

Making it in Macedonia

It's always good to end a project on a high note. However, I never thought when I accepted an assignment in Macedonia (the Former Yugoslav Republic of, for Greek nationalists amongst you) that I would literally get high. I had assumed that the four months based in Skopje over the last ten months would mean I would not see inside the cockpit of a glider until well into the present season.

This seemed justified until walking in Skopje city centre one February night for dinner, I saw a large painting of a glider across the front of an office building. Crossing the road to check, I found a sign above the entrance announcing the Skopje Aero Club – and the door open! Beyond a small hall was another open door leading into – a bar! With the walls plastered with photos of all sorts of military, commercial and sporting aircraft, half a dozen guys were busy relaxing. One spoke broken English and explained that the club catered for anyone interested in aviation and I was taken on a tour of their premises – above the bar were lecture and meeting rooms and on the ground floor, an office and workshop for making models, etc – all in the city centre! They told me the premises had belonged to the Yugoslavian government in the good old days when they supported young people wanting to learn to fly in return for recruiting pilots into the military or national airline. After the collapse of Yugoslavia, and the creation of an independent Macedonia in 1991, pilots transporting senior government officials persuaded them to allow the club to retain its premises and this was agreed, providing they only used them for non-commercial purposes.

Every evening, the premises are busy with instructors giving lectures to students, children making models and pilots having putting the bar to good use. The airfield itself was about 4 miles outside the city at Stenkovic, with a 1200m grass strip and a large hangar housing a range of aircraft from two Robins, a super Blanik, two VUK-T single seaters (made in Serbia), an ultra-light and a massive red Antonov 2 biplane used by parachutists. The VUK-Ts were standard class gliders with a 1:32 glide angle of which 150 were made.

Club members went out of their way to welcome me and asked what I flew. Somebody had a large scale radio-controlled ASW28, so were suitably impressed when hearing I had a full size 27. I was told that before I could fly solo I would need a Macedonian pilot's license which would entail a JAA medical. Last year's medical for La Motte was about to expire, so when I went home for a week, I managed to update that and returned with my logbook to apply for the license. The club CFI, Gjeorgi Ivanov conveniently worked for the local CAA and after various forms were completed and several visits later, I became the first ever British glider pilot to possess a Macedonian license!

Club president Dejan Sazdovski was particularly helpful in both getting me the license and getting me to the airfield. The director of a successful business at the ripe age of 32, he spent almost all his time working to make the club a success. After inheriting a deficit of E25,000 over a year ago, he had reduced that to E10,000 by the start of this year by selling flying charges in advance and encouraging fellow members to reduce outgoings by undertaking all servicing and routine site maintenance. This year he plans to achieve an operating surplus of E30,000 out of a turnover of E45,000, despite the constraints imposed by the CAA. He helped create the same positive and friendly atmosphere we enjoy at Dunstable. They also made it very clear that they would extend a very warm welcome to anyone from LGC visiting them for the superb wave flying possibilities in the surrounding mountains. The only adjustment necessary would be for non-smokers – Macedonians smoke like chimneys and have yet to adjust to a recent ban on smoking in public places.

Returning to Macedonia in March armed with my new medical certificate, I was told that the new season would be launched by an Open Day and that as one of the two Robins had a couple of hours left before a major engine service, I could have my check flight for the

license. Over 100 people turned up to enjoy flights in the Antonov with the parachutists and watch models careering around the hangar – and the Super Blanik was wheeled out for me to have a very public check flight. That duly completed, Gorgi suggested another one for the visitors and after a few aerobatics, we did the obligatory beat-up and hangar landing. Whether that encouraged anyone to take up gliding, or put them off for life, I never discovered.

As the parachutists repacked their chutes for a final jump, Dejan invited me to go along in the Antonov and about twenty of us hung on to whatever came to hand or squatted on the floor as we rolled along the runway. This was what flying was like before the Health and Safety Executive made it all so much more safe – and dull. I stood between the pilot and co-pilot and filmed us as we climbed out over the city and past Mount Vodno with its giant cross on top. At 1000 metres, one of the parachutists shouted for me to ask the pilot to slow down (we were only doing about 50 knots at the time!), the door opened and with a shout they were all gone!

With my medical and check flight all sorted, I was told that as soon as they had completed the 1000 hours service of the tug, we would be able to start flying and that conditions would be great for cross-country. I calculated that Macedonia is just about big enough for an FAI 300kms triangle so started making plans for some modest cross-countries in the mountains. Unfortunately, the paperwork for the service was to prove almost as time consuming as the service, so weekends passed by over coffees and beers rather than hills and rivers. This gave ample time to learn about flying in the region which started even before LGC in 1924, when the equivalent of a Primary was bungee-launched from nearby Rabbit Hill. Amy Johnson made a promotional visit to Skopje in the early 1930s after her round the world flight had made her famous and this prompted the purchase of a Tiger Moth. After this, model flying, and more recently parachuting and ultra-lights, all joined the fun. From 1991-2000, skydiving was world-class here and the club competed in world championships. In fact, if it flies, Stenkovic welcomes it.

The fun had a rude interruption in 1999 however, when the Balkans erupted into fighting. Tens of thousands of Albanians fled Kosovo, just down the road and overnight the airfield became the biggest refugee camp in the Balkans with 45,000 displaced residents living in tents. Some Antonov 2s were on site being serviced at the time so could not take off to other airfields. One was moved into the hangar but another one was left exposed, to become a play centre for local children. The wings of these old aircraft, of which there are apparently about 15,000 still flying in eastern Europe, are extremely strong, though hordes of frustrated kids proved too much to bear and the sad remains of one still acts as a reminder of hard times. However, after a mere 48 days, the refugees were all found homes in other countries or parts of Macedonia and Stenkovic reverted to being an airfield.

The club currently has about 100 active members, of which ten or so are glider pilots, with four students learning theory. A major challenge is the local bureaucracy – especially the Civil Aviation Authority, which is a minefield of cumbersome obstruction.

Macedonia is a great place for flying and the club is keen to establish links with clubs in other parts of the region, including northern EU countries. They would welcome individual or group visitors (though insurance could be a problem for anyone bringing their own gliders from UK) and gave me a fantastic welcome. There are five clubs throughout the country, with Blaniks, Vuk-Ts, a DG100, and a Pilatus. There are no competitions at present, though they are keen to promote one and offered to make all gliders in the country available to a group from LGC if anyone is interested. Airspace is not a problem and the locality offers cheap accommodation and the local wine is both excellent and inexpensive!!

That would have been my final memory of the club had Dejan and Gorgi not been determined to ensure I ended with something more concrete. Knowing my assignment finished on a Thursday morning before flying out at dawn the next day, they arranged for the tug and the Blanik to be available for me at the launch point as soon as I could escape from the office. They were as good as their word and within ten minutes of arriving at the site, I was giving the all-out for a short local soaring flight. The license now fully used, all I need now is an extension to the project!

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