



Masochismo Over The Big Water

Probable joy, possible terror: A day in the life of a seasoned ferry pilot

By Bill Cox

As this is written, it's about four hours to flight time on another of those dreaded/wonderful ferry trips. This one will take me halfway around the world from Bismarck, N.D. to Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on the Persian Gulf. In four hours, I'll jet out of LAX for Bismarck, pick up a 1969 Beech Duke from Weather Modifications, Inc. and fly it to Lakeland, Fla. where it will be tanked and fitted with HF and Loran for the trip across the North Atlantic.

As some readers may know, I've done this sort of thing before (in fact, five trips in this particular airplane to the Middle East), and I'm often asked what kind of death wish possesses me to fly an airplane that's old enough to vote and others to the opposite side of the world, not just once but, at last count, 50 times.

I guess the answer is that it's a kind of masochistic fun. I do it part-time, when there are holes in my editorial schedule here at *PLANE & PILOT*, but I know many of the pilots who do it for a living, and they almost universally regard it as unglamorous, uncomfortable and certainly not the most fun way to spend time in an airplane. Still, it has its rewards, some of them monetary and others not so tangible.

On this trip, I'll pick up the Duke in Bismarck in the afternoon, do a careful preflight (since I'll spend the next week in the airplane) and launch for Globe Aero in Lakeland, Fla., probably arriving late that night. The next morning, while I arrange for a return airline ticket,



sort through stacks of low altitude en route charts and approach plates for Europe and the Middle East, check on overflight clearances for Egypt and Saudi Arabia and put together the right combination of cash and travelers' checks for the trip (credit cards often aren't accepted overseas), the wizards at Globe will remove all the upholstery except for the front two seats, wire three 80-gallon tanks into place in the aft fuselage and fit the airplane with a temporary HF radio. I'll test fly the airplane to make certain the ferry fuel system works; then, load it up for an early morning departure the following day.

With 442 gallons of fuel aboard, the Duke will be about 1000 pounds over gross for the long overwater legs (legally so under a ferry permit). That much fuel will allow me about 11 hours endurance for a no-wind, no-reserve range of nearly 2000 nm. Fortunately, my longest leg is only about 1400 nm, so I should have at least a two-hour reserve on that hop.

I'll depart Lakeland early in the morning for Bangor, Maine, 1200 nm up the East Coast. After refueling in Bangor and

checking the weather in Newfoundland, I'll jump back off the ground for the 700-nm hop up to St. Johns on the far upper right corner of North America.

Granted reasonable winds and acceptable weather, I'll depart early the next morning for Santa Maria, Azores, 1372 nm away, with all tanks topped. Climb performance at full ferry weight won't be anything to write home about, probably no more than 500 fpm initially.

If you wonder why a 225-knot Duke should require eight hours to cover 1372 nm (average speed—171 knots), remember that the airplane will be flying at a weight of nearly 8000 pounds compared to a normal gross of 6725 pounds. I won't be able to climb as high at this weight, and because of the extra pounds and the resulting angle of attack, the airplane will be notably slower, at least for the first four or five hours of the trip.

Because I'll be flying a pressurized Duke, I'll probably be at 17,000 feet or higher, fortunately tall enough to stay out of the ice. Normally aspirated airplanes must slog through the freezing water down low, but up high in mid-

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winter, the atmospheric over the North Atlantic are typically frigid IFR. The temperature is normally so cold that airframe icing isn't much of a problem.

After an overnight in Santa Maria, I'll hop the last 800 nm of Atlantic to my European landfall over Lisbon, Portugal, track northeast to Madrid, Spain and land at Palma, Spain on the island of Majorca after a mere 1319-nm flight.

Out of Majorca the following morning, it will be on across Sardinia and the boot of Italy to Athens, Greece, listening to successive controllers talking at least five languages (and sometimes even English). Winds and weather over the Meditteranian are usually good in winter if you're eastbound, so good that the military plays war games out over the water on a regular basis. I've seen everything from aircraft carriers to nuclear submarines cruising the gentle seas below, and I've been looked over in flight carefully by F-14s on two occasions. Somehow, it's comforting to know the fighters are out there somewhere, even if it's unlikely I'd ever need military help.

It's only 986 nm from Palma, Majorca to Athens, and after a refuel and an overnight, I'll continue to Cairo or Luxor, Egypt in what are nearly always severe clear conditions. (One infrequent but interesting weather glitch over Cairo, however, is icing. When there are clouds, they typically hold plenty of moisture, and if you're high enough and it's cold enough, you'll often encounter airframe ice. Because the air contains so much sand and dust from the Sahara below, the ice will form a muddy brown coat on the wings and windshield. We call it ice mud.)

Like most Middle Eastern countries, Egypt requires specific overflight and landing permission. I'll cross the African coast at Alexandria, fly south to Cairo and land at the gigantic airport in the sand south of the city.

The next day, I'll make the final leg down the Gulf of Suez past the disputed Sinai Peninsula to the Red Sea, cross over into Saudi Arabia and set course across the incredibly bleak Nafud Desert toward Riyadh and my destination of Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. Fortunately, no one is shooting at anyone over there this month, so if the airplane continues to run well and the typical Saharan weather remains hot and clear, my last leg should be one of my easiest.

The Weather Modifications Duke will spend four months seeding clouds under contract to the U.A.E. government, and I'll probably be flying back to pick it up for the return trip to Bismarck in early June.