

VFR To Poland

'Jan!' Richard shouts, 'you're free tomorrow, how about flying an AA5 to Poland?' As you can well imagine all sorts of things were going through my head, a mixture of 'wow, yes please' followed by a swift 'how on earth would I go about that?' The more I thought about it the more exciting a thought it became. It turns out the owner had sold it to someone in Poland and needed it ferrying there, he was keen to do it but just wanted another pilot to sit beside him for the support. After studying the European weather it seemed it was going to be feasible to do the whole trip VFR and with a healthy tailwind it could be completed in around 8 or 9 hours flying. Hard as I tried I was running out of reasons not to go, not least that it would be invaluable experience as part of my hour building towards the CPL and I would get to fly over 4 countries in one day! So that was it decided, rendezvous at 0700 the next morning for departure. The route would take us first to Ostend, Belgium, via the SAM VOR, then on to Allendorf for our first stop in Germany, followed by Bautzen on the eastern border before the final leg down into Poland to a small field called Muchowiec, near Katowice. Each leg would be around 2 to 2.5 hours of flying, giving us plenty of fuel reserve if bad weather was encountered.

So along comes the morning. The flight plan had been filed and the fuel tanks filled to the brim the previous evening, leaving us free to depart from runway 05 at 0730 local and open the flight plan by radio with London Information. It was fairly hazy on the first leg, which was unfortunate after several days of scorching sunshine, but nevertheless at FL50 there was plenty of visibility. Passing over the SAM VOR it was time for the descent to remain clear of the London TMA before coasting out over Folkestone. The next part of the leg was in fact the only time we experienced worsening weather when the clouds over the channel suddenly became lower and more overcast, but still with plenty of gaps, so in order to remain high over the sea I exercised my right as an IMC holder to fly VFR above the cloud and boy was it a lovely view, the early morning sun burning off the haze and reflecting it's rays off the top of the fluffy white clouds. After flying to the south of France the previous week in a C152 and experiencing the curious French RT I was curious as to how other nations approached RT in English and the truth is Belgium were no different, Brussels Information were very helpful in giving us the weather for Ostend, which confirmed our hopes that the low cloud would clear, paving the way for the descent. After coasting in we were cleared to join right base for runway 08 and touched down after 2 hours and 20 minutes flying. An hour on the ground (30 minutes of which was spent waiting for the fuel truck to come out to the aircraft) allowed us enough time to file the flight plan to Germany and check the weather using their impressive met facilities before pressing on in order to meet our ETA's. Departing Ostend we were at nearly 1,000 feet before the end of the huge runway and a right turn put us on a heading of East (where the DI would remain for the rest of the trip!). Transiting Belgium we managed to gain clearances through most of the airspace on our route, including the class C airspace of Antwerp and Monchengladbach, via the Information frequencies who would arrange the transit and then hand us over

to the relevant approach frequencies – very helpful when you have an ETA to meet. Belgian airspace was quite busy but that was nothing compared to when we got to Dusseldorf. Our track took us through the approach path to the runway in use and so unsurprisingly we were left to navigate our own way around the edge of controlled airspace which was in the end fairly straight forward, I was actually surprised how all the German pilots spoke in English to the German controllers, unlike in France when you only know the controllers are talking to you because they suddenly speak English! Then came the relaxing part, 100nm across relatively uncontrolled German airspace and over the delightful Meissner-Kaufunger natural park with roads looking like they were made to be a biker's haven. Arrival at Allendorf was extremely picturesque but equally as quiet with just one private jet flying in while we were there and the important looking businessman being whisked away in a brand new Mercedes – German efficiency at it's peak! No time to lose though and the next 2 hour 30 minute leg took us through the heart of Germany to a very deserted looking airfield at Bautzen. It was built during the cold war and the control tower is still protected by a large earth bunker, the only inhabitant that we could see was the one attendant who cycled out to dispense our fuel and then cycled back to take our landing fee and file our flight plan! It was then noted that we had managed to find the two most deserted airfields in Germany and neither of them had a pilot store and so we could not in fact buy a chart for Poland! Luckily John had a very up to date navigation database on his Garmin 695 GPS and that coupled with a chat with a friendly private jet pilot we realised we weren't going to encounter any serious airspace. Following the final checking of the weather and Notams however we found there was a strong possibility of encountering some CB's so we set off straight away to give us as much daylight as possible and headed over the border. The Polish Information frequencies were also helpful, even though the Polish accent took a bit of getting used to! A straight line track brought us over the finishing line 2 hours later, after seeing first hand some of the serious flooding that had occurred all over Poland in the preceding weeks. The runway at the field was some 600m of very rough tarmac that once we touched down felt like the big dipper at Blackpool! But it didn't matter we were down after 8.5 hours of flying thanks to a tailwind that gave us an average groundspeed of 130 kts. A thoroughly worthwhile day that was surprisingly a lot easier than it first seemed, the radio was all in English, the navigation was no different to in the UK and we remained VFR albeit with a couple of diversions to avoid cloud. Once all the planning has been done and paperwork is in order it is really that simple, and to top it all off we were met with a Polish accent stating in an excited tone 'you're here! Great, let us go and eat lots of food and drink lots of beer!' – Fantastic!