

## **NOTES ON FLYING TO ISRAEL**

*by George Irvin*

Six months ago I received an invitation to an academic conference in Tel Aviv. I had not been back to Israel for nearly thirty years and was keen to return. I took two colleagues with me, our pooled expense claims enabling us to finance the trip. The 4000 nm return trip was flown from my home base at Rotterdam (EHRD) in my Mooney M20J-201 in early April 1999.

### **Choice of Route**

There are several alternatives for routing to Eastern Greece, Cyprus and Israel. Indeed, much of what appears below is relevant for planning a flight to Cairo (a bit further south) and thence to East Africa, or for that matter going to Southern Italy, Malta and thence North Africa. Basically, it comes down to whether you want to fly over the Alps and via Romania and Turkey or whether you want to fly the (only marginally longer) southern route via Italy and Greece.

I had done the planning for two alternative routes but, in the event, NATO began bombing Yugoslavia a fortnight before the flight and the East Coast of Italy became inaccessible. Nor is April the right season for flying the Alps with two passengers at MTOW in a normally aspirated non de-iced single. In the end, I routed to Nice, Elba and down the West Coast to Reggio Calabria; then across southern Greece (AXA-TRL-MIL) to Rhodes and from there straight to Israel.

I allowed three days to get there with overnight stops in Reggio and Rhodes, but the eastbound journey could as easily have been done in two. The return routing called for overnight stops in Rhodes and Rome, with further fuelling stops in Kerkira (Corfu), Cannes and Southend. The Rome-Cannes-Southend- Rotterdam sector (1100 nm) was accomplished in 8 hours flying time on the final day.

### **Fuel**

A major planning headache is fuel availability and price. With Bari and Brindisi closed, Rome Ciampino and Reggio were the only two places in Italy where the availability of 100LL avgas was certain. AOPA-I provided invaluable advice on this matter; eg, note that you may be asked to pay your fuel bills in cash, so be prepared to travel with a wadge of dollars. (AMEX credit cards are accepted by AGIP in Rome.)

As for Greece, because the price of fuel is nearly USD 3 per litre (about USD 12 per gallon!) irrespective of destination, I was tempted to fly the 900 nm from southern Italy to Cyprus non-stop. But this was cutting it a bit fine, and in the event my two passengers wanted to stop in Rhodes. My fuel uplift there was strictly limited to the 2.5 hours' worth to get to Israel plus reserves.

## **Charts**

The charts for Southern Europe and the Med are Jep (Lo) 5-6, 7-8, 9-10 and Jep ME (Hi/Lo) 1-2 for Rhodes eastwards. Flight planning can be greatly simplified by using a program such as NAVTOR. Before leaving home, I print windless PLOGs and FPLs for all possible routes, staple the lot together and carry it with me. This avoids the need for spreading charts over the dinner table and your companions while calculating furiously, or even worse, working in the hotel until the wee small hours while the wife murmurs darkly about divorce.

The usual first stop on the Mediterranean route is Nice. A good tip is to stop at Cannes Mandelieu instead, using Nice as the alternate. Cannes is only a VFR airfield so it's smaller, nicer and far cheaper than Nice; also, if you fax them the relevant names and passport numbers, *Messieurs les Gendarmes* are more likely to be co-operative. But keep the STAR for Nice beside you since you may be asked to hold at intersections not shown on the Nice area chart. Even had Bari and Brindisi been open, an Italian PPL-IR colleague suggested these cities were best avoided.

Reggio, by contrast, is a most pleasant town. But the airport MSA is 8000' and the approach onto R-31 requires flying an LDA approach to the MM followed by a 30 degrees left turn onto the runway. If you don't turn left in time, you plough straight into terrain. GA pilots wishing to fly into Reggio are required to fax the authorities a certificate attesting to having received a "ground familiarisation session."

## **Simulator Training**

I consulted an acquaintance who flies 747s for KLM about this and, alas, no-one could be found who had flown into Reggio. In the end, I settled for a session using my own dedicated PC simulator, following which I despatched a somewhat dubious fax to the Italian authorities attesting to my mastery of the approach. I never learned what became of my fax, but by the time I got to Reggio night had descended and so had the cloud base. Squinting at my approach plate, I crossed the beacon at 6000', let down in four steps to D-11 outbound, turned inbound onto the localiser and eventually broke cloud before the dreaded MM and its associated hair-raising missed approach procedure.

I shudder to think what flying this approach would be like in rough weather. The lead-in and runway lights were as sparkingly clear as on my PC simulator. But like the simulated airport, the real airport had no taxiway lights. Tower instructed me to hold position and to await the arrival of somebody with a torch who would come to the edge of the runway and lead me off it. And that, good reader, is how eventually I vacated R-31 at LICR.

## **The Harsh Reality**

The next morning brought a quite different revelation. Picture coasting along in a pure azure sky two miles above the terraced landscape towards a shimmering sea, half lost in reverie. Bit by bit, I am tugged back to a harsher reality by a change in the background radio chatter. As we fly eastward, Italian call-signs and accents are gradually being obliterated by a cacophony of Nato voices. One aircraft is requesting a diplomatic

clearance code for Bari, another is told to expect an hour's delay because Tirana airport is full, a third announces itself as "Kosovo four three zero" bound towards some obscure northerly waypoint.

The lone voice of the Brindisi sector's lone controller tautens audibly as he attempts to deal with a mounting backlog of requests. Lower airspace is kept clear to accommodate the busy nearby air bases. Nato's airforce, unseen but in full command below, streams out towards the nearby Adriatic coast to unleash bombs and missiles upon unhappy Yugoslavia. While I sit up here in the gentle morning sunshine, just over the horizon to the north-east buildings are exploding, bridges are tumbling and more hapless innocents are seeking desperately to flee this computer-guided barrage. For an instant I recall my own experience of the chaos of aerial attack. Just as quickly, I put it out of my mind and return to scanning the gauges and other housekeeping tasks of flying. Where did I leave off?... ah yes, in Reggio.

### **Handling Recommended**

Now that Italy is part of the Schengen area, customs is no longer a problem — but the Italian airport authorities have found ways to take up the slack. In some forgotten Ministry in Rome, doubtless there exists an entire floor is dedicated to inventing all manner of forms for airmen, each to be completed in triplicate, signed and countersigned. By the time I returned to Italy a week later, I was wiser and positively welcomed compulsory handling by Rome Ciampino.

The service in Rome is dear but excellent. They even arrange accommodation at a local crew hotel, the Villa Giullia, with transport provided by the *patrone*. The Villa is located barely a 100 metres from the local train station from where it is mere 15 minutes to *Termini*, Rome's central station.

On this trip, it is Rhodes Diagoras that takes the bureaucratic biscuit. Unless you accept the non-compulsory Olympic Airways service, you can count on an absolute minimum of two hours to get through the airport. Upon arrival, I am directed to speak to an officious lady at Olympic Flight Ops about my General Declaration form. "You weesh our handleeng ...?" she enquires hopefully, unable to conceal her delight at the prospect of earning a hundred dollar bill for so little service. I reply politely that I do not. This is greeted by a slow, wry smile with a hint of gold fillings, a smile bearing the unmistakable message that I shall live to regret my words.

And so I do! I haul my flight bag, cases and weary passengers to and from flight planning and customs offices at opposite ends of half a mile of tarmac, and then to the border police to stamp the GenDec and eventually back to my point of departure. When finally we are done, the lady instructs us to arrive in good time the next day. The same procedure will be required for departure! Dear God, Rhodes may be a beautiful island, but one would be well advised to travel there by charter. Corfu is equally beautiful, but since we stop there for fuel alone, I am spared further bureaucratic encounters. On a positive note, in Greece my BP fuel card was accepted in place of a bundle of dollars

### **Greek Mountains**

Another tip about flying in Greece: crossing the mountains, which in places rise to 8000 feet, is not to be taken lightly. Outbound, much of this leg was flown in IMC at FL 130 on my portable O2 bottle. This level enabled me to reach sufficiently cold air to minimize the risk of icing while keeping the passengers just barely conscious. Mercifully, the return leg over the same terrain at FL100 (the base of the airway) bucking a 40 kt headwind was flown in VMC. At one stage the down-draughts in the lee of high ridges overpowered my maximum rate of climb, forcing me beneath the airway into VFR-style mountain flying. Almost as serious was the difficulty of maintaining contact with Greek ATC.

### **Greek ATC**

Unusually I am told, Greek radar was serviceable, rendering old-fashioned position reports and estimates unnecessary. But on some legs, it was clear than nobody beneath FL245 was maintaining steady radio contact. Where necessary, I relayed messages through commercial flights or used published joint military and civilian approach frequencies. During the dozen hours I spent in Greek airspace taking to half as many different Athens sector frequencies, I am quite certain that I talked to the same two duty controllers, so familiar did their voices become during those times when communication was feasible. When, if ever, you may well ask will the EU enjoy a fully integrated ATC system?

By contrast, contact with Cyprus ATC was perfectly clear, but then the leg was over water. Flying the direct route from Rhodes to Tel Aviv, the VOR needles soon start to flap about. In the old days, one soldiered on by DR (see T. Nathan, *Pilot*, Apr. 1988). Today there is the miracle of GPS.

To fly in Israeli airspace, one needs prior permission. This comes in the form of a number faxed to you by Israeli CAA, which you place as a remark on the flight plan. ATC handoff will be about 80 miles before landfall at LEDRA.

### **Jerusalem!**

From here, the routing into Jerusalem passes straight over a cordon of Tel Aviv beach-front hotels, over Ben Gurion International and its VOR and on to the procedural ILS at Jerusalem's Atarot airport, a small ex-military field a few kilometers beyond the Green Line. As we cross the airport's NDB, just to the south the gold of the Dome of the Rock glimmers from the centre of the old city; the sprawl of Jerusalem's Western hills comes into view as do Mount Scopus, the Mount of Olives, the dusty yellow of the Eastern hills and *wadis* and the great bowl of the Dead Sea to the far South.

On a clear day, the panorama is quite breathtaking. *Yerushelaim, shel zahar* ... these few minutes alone sweep away the accumulated tiredness of three days' flying. And then, the procedure turn complete, the runway appears through the heat shimmer and we soon are taxiing towards the small terminal. Customs formalities are brief and the landing and parking charges a third the price of those at LLBG. The fuel is mercifully cheap, but cash is obligatory.

### **The Return Flight**

Six days later we depart Atarot for the 2000 nm return flight. At dusk on *Shabat*, we spiral up over the NDB and head out towards the Med and Rhodes on what will be a magical moonlit night. Some final tips: you cannot file a flight plan in Jerusalem; it must be faxed into Ben Gurion and the number is available from the ever-efficient Airport Manager. There is almost no bureaucracy at Atarot, but wait until 24 hours before take-off to file. Equally, it's a good idea to arrange for a car rental firm in Jerusalem to deliver and collect the car at the airport; getting to and from the centre by bus is impossible and by taxi costs a fortune. But then flying privately to Israel is not cheap. Doing some rough sums, I found it cost me considerably more than flying to Canada and back (see my piece in *Pilot*, Dec. 1998).

### **A Few Sightseeing Tips**

As to what to do and see in Israel? For starters, go to the Old City, then Bethlehem, up to Haifa and Mt. Carmel, to Tiberius and Upper Galilee and the Golan beyond, down to the Dead Sea, to En Gedi, Mazada, Be'er Sheva, the Negev, Sta. Caterina and Eilat—perhaps one day, even Nablus and Hebron under peaceful Palestinian rule. But that is a topic for another piece and not, alas, for these hastily jotted notes.