

Well, where to begin now?

1) Let's start at what a pilot would need as absolutely necessity for a long-ish trip.

1. Before the trip, a flight plan.

How detailed or how rough - really depends on the authority responsible for the area overflowed.

On one side the French could not care any less about the plan and the route, not that they will be aware of the plan anyway.

Even if we deviate by 100 miles off track, it is still OK, for as long as we do not breach some controlled airspace.

Talking to the French ATC - most of them aren't really interested in what the pilot is doing and the impression I gained is that

should not really disturb the ATC while they are having their coffee.

On the other extreme the Serbs will fine-comb the plan and if it is not at their liking will bluntly reject it.

You either give them acceptable flight plan or no flying through Serbia.

Deviation from the planned track is followed by prompt magnetic track reminder from the ATC.

Yet, the flight through the Yugoslav airspace leaves the impression of very good organisation, helpfulness and professionalism.

They will treat you like a proper commercial air transport flight and will expect you to behave likewise.

2. An aeroplane and enough fuel to take it to the next stop-point.
3. Some sort of IMC / IR rating is an ABSOLUTE must.

True, the IMC is only valid for Britain, but should you get into cloud, followed by radar-vectoring to ILS, there is hardly any difference between the two. At the end of the day, all being well, you can always inadvertently enter cloud and in that case it is the skill that matters, not the bureaucratic paper.

Without IMC / IR we stand no chance of completing a long VFR trip across Europe in a day.

Trip like this, if done VFR, can easily take few days or even longer.

As for the rest: charts, GPS, route plan is all helpful but not an absolute necessity.

I had charts covering France and Germany, but for Austria and Yugoslavia I used an aviation atlas with overview of the area (but not detailed). Like ICAO airports, major en-route VOR/NDB or similar. Yet, for the area I flew over it was sufficient.

Ah, one more thing, planning 6 hour route may well turn into 7 hours.

And one more thing - cash. And plenty of that!!!

II) Well, lets start at the beginning.

Planning

4 days before the trip.

Insurance – the insurers confirmed that all of Europe is covered for as long as we do not fly in a country subject to UN sanctions. In this respect I was OK.

Transits through foreign airspace.

We all know that France is OK, so would be Germany and Austria.

I got in touch with the Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian and the Macedonian authorities.

Result:

1. Slovenia – being part of the EU, there are no restrictions for GA private flights. Flight plan is more than sufficient. Landing at Ljubljana is 10 euros, overnight parking 8 euros. Not bad for an international airport.
2. Croatia – transit is perfectly OK for private flights, for as long as the number of seats is below 6. Now I am not entirely sure if that number was 16, but in any case, being over 4, I was no longer paying attention to that part of the conversation. Over that, the carriage of passengers will have to be discussed with the authorities, even if it is private GA flight. Next, they said that if I were to use the airways there would be a charge via Eurocontrol, depending on the entry and the exit point, but not exceeding around 100 euros. This being VFR and low level any charges will be nominal.
3. Serbia – private flights permitted with prior flight plan. Also, if the weight of the aircraft is below certain value, the flight is exempt from any charges. I do not know what the max weight is, but MTOW 1055 kgs is well below this limit.
Advice: in the REMARKS field on the flight plan specify MTOW 1055 kgs.
4. Macedonia – no problem for private flights.

2 days before the trip

1. Outbound, the intended route was: Elstree, Lille, along the French/Duch border, north of Strasbourg, enter Germany at Baden-Baden, south of Munich, enter Austria at Salzburg, cross the Alps direct to Slovenia, Ljubljana, alternate Maribor.
Planning 6.5 hours flight with refuelling stop in Slovenia.
2. I ordered maps covering the area up to and including Slovenia.
3. W&B calculations, with full tanks little bit overweight, but not much, well under 5%.
Should be all right.
Total passenger/luggage weight 240 kg. Generally 300 kg with half a tank is a rough guide for 'OK flights'.

1 day before the trip

1. Submitted the flight plan and the customs form to the tower.
2. Maps (for which I paid for next day delivery) not arriving.
3. Fuel, well, Elstree run out of Jet-A1 and were awaiting new delivery.

Ah, well, not looking too well to start with, but I am not giving up.

I still had bit over $\frac{3}{4}$ of fuel, so, all being well should last me till Slovenia, if not I'll just make some en-route stop.

The evening prior to the trip

1. Visit to the Elstree Aero-Club and I obtained approach plates for some of the en-route airfields, Ljubljana (LJLJ), Maribor (LJMB), Skopje (LWSK), Ohrid (LWOH).
2. I'll have to do with whatever maps I had. I am covered all the way up to Salzburg. For Austria, Slovenia and beyond I'll rely on the Aviation Atlas I mentioned earlier.

True, this atlas only mentions the major airports, and the more important en-route VORs and NDBs. Plus, I do have some familiarity with the area and if necessary I can always ask for guidance the ATC.

3. I also did some detailed calculations for the route, timings, fuel burn, frequencies and so on.
4. Weather check
The rest of the night I spent printing off the weather charts and the approach plates. The weather was not quite perfect, bit rain and clouds here and there, but in general most of the cloud bases were over 4000 feet agl. So, I reckoned, all being well I may still end up with VFR flight all the way.

III) Finally, the big day, Wednesday, 19th April, 7am at Elstree, ready for 8am take-off.

England

Actual take off around 08:30 am.

As soon as I got airborne, I activated the flight plan with London Information and got on my way. The cloud base at Elstree was around 1000 feet, but by the time I reached Stapleford it all cleared and I enjoyed very nice view of London from 2000 feet. The conditions were exceptionally smooth, very nice flight indeed.

Soon I was over Dover and Direct to Lille Airfield, crossing the channel at 2000 feet.

France

Bit of cloud over the channel, but as soon as I got inland on the French side that mostly cleared and I was able to enjoy the French countryside.

I was talking to Lille Information at the time, got to overfly the Lille Airfield without problem.

Transits

At this point it is worth mentioning that any transits in Europe are so easy to obtain, no sooner you specified the request to transit a zone, the response comes 'approved'. Great!!! A true end-to-end flight in a straight line. Now compare this with our own Luton, Stanstead, City,..... Even Elstree!

Radio work

OK, passed over Lille, and I was asked to call some Xxxxxxxx Information on certain frequency. All right, I tried calling 'Information – G-EGTR'. Response came through and a minute later the controller established that I am not really in his area and he suggested another frequency. And so on for the next half an hour.

'What is your position?' 'I can not get contact' 'Call this frequency'. And so on, 'Call that frequency', 'Call this frequency', No matter who I tried, I was either outside their domain, or nothing to affect me or simply no response.

Eventually I thought why should I bother at all?

If I can fly all the way from Elstree to Clacton without even talking to a single person for as long as I stay out of the airport zones, why should France be any different?

On our trip to Clacton, how much would Southend or Stanstead or Thames be interested in talking to us?

Right, accepting the general status, I continued for the remaining hour or so and reached the German border at Baden-Baden.

Germany

Now, the Germans seemed completely different. I got onto the tower frequency and asked for overhead transit at 2000 feet agl, needless to say, approved immediately.

After crossing the river and Baden Airfield and I was passed to the controller looking after the Stuttgart area. Finally, somebody who actually wants to talk to me.

The guy asked for my destination (LJLJ), departure airfield (EGTR) and did not even bother asking for the route. But that should've been obvious anyway, from my position in a relatively straight line direct to Salzburg. Obviously I was followed on the radar as some time later I was asked to descend to 1000 agl underneath the Stuttgart AC area. Shortly afterwards I was advised that I am free to climb again and I climbed to around 6000 feet, somewhere level with the fluffy cumulus bases.

Some time later I was passed to the Munich control, for further uneventful flight.

Fuel

And at that point I was already beginning to wonder about my fuel situation. Looking at the remaining distance to Ljubljana, I should be just about OK, but with insufficient quantities for any delays or diversions. Of course, crossing the Alps, there are not that many places to land. Seems, I am paying the penalty for being little bit overweight in terms of fuel burn and instead of the comfortable 7 hours, I was likely to achieve just over 6 hours. My wife, always on the cautious side, put an additional pressure to land and finally I decided on the conveniently located Salzburg.

Important

The other reason for choosing Salzburg was that Aris told that the Germans are known to check the licences if I am likely to encounter IFR without IR (remember IMC is only valid for UK). So, I decided against landing in Germany.

I told the German controller about my intentions and being about 20 miles away from Salzburg I was asked to call the approach. And so I did.

Austria

'Salzburg Approach – G-EGTR'

'G-EGTR – Salzburg Approach what is your altitude?'

'6000 feet'

'Approved transit at 6000 feet'

????? A?

'Salzburg, G-EGTR request landing for re-fuelling'

I was then transferred to the tower who just said

Report nn-left hand downwind

????? - I thought I am talking to a major international airport.

'G-EGTR begin the descent towards the airfield'

'I can not, I have mountain to cross'

'OK, after you cross the mountain'

Well, all nicely said, but is that peak ahead little bit in a cloud?

Left of me – mountain, right of me mountain, ahead of me there may be a pass, but in a cloud.

Monkeys, I can not descend and I can not continue in a straight line.

I told the tower that I am climbing because I can not cross the pass VFR and that I'll enter cloud.

The response:

'G-TR are you VFR or IFR'

I was VFR, but now I am IFR because I entered cloud. What is the minimum safe altitude for this area?

'If you are VFR the terrain clearance is your responsibility but for your area it is 9000 feet. Can you fly instruments?'

'Affirm, I am climbing to 9000 feet and requesting radar vectoring to ILS'

Fine, then I was transferred back to the approach for radar vectoring.

The guy says, *'expect vectoring to runway nn for ILS approach. Continue towards the VOR'*

Half a minute later, still at 9000 feet, I was out of the cloud, VFR again and with the runway right ahead of me!

I told the approach that I am VFR again and that I want to revert to VFR approach.

I think those guys down there were already wondering what I am up to.

Nevertheless, I was passed back to the tower, and was asked to report downwind left hand.

I made couple of orbits to descend before finally joining what I saw as left hand downwind.

In all the drama in crossing the mountain I went for the right hand instead.

There was a prompt reminder that I should follow the instructions and that I should return to the left hand downwind.

This was followed by eventless landing and I was requested to visit the flight control.

Which I did and the guy there told me that I was not following the instructions and asked if he could see my licence. OK, here is the licence and the log book.

He asked me if I was in a trouble, I explained no, I was not in a trouble. I intended VFR approach and got inadvertently into a cloud and as soon as I regained VFR position I changed the request from radar vectoring back to VFR approach.

I made mistake in terms of left-right hand downwind, but other than that I had no problems.

'OK sir, I'll just photocopy your documents.' A minute later he returns and hands back the licence and the logbook and says: *'Your documents are OK sir, how can I help you now?'*

Seems total of 350 hours and 55 IR hours did the job.

OK, after 6 hours and 30 minutes flying, about time to relax bit.

Important

One more thing. It is good I landed. I estimate I had another half an hour of fuel.

Departure from Salzburg

I submitted another flight plan, this time to Ljubljana and asked for refuelling.

Knowing that I was going to climb the Alps, I was reluctant to put more than half a tank fuel, therefore I still had to land in Ljubljana.

The other reason for only getting half a tank was the cash.

The fueller could only accept cash, Euros. *'Can I use a card?'* *'No sir.'* *'Pounds?'* *'No sir.'*

OK. I was not keen to walk half a mile to the cash machines in the passenger terminal, luckily I had just enough cash for the half a tank. Not a cent more.

And now, my wife refused to board the plane.

'After six and half hours in the air I am not going anywhere without at least one hour rest and some lunch.' *'But if we stop here we will be late for Skopje and they close at 10:30 pm.'*

'I am not going anywhere without break.' *'Oh well. Let's go to the restaurant then.'*

We had nice goulash soup, some kiddy stuff for the kids and about 1.5 hours after the touch down we were airborne again, on our way to the towering Alps ahead of us.

It was around 17:00 local time. I still reckoned with 1 hour flight to Ljubljana, ½ hour refuelling and 4 hours to Skopje to arrive by 22:30.

Salzburg reporting points

For those of you intending on visiting Salzburg, they have established a number of reporting points around the airfield, about 10 in total.

Similar to the Elstree's Golf Course and Canal Bend. And you will be expected to comply with those. That was the other reason for the ATC's dissatisfaction. Not really planning a stop at Salzburg, I did not print any of the plates and I had no idea of the reporting points. Conveniently, these points are printed and available from the airport staff, so the departure presented no problem whatsoever. I was precisely on the expected route – seems my departure left much better impression than my arrival.

If anybody goes that way, I can provide you with a copy of the reporting points.

And so, got airborne and took a heading towards the HALLEIN point, after which I'd leave the zone.

The Alps

The plan was to fly direct to Klagenfurt, another major airfield on the other side of the Alps and then descend towards Ljubljana.

I intended to follow the motorway VFR between the towering peaks and without any troubles in one hour I'd be in Slovenia.

Five minutes later, I was at HALLEIN, the motorway below me and on the Wien Information frequency.

Good thing about the European countries is that their informations have access to radars, unlike London Information.

And to cut short, with a sluggish visibility I was following the motorway, not a great visibility but OK.

And finally, I was able to enjoy the Alps, nicely flying at 6000 feet. A real breathtaking view either side of the flight path.

Snow covered mountains, fluffy clouds above and their peaks sometimes visible sometimes shrouded in cloud.

Big slopes, large green valleys below, pretty villages along the road. I would thoroughly recommend the scenery for whoever happens to be passing along this way.

But, as any other beautiful thing, this was also short lived. I knew that at one point the motorway goes in a tunnel, so I thought of going over that mountain, coming out on the other side and continuing along the motorway all the way to Ljubljana. Except that particular mountain was shrouded in cloud.

Monkeys. Not again. Ah well. Seems this is not my day and I'll have to climb. There is no other way. OK then, I stopped flying forward and started my climbing orbits. Wherever possible I maintained VFR climb, but above 10000 feet that was already impossible and I continued with STRICT ORBITS IN THAT AREA to climb to 13000 feet. At that point I was almost on top of the cloud and continued to 13,200 before setting off on my way. Finally. It took me nearly one hour to reach this altitude. So much for being in Ljubljana in one hour from being airborne. Now, being VFR on the top I continued towards Ljubljana. Strange scenery, I have no regrets for climbing. Below me clouds as far as you can see, to the right clear VFR above cloud, to the left (where I needed to go) a huge vertical wall of cloud – literally. Of course Wien Information noticed that I was climbing and asked me:

'did you climb?'

'Affirm, new altitude 13200 feet for safety reasons'

'You need to ask for that'

'OK, G-TR request FL132'.

'Wait to be co-ordinated' (Sounds like airway thing, this co-ordination). A minute later,

'FL132 approved, continue to Klagenfurt' and change frequency to Klagenfurt approach xxx.xx'.

Now onto the Klagenfurt radar. What was clearly obvious to me was that the VFR cloud top was extending to the right of my path, and sooner or later I had to enter the vertical wall on my left towards Ljubljana. Of course, Klagenfurt were OK if I wanted to delay the left turn.

Slovenia

Finally, it was time to change frequency to Ljubljana approach and I had to enter the vertical cloud mass.

Not a problem, unlike Salzburg this was expected and I was prepared.

Important

One thing though, over 10000 feet the effects of hypoxia can be felt, not as badly as at 15000 feet, but considering I was already for one hour at this altitude I was already longing for descent. Impossible. Not after you enter cloud. If you regain ground contact, then yes, descend by all means. Until then you are where you are and any descents are out of the question.

Approach

OK, finally onto Ljubljana approach and I asked for radar vectoring to ILS.

Not a problem and my request was promptly followed by headings I needed to follow. My initial request to descend to 12000 feet was met with *'Negative due to high terrain in your area'*.

Five minutes later that was granted and I descended to 12000, followed by further descent to 10000, 8000, 6000. I think I already felt much better and I could notice my wife's knees going in a quiet mode.

Earlier I made the mistake of explaining a thing or two about hypoxia, which my wife took too seriously.... Of course I was fine, just a slight feel, I've been before to over 14000 over Bourn. That was not enough to re-assure my wife, only when I descended to 6000 did she calm down.

Finals

Anyway, the ATC continued to guide me and at some point they said report when localiser established. A minute later I was established, followed by continue on ILS. That was not that hard as by 4000 I broke cloud and from couple of miles out I changed to VFR approach.

Nice touch down, my wife by now fully composed, kids happy to have another break and then onto the bureaucratic procedures. My intended ½ hour break turned out into more like an hour and a half.

On the ground

GA Office

But, on the plus side, the guys at Ljubljana could not have been more helpful. An example to be desired for in these lands.

Escorted through the passport control, into the GA office, formalities, landing fee, flight plan, refuelling, back at the office to pay for the fuel, through the passport control and ready to board, expecting by midnight to be in Skopje. Then the news comes, there is a problem with the flight plan, return to the office. And the telex says: Skopje closing at 10:30 local. On the phone to Skopje but the guys would not be moved, 10:30 we close. ?~:!"£\$**&!!!! I arranged for early morning departure as soon as the airport opens, just after 6 am local time.

Change of plans

Great, if it was not for that unplanned break in Salzburg and for the longer than expected break in Ljubljana I would've made.

Gentle pressure from my wife and the airport guys (they were concerned about possible icing conditions around Bosnia (not that I was going that way anyway) and I decided to admire Ljubljana at night time and have a sleepover. Again, the escort (a full IFR pilot himself) could not have been any more helpful and organised accommodation with local inn where the pilots would normally stay.

Transport to/from the inn provided. The inn was very well presented in something that would resemble a tudor style.

Must say that for second time during that day my wife was right. As soon as I laid down, the tiredness took over I woke up hour and half later, in time for the dinner.

The dinner was fantastic, buffet style and few local meals. Very tasty and well presented.

Probably the best thing that happened that day.

Well, finally in bed and woke up early next morning for nice breakfast. Paid the bill (83 euros – about £60) for two double rooms, lavish dinner for and mammoth breakfast.

Departure from Ljubljana

Transport organised back to the airport, paid the additional 8 euros for the overnight parking, new flight plan and onto our way.

Unlike the previous day, the weather was promising. Down below in the valleys the ground was in fog, but the peaks all around were basking in nice sunshine. I was flying at 3000 VFR.

Croatia

Half an hour later I crossed the border and onto Zagreb and over the Zagreb Airfield. As I said earlier in this area the ATC is extremely well organised, not only did they know all about my flight, but also the squawk was passed around as well. I flew on a single squawk with 8 different ATCs. And of course, the guys were very helpful, accommodating, treating you like a professional but expecting professional behaviour as well.

Uneventful flight all the way to Zagreb. Unlike the earlier sunshine, now the cloud base was lowering and I descended to 2000. This was promptly noticed by Zagreb Information who reminded me that when I left the Ljubljana airport I was approved for 3000 feet.

'I am sorry, I request 2000 feet to stay VFR'.

Approved.

It did impress me. Third different ATC down the road and they knew all about the initial clearance – very efficient transfer of information. Saves you lots of talking on the radio. Now, compare this with the French experience. At that point I asked if I could simply follow the motorway VFR all the way up to Serbia at 2000 feet.

'Approved.'

There is a freedom of movement in this area, but the entire Yugoslav airspace being treated somewhat like class D in England, they would expect you to announce your intentions before going ahead and changing either the route or the altitude. And, so I continued uneventfully for the next 2.5 hours, just below the cloud base and in rain, but VFR. I already knew that at my destination the cloud base was at 5000 feet, with very thin clouds which allowed most of the sunshine through. And I was already looking forward to scenic VFR approach between the mountains.

Serbia

But, the VFR scenic flight was not to be.

By the time I got in the Serbia, the rain was still there and the rain band did not stop until Nis, half the way through Serbia.

And the mountain range was already beginning. I tried to hold VFR for as long as I could, initially following the river Sava, then the motorway to the South, but as I moved further towards the mountain range, the clouds were still at just over 2000 and the terrain was rising. Couple of times the ATC from Belgrade:

'confirm you have full ground contact'.

Finally, I had no other option but to go up and asked for the flight plan to be changed from VFR to IFR.

'Wait a minute', 'Approved and co-ordinated', 'cleared to altitude 8000 feet',

a minute later 'is altitude 9000 available to you?'

'afirm' 'cleared to 9000 feet continue IFR to the reporting point XXXXXXXX'

Now that we are in IFR, no more following roads and rivers, but along the airways direct to the en-route reporting points.

On the plus side, at 9000 feet I was VFR on the top and I could still enjoy some of the scenery.

ATC helpfulness

The only problem is that I was not planning IFR flight and therefore (with my vague atlas) I had no idea about the whereabouts for about half the reporting points. Some of the reporting points, VORs or NDBs were listed in the atlas, but not all of them. Well, this is not such a big issue as I was asking the ATC for the co-ordinates for the next reporting point or even the VOR frequency if I did not know it.

The guys were very helpful in this respect. What matters at the end, they are there to assist and regulate the air traffic. They did very good job and my job was to stick to the heading and the altitude.

The rest of the flight was very uneventful. Pity for the missed scenery, but I was hoping it will be different on the way back.

On the down side, I am just awaiting for the bill from Eurocontrol for using the airways.

Macedonia

Eventually I was passed onto Skopje approach, still at 9000 feet over the cloud I asked for radar vectoring to descend. There being mountain ranges all around me, would be foolish to do otherwise.

Got descended to 5000 feet, broke cloud and continued for uneventful right hand downwind join.

Safely on the ground, welcomed by warm and sunny weather (thin cloud layer allowing the sun through), some bureaucracy as expected, nicely through the passport control just to find out that our Macedonian passports have expired. Never mind, the British passports still did the job.

Well, the rest is just visits, family, lunches, sight-seeing and relaxing (or tiring – as the case may be) four days.