stay was in a Bedouin camp alongside the airstrip; the Governor of the province addressed us at dinner, telling us that the police, health service and city administration were at our disposal during our stay, so we felt, and were indeed, very honoured guests.

TARFAYA – DAHKLA

Taking off from Tarfaya was a different matter from landing. The runway is long – around 2,000ft – but the initial run was between parked aircraft and we needed to avoid creating clouds of sand and dust. Accordingly, we kept the engine power down and flaps retracted until past the parked aircraft, then applied full power, and at seventy knots and, on the call from Kelvin as P1, Julian as P2 selected two stages of flap and 'FD jumped into the air, with a minimum of sand and dust. We thought this was cool.

A short hop to Essouaria to refuel, before the afternoon flight to Dahkla. The route was along the coast, with miles of desert on the left of the aircraft and the Atlantic ocean on the right.

We stayed at a beach front hotel at Dahkla, which must be one of the smarter hotels in town as commercial flight crew stayed there too. It was a fine place but had one serious flaw: its

lush estate was watered with final effluent from a sewage treatment plant, (so the staff told us) which led to a pervasive smell around the residential bungalows. Fortunately, the smell did not permeate the restaurant or our rooms!



Overnight stay in a Bedouin camp, where we were honoured guests



At Tarfaya the aircraft were guarded for 24 hours by the emergency services



DAHKLA – ST LOUIS, SENEGAL

Dahkla is the very edge of Morocco, and the next day was the final, two-leg trip via Noudahibou in Mauretania and on to St Louis in Senegal. We were required to file individual flight plans on *paper*, something which most of us had not done for several years.

However, the combination of morning mist, sand storms, and the

tail of monsoons meant that VFR was sometimes very marginal indeed, but visibility improved towards Nouadhibou.

At Nouadhibou, refuelling was expensive, at over €5 per litre, and we were delayed by more than an hour by a monsoon storm. The leg to St Louis was challenging with CBs and very heavy rain. As we crossed the border, and approached the river delta at Senegal, the countryside become more verdant.



Yes, it did rain! Monsoon at Nouadhibou





▲ Approaching Senegal through the tail of a monsoon

▶ Julian and Ishmael fix the alarm switch on the retractable nosewheel at St Louis



And then, at the furthest point in our journey, a problem. A smooth landing was followed a few seconds later by a deafening alarm, the nosewheel green light went out, but, to our huge relief, the leg remained extended.

This meant that the subsequent Saturday morning was spent at the St Louis airport with Ishmael, our mechanic, who managed to fix the problem. The gear operating system was fine, but the plate which closed a switch to indicate 'gear down' had moved slightly, so triggering an alarm indication. A small but critical adjustment to this plate resolved the problem, and we heaved very large sighs of relief.

The rally was a delivery vehicle for a medical charity based in Toulouse, and one of the aircraft, an Arrow 2 like ours, was piloted by three French surgeons from Toulouse. These

doctors had organised for medical machines recently replaced in Toulouse to be shipped down to St Louis, along with medical supplies. We, along with others, volunteered to carry some of these supplies to support this charity. The doctors, rather than take the day off in Saint Louis, went to the local hospital, set up the machines, trained the local doctors on how to use them, then went on to carry out thirty sight-saving eye operations. Fantastic!

At St Louis, we stayed at the historic Hotel de la Poste, which is where the Aéropostale pilots used to stay in the 1920s and 30s. Julian had lived at the hotel for some months, over forty years ago, so was interested to see the changes in the country.

We took a boat ride around the island of St Louis after our airport excursions, on a river heavily swollen by the monsoon rains. We passed

the fish market, many fishing boats and up to the border with Mauretania, where hippopotamus are often seen.

That evening, we had a reception dinner on a boat restaurant near the hotel, where we met several expat French people who mainly worked in the aid sector, as Senegal is a very poor third world country.

STARTING THE RETURN TRIP

On 24 September, we started the return journey from St Louis to Nouadhibou. We had good VFR weather for a change. To pick up the tailwinds, we flew at FL65.

A gaggle of 27 aircraft flying to some of these airports in one day over a relatively short period of time was a challenge for the local ATC, who were used to sparse traffic and did not always have radar to help them. This meant that we were often required to make numerous position reports. This issue was brought



Aéropostale

- Established on 25 December 1918, offering a mail service from Toulouse to Barcelona
- Extended to Casablanca in February 1919
- Extended to Dakar, Senegal in 1925, from where the mail was shipped by steamer to South America.
- November 1927: regular flights between Rio de Janeiro and Natal in South America. Expansion then continued to Paraguay
- In July 1929 a regularly scheduled route was established across the Andes Mountains to Santiago, Chile, later extending down to Tierra del Fuego
- On 12-13 May 1930 in flying from Dakar Senegal to Natal, Brazil a Latécoère 28 mailplane fitted with floats and a 650 horsepower Hispano-Suiza engine made the first nonstop South Atlantic flight. Aeropostale pilot Jean Mermoz flew the 3,058 kilometres (1,900 miles) from Dakar to Natal in nineteen hours, 35 minutes, his aircraft carrying 122kg (269 lb) of mail.

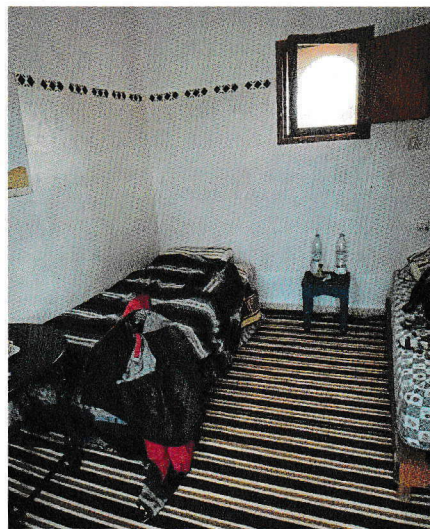


into focus when ATC at Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, asked us all to report our positions. This we dutifully did one after the other until ATC called stop, as he could not write quickly enough!

The return trip followed our outbound route to Laayoune, where fuel was cheaper and the airport restaurant provided a great local tagine for lunch. This time the weather was fine, no monsoon.

The next leg was to TanTan, a desert town where we stayed at an amazing desert hotel. Its website suggested some luxury glamping, no less. The journey from the airport was in a fleet of 25 very old Land Rovers, as the route through the desert definitely required four-wheel-drive vehicles.

The hotel is a recent build, as a copy of a Moorish fort, the ruin of which we passed *en route*. It is quite remote, our room likened a monastic cell, generator-provided electricity ran from sunset at 8pm to 11pm, so a night-time visit to the communal loo was challenging. Dinner, however, was really fantastic, a huge achievement to feed seventy hungry pilots in the back of beyond. It is also a considerable achievement to provide decent accommodation and service at such a remote spot.



▲ Washing the family goat is a Saturday ritual in St Louis

▼ A few of the thousand or so old fishing boats to be found at St Louis



KELVIN'S BIRTHDAY

The next day was Tan Tan to Essouaria, a seaside resort in Morocco. Breakfast was a chilly predawn, and off to the airfield only to hang around in the departure lounge waiting for the weather to improve. Luckily, Agadir Approach was not too busy, and we were able to cross the bay at FL 75 and then down to Essaouira for an overhead join, listening carefully to ascertain where the other aircraft were as they

◀ Our monastic cell bedroom

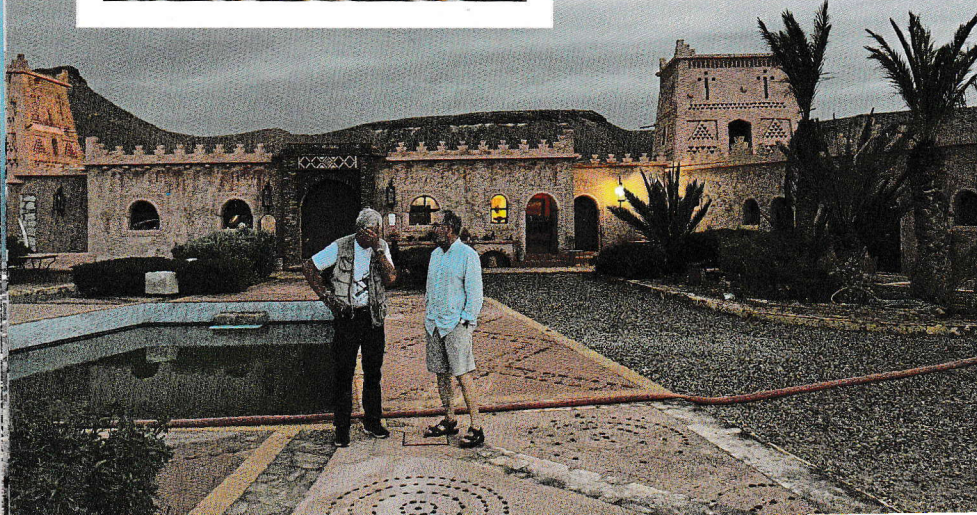
▼ The hotel courtyard at dusk

waypoints, and with our eyes peeled. Once again we had a buffet dinner in the hotel restaurant but this time we had a great view of the bay and the port.

Tuesday 27 September was an important day; Kelvin's 77th birthday, and he was PIC from Essouaria via Casablanca to Fes. The day was the first truly blue-sky one. The group made a huge effort to make the day special. At the morning flight briefing, sweet birthday biscuits were chomped happily and, as we climbed into 'FD on the apron, 69 pilots stood on the wings of their aircraft at Essouaria airport and sang *Happy Birthday to You*. It is a moment which will always remain in Kelvin's memory.

At Fez, with 27 aircraft arriving one after the other, the tower controller, clearly overloaded, sent us downwind to the NDB, four miles from the threshold, before clearing us to land. The SkyDemon log clearly showed our track and was useful in providing feedback to the Senior Air Traffic Controller on what had happened.

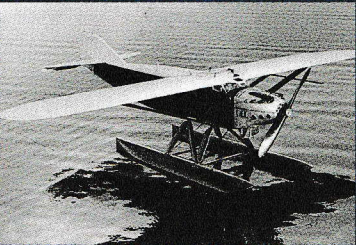
We all stayed in wonderful old Riyads (four floor house constructed around a central tiled courtyard). In the afternoon we toured the Medina (the old town) with its amazing maze of little alleys



and shops selling a wide variety of products. Dinner was in the biggest riyadh. It was our last night in Africa. We had a band and a belly dancer who insisted Julian danced with her, much to the amusement of the team.

The aircraft

THEN



LATECOTERE 28

- 140mph cruising speed
- single radio, with poor coverage
- magnetic compass
- paper maps
- limited weather forecasts

NOW



PIPER PA-28R ARROW 200

- 150mph cruising speed
- three radios, complete coverage
- 1 magnetic + 3 electronic compasses
- paper maps + 5 electronic maps
- live satellite weather
- emergency satellite-linked locator beacon
- ground radar stations
- electronic beacons..8 navigation systems including GPS

BACK TO EUROPE!

The Spanish air traffic authorities allowed us to file a group flight plan, even internationally, but did make a small adjustment to our route, one day before our Fez to Malaga Al Axarquia flight. This took us via PIMOS, an IFR reporting point, which meant that all 27 aircraft following the route would have a great view of Gibraltar at 2,000 feet, before descending to 800 feet to pass Malaga Airport.

We arrived at Axarquia, the home of the Malaga Royal Aeroclub and were back in Europe. We stayed in central Malaga and spent the evening at the Malaga Aircraft Museum housed at the main traffic airport in the original

west of Valencia with a charming old town where we stayed. Dinner was in a local restaurant run by a Bentley-owning Swede, himself a pilot, and his Spanish wife. The food was superb, and the doctors put on a very cleverly crafted skit mocking the organisers and many of us rally participants. This was a great evening and lots of fun.

THE LAST LEG

Again, we were up pre-dawn for a quick breakfast followed by a wait for the weather to clear before we headed back to Toulouse. We were allowed to make our own way back and we chose to fly due north and then NW around Barcelona, crossing the Pyrenees over the

Not only was the flight planning and organisation perfect, but the organisation of hotels, transport, and fuel for sixty people, often in strange isolated places, was stunning

Terminal, which was built by the Aéropostale pioneers in the 1920s.

The last day but one, 29 September, was from Axarquia to Requena Valencia, where all flight plans had to be changed as the direct route was cancelled at short notice due to military exercises. We had to fly around the coast dropping down to 800ft past the major airports before climbing to FL65 after Alicante.

Requena is a small town to South

Perthuis pass near Perpignan. At Toulouse Lasbordes we said goodbye to those of our friends who were heading straight home.

We stayed on overnight for the final party, where we thanked the French organising team, who were utterly brilliant throughout. Not only were the flight planning and organisation perfect, but the organisation of hotels, transport, and fuel for sixty people, often in strange isolated places, was stunning.

The square at the middle of the charming town of Requena, Valencia



In the Footsteps of Heroes

Retracing St Ex's fabled 2,500km
Aéropostale airmail route amid a
flotilla of French single-engine light
aircraft in a well-organised rally

Words & photos:
Kelvin Roberts & Julian Mant

