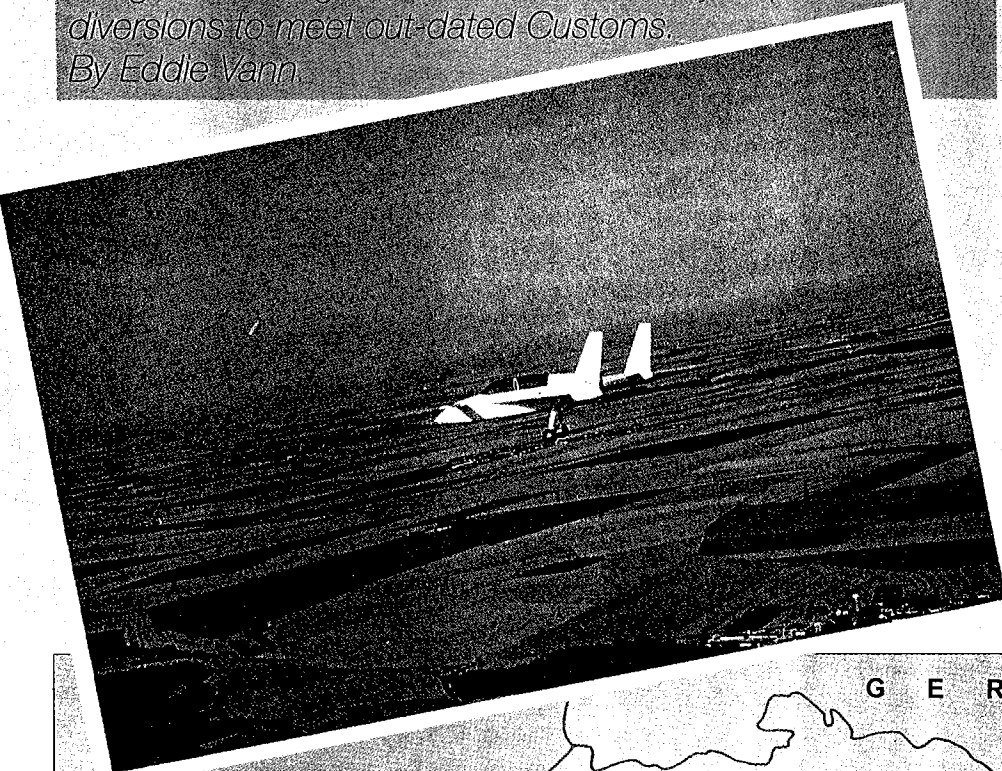


ALPINE TOUR BY LONG-EZ

Switzerland and Northern Italy offer spectacular scenery, with gin-clear alpine air and lowland haze, and tricky navigation through narrow mountain valleys—plus a few diversions to meet out-dated Customs.

By Eddie Vann



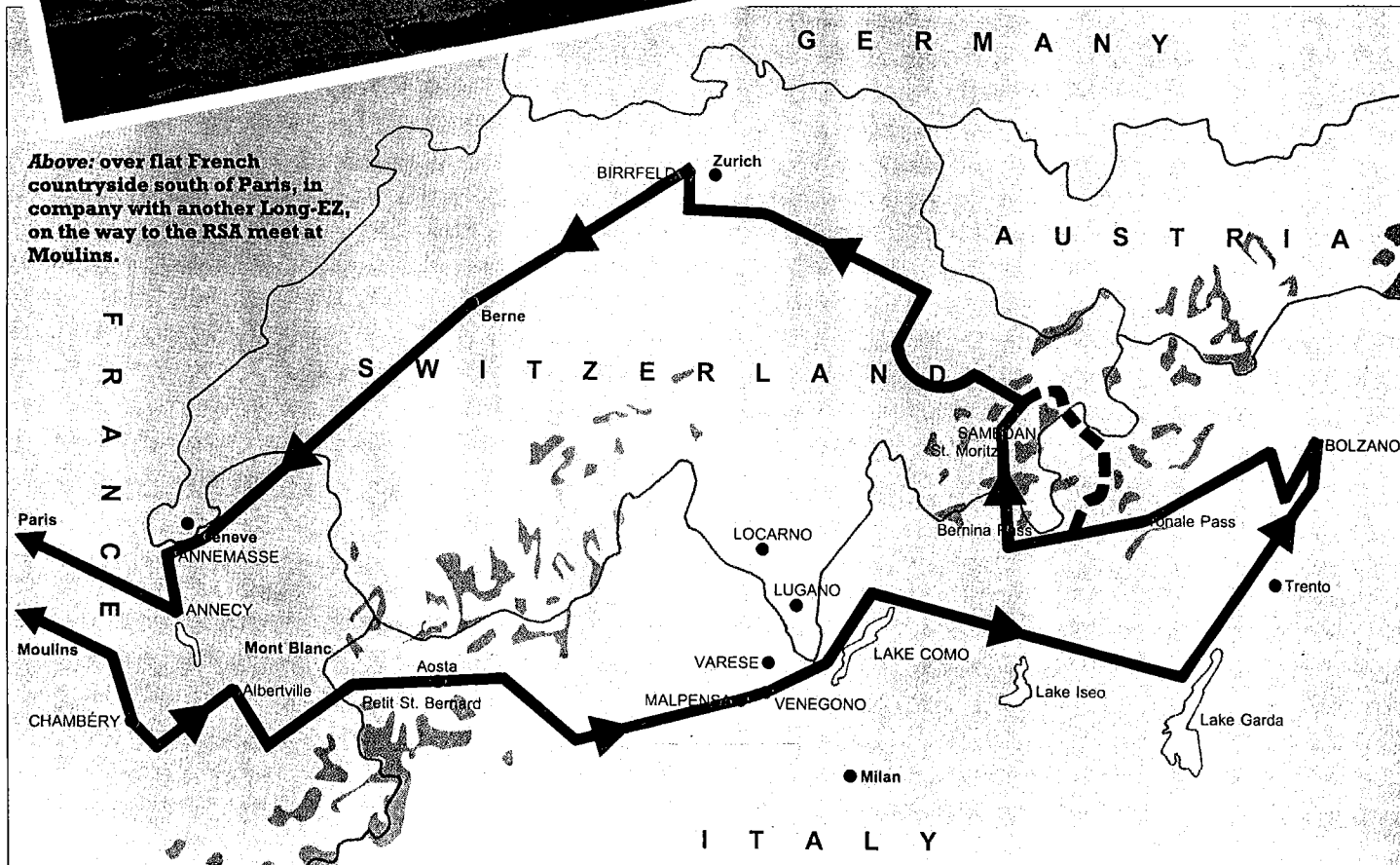
When we finally worked out where we were, it was thanks to the map we had been given by the car rental company, and not the one-million-scale ONC aeronautical chart that I had bought especially for the trip. The line of three lakes before us, stepped up in the direction 120° to 300°, corresponded to nothing I could find on the chart, but my companion, Mireille, who was following our progress from the back seat on the Hertz map, could see that we were over a previously unknown town in Italy; it was Mireille that determined the course to our destination and ended the half hour period of 'position uncertain'. Sighs of relief.

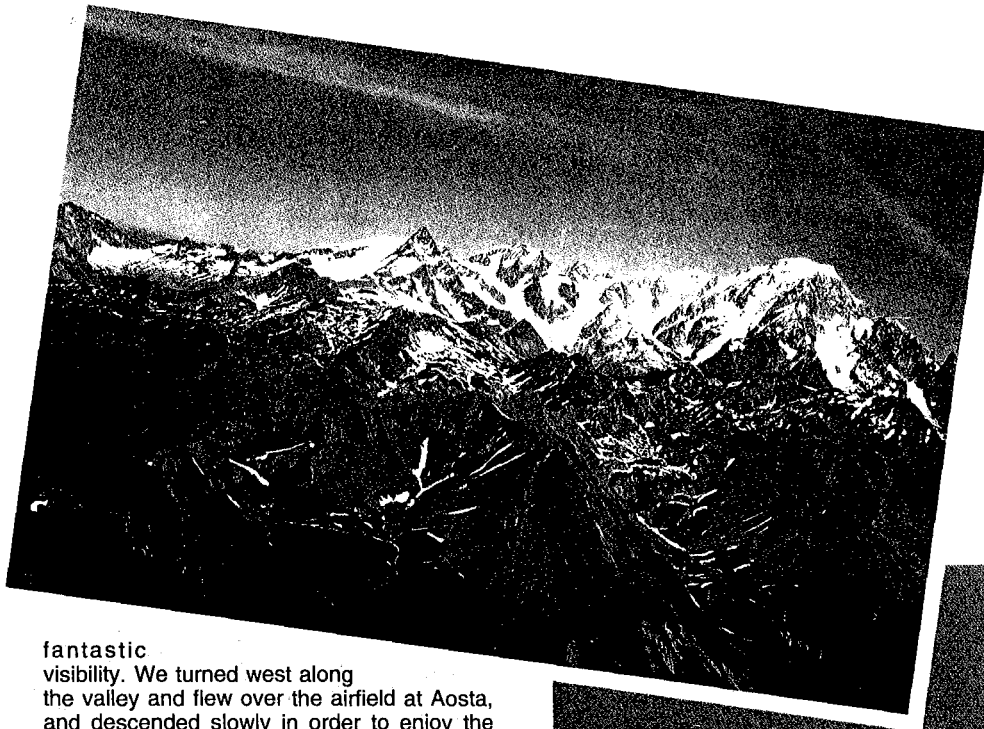
Our vacation trip in my Long-EZ, loaded with tent, mattress, sleeping bags and personal effects started with a flight from Toussus-le-Noble near Paris to Moulins, in company with friends in another Long-EZ and a TB20, to attend the French Sport Aviation Fly-in on Saturday 25th of July. This was blessed with much better weather than Wroughton and made a great day out.

From Moulins we continued on our own to Chambéry, where we took advantage of the superb hotel right at the airport to get into vacation mode and start on our suntans. With assurances of 'no-problem' from Chambéry's Met office we filed a flight plan departing on the Monday for Milan's Malpensa airport. We named Venegono as the alternate, hoping to persuade the controllers to fix Customs so that we could go direct to Venegono, which is a more suitable general aviation airport but does not normally have Customs.

Flying from Chambéry over Albertville and on up the winding valleys to the Petit St. Bernard pass was really beautiful, and we crossed the pass from south to north into Italy flying at 11,000 feet, with the beautiful massif of Mont Blanc seemingly just off the wingtip in

Above: over flat French countryside south of Paris, in company with another Long-EZ, on the way to the RSA meet at Moulins.





fantastic visibility. We turned west along the valley and flew over the airfield at Aosta, and descended slowly in order to enjoy the spectacular vista of the Bernese Oberland spread out to the north, with the Matterhorn as its central feature.

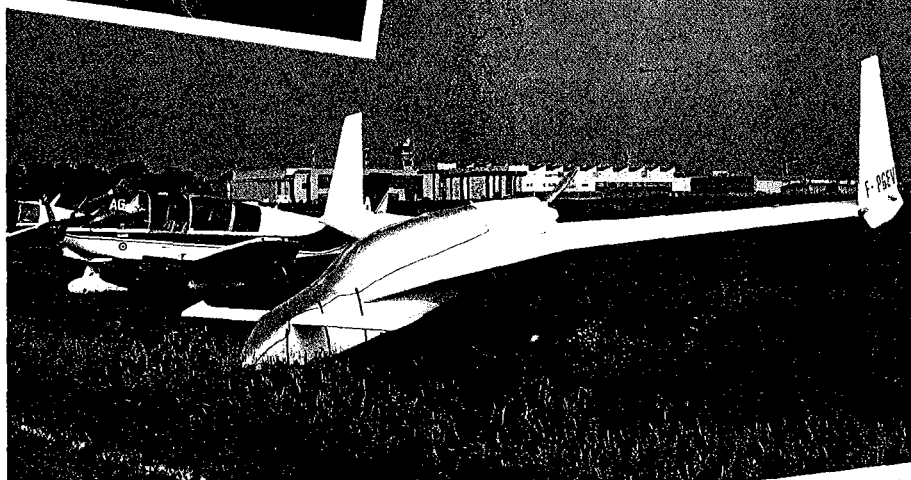
The eastern end of the valley of Aosta turns south to lead into the north Italian plain, and we could see a thick mixture of cloud and haze entering the mouth of the valley. It was clear that we were changing to a completely different airmass for which the Met man at Chambéry had not prepared us. We continued in the direction of the valley until well clear of the mountains, before turning towards Malpensa.

Airspace restrictions dictated that we descend into the soup, and we pressed on with visibility down to two or three miles. Happily we were receiving the VOR at Malpensa, but we never did get any change from the DME—and of course the first thing the Milan area controller asked us for was our distance to run. I busily invented reporting points and ETAs for them, and the controller seemed happy and passed us over to Malpensa tower when we were five miles out. The lady in the tower seemed less happy and was very busy, so I found myself circling just west of the field for twenty minutes before being cleared to land after, but in the opposite direction to, a DC-10. The excitement level had been sufficient that I had not added to it by trying for an airborne Customs clearance.

The general aviation parking at Malpensa is a long way from the terminal, and when a smart shuttle bus appeared to collect us I winced at the implications for the landing fee. However, we spent an hour and a half using the facilities of this large international airport and they let us out for about £20, which seemed reasonable. The various places we were obliged to go in the process of completing the necessary formalities were spread around the airport, and at one point we were refused access airside to regain the aeroplane. On the other hand there was a very nice chap in Operations who was very helpful, and we quizzed him about the possibility of an improvement in the visibility. His prognosis was that limited visibility is the norm in the Po valley throughout most of the year. If the haze clears, it's only to make way for the fog.

very helpful indeed. The Aero-club de Varese is a well-equipped and well-organised operation which does a lot of commercial pilot training. The starting aircraft is an Italian 172 look-alike, and the fleet goes up to Partenavia twins. Everything seemed clean and well-organised, although we were told that one has to be a masochist to persist with recreational flying in Italy.

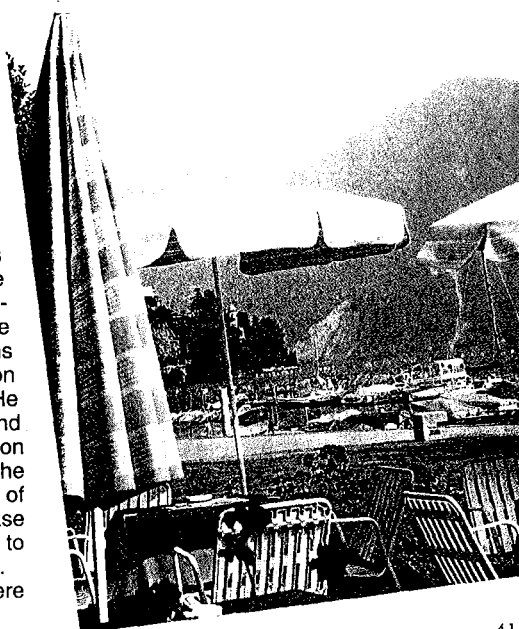
In view of the really awful visibility we had decided to tour the lakes by rented car rather than by Long-EZ, but it seemed that in order to rent a car we would have to go to Varese, about fifteen miles to the north. A chap from the aero-club gave us a lift to the station and we took a slow, wooden-seated commuter train into Varese where we found a rental car after a comic-opera taxi race against closing time across Varese. That night we found a crowded camp site on the shores of Lac de ►



The Bernese Oberland in fantastic visibility, with the Matterhorn in the centre; the Long-EZ parked and covered at Venegono, with the Aermacchi factory behind; beautiful Lake Lugano with a build-up forming over the mountains behind.

Once cleared Special VFR to Venegono, we taxied miles to the threshold and lined up to hold behind a landing DC-8. After the statutory wait to avoid wake turbulence we took off into the worsening visibility and climbed to the allotted 1,000 feet, before reaching the VOR, which was about mid-runway. Thus it was easy to turn on course with an accurate departure time for a flight of just eight nautical miles. The controller spent so much time giving me complicated routing instructions that we were turning over our destination before I could get a word in edgeways. He let me QSY, and we were cleared to land with the warning that there were cables on the runway. The cables turned out to be the arrester variety, as Venegono is the home of Aermacchi and the cables are there in case an AMX loses its brakes. We parked close to an AMX test aircraft which was warming up.

We consulted the aero-club staff, who were



Varese, which was OK, but swimming was not allowed in the lake due to pollution. The next day, after taking a look at the lovely little gliding airfield of Calcinate del Pesce and deciding not to bring the Long-EZ there, we went to Lake Maggiore, where we did swim, and followed the eastern shore over the Swiss frontier to Locarno for an ice cream. The activity at Locarno airfield looked interesting, with the civilian traffic fully-mixed with the Swiss Air Force Pilatus trainers.

That night we crossed back into Italy and camped near Parlezza, by Lake Lugano, after having filled the car's tank with petrol at Swiss prices in Lugano. The following day we drove around lake Como and so back to Varese, to leave the car and brave the train to Venegono. We dined regally in the restaurant in the clubhouse on the airfield, although the price was pretty steep, and pitched the tent in the gathering dusk near the aircraft. I always feel a special magic



when I sleep next to my aircraft, and the following morning I was eager to get airborne and continue our trip in the best possible way. The weather, however, did not share my enthusiasm, and the early morning vis was only one or two kilometres. Nobody commented, though, when I filed a flight 'authorisation' (not a flight plan), since it is probably always thick haze throughout the summer.

Venegono was unable to provide Customs for us to leave Italy for Switzerland, and we were not keen to tackle the immensity and bustle of Malpensa a second time, so we decided to go to Bolzano, which I had never heard of previously. The contrast between the constraints of Customs clearances in a light aircraft and the ease of the same in a car was really highlighted during this trip. We took off with about two kilometres vis and used a radial from Malpensa VOR to find Lake Como; from there we headed east, passing north of Lake Iseo to overfly Lake Garda. We followed this to its north-east end, and then cut east to join the autostrada running north-east past Trento, with what looked like a good airport, and so to Bolzano. We landed off a right-hand circuit, only to be told that right-hand was reserved for the military and the big stuff, and that we should have

Glaciers and ragged cu over the Cima Presanella, south-east of the Tonale pass; Samedan airfield—a gliding paradise; colourful Swiss bank in St. Moritz.

taken a left-hand circuit, hugging the mountains.

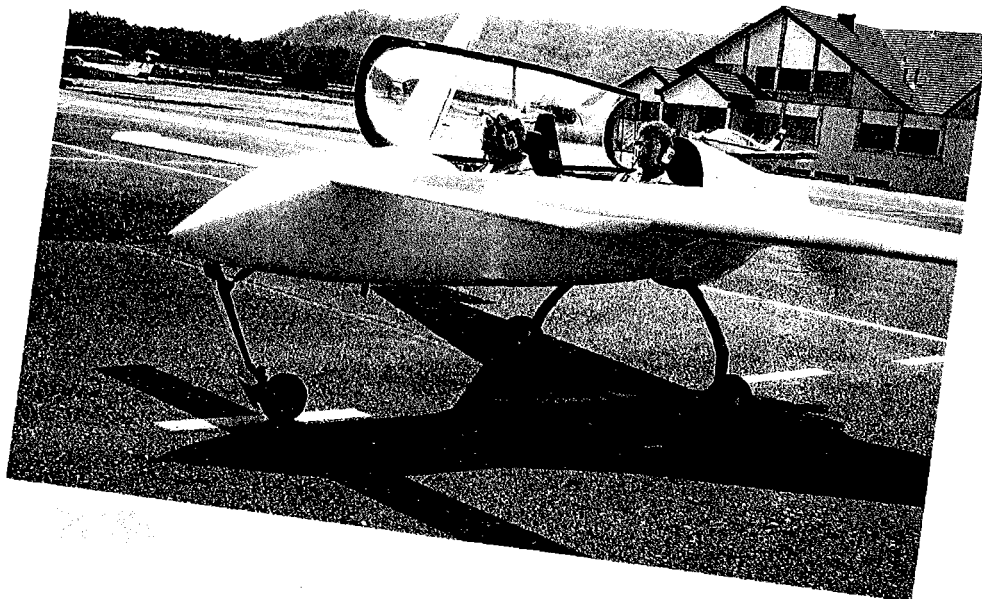
Once he had torn me off a strip, in excellent English, the controller became quite friendly, and during the course of our conversation looked in the latest edition of the ICAO aircraft type identifier list and showed me that there is now an identifier for the Long-EZ: VZ10. This means that I no longer have to mark ZZZZ in the identifier box and write 'Aircraft Type Long-EZ' below, but it remains to be seen if it will stop the frequent calls from controllers, "Echo Victor, say again your aircraft type?"

We stayed in a delightful hotel close to the airport, where we made the most of the pool and dined really well on Tyrolean-style dishes. It was fairly expensive, as was all of our stay in Italy, but the real surprise came the following morning when we bought fuel and



found that it was equivalent to 10.75 French francs (about £1.10 at that time) per litre. The re-fueller was almost proud to tell me that avgas in Italy is the most expensive in Europe—which reminded us of the comment at Venegono about masochism. Happily we did not need too much (45 litres), as the next leg was only to Samedan, where the Engadine pass descends to St. Moritz in Switzerland.

The logical VFR route from Bolzano to Samedan is not possible because of a large restricted area along the border with Austria; so we climbed out of Bolzano south-east down the valley towards Trento, and then turned north-west up another valley to Lake Guistina, after which we headed about 250° along the valley of the Sole Noce and over the Tonale pass towards Teglio—where we were to turn north over the Bernina pass to St. Moritz and Samedan.

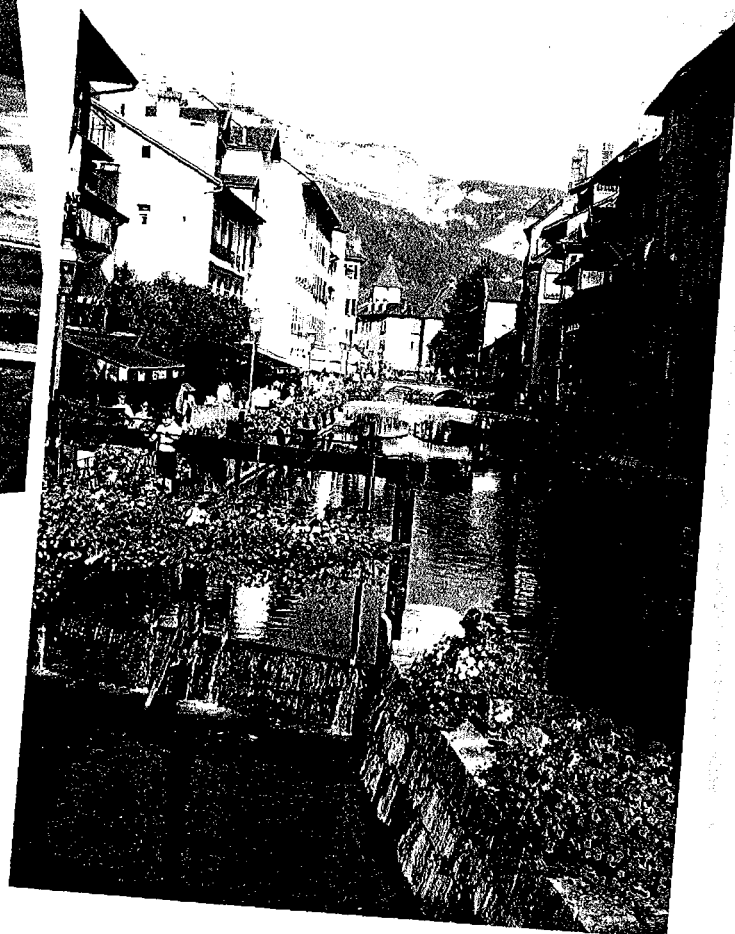


Above: 'Birrfield is so neat and tidy you feel obliged to taxi and park on the white lines!'.



I took a time-check at the north corner of Lake Guistina and calculated my true air-speed (by now we were at 8,000 feet and the air temperature had dropped to 25°C), in order to predict my arrival over Toglio. We were making the flight visually, which meant following the valleys, which are narrow in this part of the central Alps, whilst avoiding the rocks. This constraint kept us in the gin-clear air at nine or ten thousand feet, from where it was very difficult to pick out the landmarks and follow the railways in the haze below; it was also impossible to be sure of the wind speed and direction at our altitude.

Above: departing Samedan, where the Long-EZ needed most of the 1,800 metre runway. Right: flowers everywhere and the purest lake water at Annecy.



On our ETA for Toglio there was indeed a town below, although I could not reconcile all the indications on the map with the ground. In addition, there were well developed cumuli sitting on the peaks directly to the north, our supposed track, and I really did not want to mix clouds and mountains. Thus I took a heading of 315° which kept me clear of cloud and took me, so I thought, into Switzerland, to the west of Samedan. After fifteen minutes we came to an inhabited valley running 240° to 060°, which corresponded with nothing on the ONC map, and I regretted not having found a half-million or even a quarter-million map of this part of the Alps. However, since I was sure that our goal was to the east, I turned right up the valley. When we reached a branch to the north it seemed that it might be the Engadine, but when, after ten minutes, it petered-out amongst the rocky wilderness that was the norm, I about-turned and regained the unknown valley and continued following it north-east until it gradually turned north.

By now the questions from the back seat were becoming more frequent and more difficult to answer, but I pressed on for a further fifteen minutes until we came to the town of Bormio, and the lakes of my opening paragraph. Once we had established our position we were able to enjoy the spectacular scenery as we descended in the valley, looking out for gliders, and turned over St. Moritz before touching down on Samedan's superb 1,800 metre runway.

Once in the flight office I bought a beautifully clear half-million map of ➤

Switzerland, which also covered the route we had just flown, and by studying this we were able to see that we had turned north short of Teglio, at Edolo and Sonico, and so were east of Samedan and not west. Our meanderings had been entirely in Italy and not in Switzerland at all. The flight was not so worrying as my writing implies, because we had clear skies above and could have easily climbed to fifteen or sixteen thousand feet and, with over two hours of fuel in the aeroplane, flown north to the Zurich area or south to the Milan area with no problem other than elements of embarrassment. It was only my determination to make the flight visually that gave us a little excitement.

Samedan is a superb place to visit by light aircraft. Since it is so deep in the Alps simply finding the place is exciting, and the location at the junction of two deep valleys, near the lake of St. Moritz, is really beautiful. Although the altitude is 1,707 metres (over 5,000 feet), the runway has good clear approaches and requires no special skill, apart from an awareness of the greater turn radius and reduced rate of climb. All types of aircraft are welcome at reasonable costs. Gliders are winch-launched from beside the runway, which is used by powered aircraft up to the bizjets of the St. Moritz crowd.

Our visit coincided with a major polo tournament which created a lot of bizjet traffic. We camped with the glider pilots among the trees at the side of the runway and had a rather shivery night with our minimal camping gear. We visited St. Moritz for the afternoon and evening and dined well for a reasonable

price, although it is clear that there is considerable potential for emptying one's pockets. Throughout the afternoon the mountains draw a good breeze up the valley, which helps take-offs in the afternoon temperatures—and also makes the lake very popular for wind-surfing.

The next leg was to visit friends who lived near Zurich; so we used the sport airfield of Birrfeld. Our flight from Samedan took us, in the excellent visibility of the northern Alps, down the valleys via Chur and the Walensee to the eastern end of the Zurichsee, from where we headed west and then north to remain clear of controlled airspace. It was a very relaxed and enjoyable flight with good and efficient co-operation from the Swiss controllers, although once again we were troubled by reduced visibility near our destination. Birrfeld is very busy with both gliding and power, has no tower, and has a rather odd joining procedure. Everything is very neat and tidy and many of the aircraft are equipped with silencers, three- or four-bladed propellers, or other noise-reduction mods. Luckily no one made any comments on the four open exhaust pipes on my Long-EZ.

After a great weekend with our friends, including a visit to Butwil, which is a sort of Swiss Old Warden complete with a joy-riding An-2, we filed a flight-plan from Birrfeld (where we were cleared Customs outbound by telephone) to Annemasse, near Geneva but in France. We flew most of the length of Switzerland under fair-weather cumulus, finishing with superb views of Lake Geneva and the city fountain. We had wanted to go direct-

DON'T FLY WITHOUT YOUR POOLEYS

ly to Annecy, but as Customs was not available there we had been obliged to land at Annemasse for the formalities. Once landed we were scolded, as no flight-plan had been received and it took considerable insistence to assure the flying club, which runs the airfield, that we had filed. Once I had got the message home the tone changed, and we were on our way without seeing the Customs man: fifty French francs and an hour—spent for nothing.

The hop across to Annecy took twenty minutes, and we enjoyed the last two days of our holiday cycling around and swimming in the lake that sets off this lovely mountain city.

Early on the Wednesday evening we took off for the last leg, climbing until north of Lac du Bourget and flying around the south end of the Grand Colombier mountain, below the level of VOR CBY, which is on the peak at more than 5,000 feet; then we crossed the Saône valley and tracked over ATN VOR in the Morvan hills. This flight back to Toussus was pleasantly uneventful and we landed in the late evening calm, full of wonderful memories. Roll on the next trip.

MENTOR
Plus

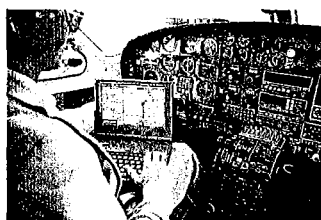
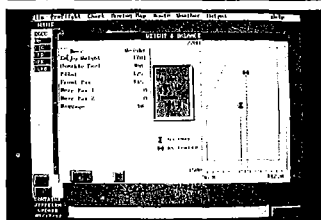
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