



Seen here on the apron at Linz, Stephen's mount G-XIFR is the IMC-equipped version of Lambert Aircraft's M108, which can be owner-built with factory assistance

Touring Mission

With a newly-won PPL in his pocket, Steven Lambert and friend Mark Delfosse set out on an ambitious circular European flying tour, visiting six countries in nine days

Words Steven Lambert **Photos** Steven Lambert & Mark Delfosse

Having flown three-axis microlights since 2005, I realised my long dormant ambition to gain a PPL(A) in 2016. Unlike the UK, Belgium does not allow credit for microlight training or experience towards a PPL or LAPL, so I had to go through the full PPL course, including ground school and 45 hours of flight training. I received my EASA PPL in June 2016 and was determined to make use of it to fly further and higher than I ever had before.

After gaining my PPL, I had been flying our company demonstrator G-XIFR (Steven is younger brother to Filip, designer of Lambert aircraft), and taking her on a serious trip had now become almost irresistible. The greatest asset of a two-seater aircraft is the second seat, and my companion for the trip was going to be Mark, not a pilot but a great aviation enthusiast. My plan was to fly south to Corsica and then continue anti-clockwise all the way around the Alps and back to Belgium. Although G-XIFR has a full IFR fit, it is currently still limited to VFR day



Setting out on 22 July, Mark (left) and Stephen

only, and so is my PPL. But then, the trip was not about setting distance or speed records, nor stretching ourselves to the limit: the only goal was to enjoy it and make it as relaxing as a flying holiday can be. So despite 'FR's more than seven hour endurance, the plan was to make flights of up to three and a half hours' duration and limit total flying to six hours a day, unless there was a good reason to do otherwise. And, to keep our options open, we decided *not* to book accommodation in advance.

So far, so good. Hoping for a week of perfect VFR weather and tailwinds, we were ready to go on 22 July.

Day 1: Wevelgem – Troyes – Lyon

The plan was to make a stopover for lunch at Troyes and then continue to Lyon Corbas. However, neither the METAR at Wevelgem nor the TAF along the route were very encouraging. With marginal VFR and rain at Wevelgem, likely to get worse by early afternoon, and severe thunderstorms forecast anywhere south of Troyes, we weren't sure if we'd get anywhere at all.

Late morning, we took off and headed south. After the first hour in a 20kt headwind at 1,400ft, the cloudbase gradually lifted, although it wasn't worth climbing above 2,000ft as the headwinds got even stronger with altitude. The stopover at Troyes was uneventful and by mid afternoon we were back in the air, rowing further upstream against this more than twenty knot headwind. Approaching Lyon, we couldn't miss a king-size Cb in the valley over the city so, with about 25nm to go, we got the message and diverted to Macon to wait for the thunderstorm to clear. Macon is a friendly airfield with a 1,200m concrete runway,

and as they had 91UL I took the opportunity to fill up. Two hours later, the situation in the sky had improved significantly and we took off for the thirty minute hop to Lyon-Corbas where we were met by Pierre-Adrien, who offered a hangar for the night. We didn't refuse as there were more thunderstorms to come overnight. Pierre-Adrien is an aerospace engineer and keen glider pilot who did an internship at Lambert Aircraft Engineering a few years ago and contributed to some developments on the Mission M108.

Finding accommodation nowadays is simple, with a smartphone and free EU roaming, and within minutes Mark booked us a room in town for less than €45. We enjoyed the evening in Lyon.

Day 2: Lyon – Calvi, Corsica

This was going to be a big day for me, one I had been looking forward to for a long time, and the weather looked perfect.

We said goodbye to Pierre-Adrien, strapped in, got airborne and continued through the Rhône valley towards Orange. After Orange, we climbed to FL55 and flew straight across beautiful Provence to Saint-Tropez VOR on the Mediterranean coast for the 120nm water crossing to Corsica. Having crossed the English Channel well over a dozen times, I wasn't particularly worried about that. ATC was very helpful and cleared us on a direct to Calvi. The slight tailwind was also helpful in boosting our groundspeed beyond 105kt.

Calvi ATC cleared us to 1,500ft, before taking us on a sightseeing tour through all their reporting points and then let us hold for several minutes due to departing traffic.

Once the twin turboprop was climbing away, and with no other aircraft in their CTR, ATC instructed us to climb back to 3,000ft for the visual approach. We



Coasting out from France at FL55 for the 120 mile sea crossing to Corsica

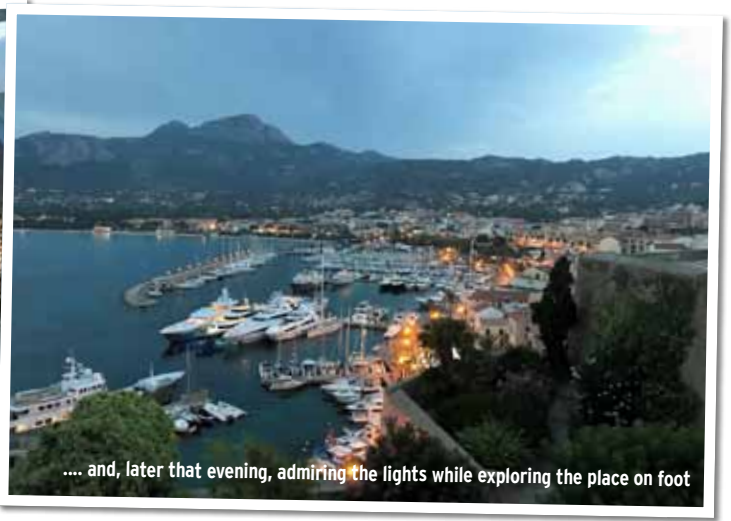
politely refused this and replied that we were perfectly comfortable to make it onto final from our present 1,500ft.

Calvi is a bit of an unusual airport as it is surrounded by high ground to the east, south and west. So the preferred runway is 18 for landing and 36 for departure. The approach to Runway 18 over the sea is spectacular and we used only a fraction of the 2,300m runway, despite the seven-knot tailwind and a temperature of 35°C (yes it was that hot!). With space to park at least fifty aircraft and only two aircraft present, we tied down 'FR and put the canopy cover on.

When booking in, one of the ladies in the office suddenly switched to high drama mode because we were staying overnight,

for which a request must be made at least 48 hours in advance. With an almost empty apron we didn't understand what the problem was, so I suggested: "Just give us a call if you're getting short of space and we'll fold our wings and put it under the wing of that ATR42". Mark arranged accommodation and transportation within budget, and as we left the airport the wind started to pick up.

All the next day winds were 200 direction at 25kt gusting to 45, which was no good for a takeoff at Calvi in either direction. So what did we do while we couldn't fly? Absolutely nothing! Having worked like a dog in the weeks and months before this trip, it felt very good to be able to relax with nothing to do. ➔



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Day 4: Calvi – Zadar (or not!)

The winds at Calvi had dropped to ten knots, and we filed a flight plan to Zadar in Croatia. This would take us east over the isle of Elba, then all the way across Italy and the Adriatic Sea. We took off and climbed to FL45, following the north coast of Corsica. Elba soon appeared on the horizon, followed by the Italian mainland not much later.

Cloud was already building up over the mainland and as we coasted in we needed to descend to 2,500ft to maintain VMC, and deviate from our planned route to stay well clear of terrain. This worked pretty well, though cloud was building up faster and faster and I wouldn't even consider outclimbing it. Before the Adriatic coast, we approached a mountain ridge that was poking well into the cloudbase and, with no safe option to get past it, the decision was made to divert to Perugia before we got squeezed between the terrain and thunderstorms –

which wouldn't take long for it to be all over for us. ATC at Perugia was friendly and helpful in guiding us to their 2,200m runway, with plenty of space available to park. The handling fee of €60 was more than I had wished, but diverting to Perugia was the right thing to do. For the rest of the afternoon we visited the picturesque town centre of Perugia and ended the day with dinner in a typical Italian restaurant.

Day 5: Perugia – Zagreb

Next morning the weather was fine but, like the previous day, temperatures would shoot up to 35°C by midday with



The Garmin shows 'FR part-way across the Adriatic sea

thunderstorms forming in the afternoon. The weather at Zadar was below VMC with only little improvement expected for the next six hours. As we wanted to make progress, we filed a flight plan to Zagreb. Besides the weather, the challenges were a mountain ridge up to 5,000ft between Perugia and the Adriatic coast, a sea crossing of 95nm and high ground up to 5,000ft in west Croatia.

ATC cleared us to FL75 and, despite a 10kt headwind, life up there was comfortable: smooth air, great visibility and away from the 30°C-plus on the ground. 'FR

was also happy, cruising at 95kt TAS at 4,750rpm and burning just twelve litres per hour – great fuel efficiency from the Rotax 912iS!

It's amazing how much of the airspace over the Adriatic is controlled, most of it being class D, but equipped with a good radio and Mode S transponder there is no need to fear flying into this kind of airspace. Zagreb was by far the busiest airport on the entire trip and ATC did a good job fitting us in between the much

With no safe option to get past the mountain ridge, we diverted to Perugia



Parked at Perugia, clearly showing the thunderstorms we were avoiding





Unusual and clever artwork spotted on a building in Zagreb

faster heavy jet traffic. We were vectored onto a left base to create a five minute gap with the B767 ahead of us (yes they took good care of the fact that a M108 is a Light Wake Turbulence category aircraft), and seconds after we had vacated the runway we saw the A320 behind us was about to touchdown.

With a little ‘cooperative airmanship’, flying into airports like this with a Mission M108 or any other light aircraft is perfectly possible without becoming a nuisance to ATC. To be more specific, don’t fly the final approach at 55kt, per the POH but maintain the 95kt cruise speed all the way down to about 500ft, then gently throttle back and slow down to 55kt at the point you start the flare to

land. Also, aiming for a touchdown about 300m before the taxiway turnoff will minimise time spent on the runway.

We tied down, booked in, cleared Customs, and were ready to go into town. The handling fee of €80 was certainly expensive, but as I had never been to Croatia before I had no idea what smaller airfields would be like and regarded the handling fee as an insurance premium against any trouble that we might otherwise have had.

Day 6: Zagreb – Graz – Linz – Salzburg

After a good night’s rest to recover from the sightseeing and restaurants in Zagreb, it was time to move on. I’d spoken to Filip two days before and he suggested Graz,

Linz and Speyer as suitable options for a stopover. The weather on the northern side of the Alps was marginal for VFR with a front approaching, so we planned a short flight to Graz (Austria) where we would enter the Schengen area and clear Customs.

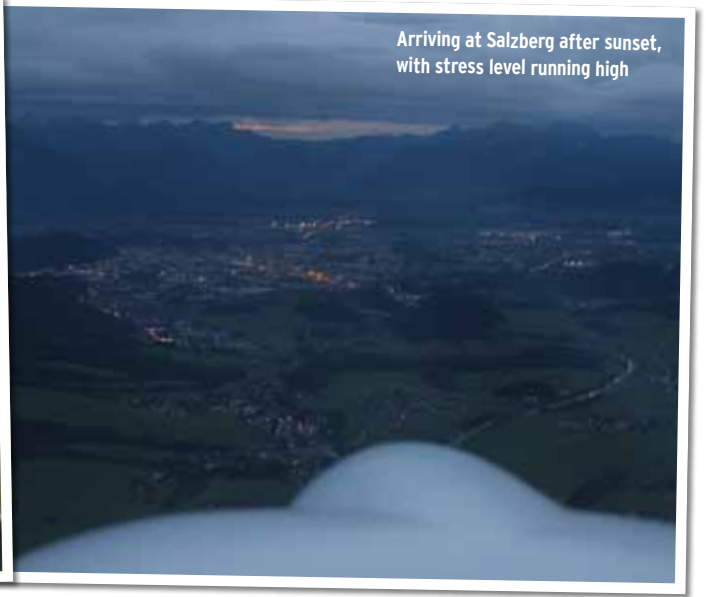
Booking out at Zagreb took quite a bit longer than anticipated. As our flight would take us over Slovenia, the flight plan had to state the exact coordinates of our border crossing point. Flight plan submitted and accepted, it was off to the Customs office, where the meticulous officer saw a problem with my national identity card. Belgian ID cards take the same format as a debit or credit card, and mine has had a crack in it for as long as I can remember. Now this crack was a big →

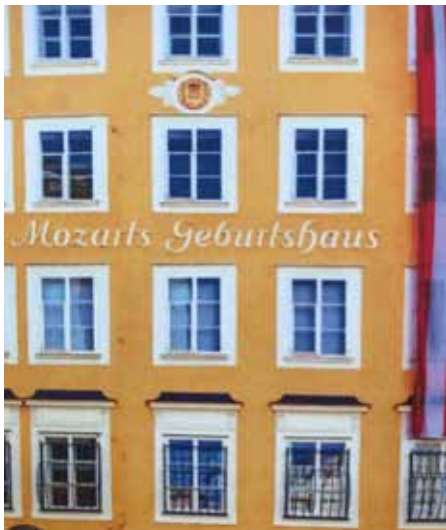
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The 480m grass strip at St Georgen – no problem as a diversion for the M108, which has good STOL capabilities



Arriving at Salzberg after sunset, with stress level running high





Above: Mozart's birthplace in Salzburg
Below: Salzburg is a truly beautiful city



issue and going to decide whether I would be allowed to leave legally, or have to remain in Croatia illegally. National security issue, I could read it in their faces... Come on guys, your colleagues yesterday had no problem allowing me into your country with this ID card; would you now please let me leave it? A supervisor was called in for advice, followed by phone calls to probably even higher ranked officers. After another fifteen minutes of fuss, the final verdict came and we were free to go. As we'd say: 'Much ado about nothing'.

An hour later we landed in Graz where it took the Austrian Customs and border control no more than thirty seconds to scan, verify and accept my ID card – what a world of difference. Quick lunch at Graz and we got ready for the flight to Linz. Weather at Linz was marginal and might get worse at times in the next few hours so we took into account that a diversion might be necessary, but at least we would be on the northern side of the Alps with the high terrain and mountains no longer something to worry about.

We took off from Graz, initially heading north at FL55 until below the Vienna TMA, and then turned west once clear of the mountains. All went well until about 25nm short of Linz, when the cloudbase dropped and the visibility got marginal. Unfamiliar with the region and the terrain, we decided not to take any risks and diverted to nearby St Georgen, a small airfield with a 480m grass runway. For once, there was no chance of holding up an airliner on final approach. Two hours later, the weather looked fine again and we were up and away for the twenty minute hop to Linz.

As we landed in Linz, Mark was looking for accommodation, transport and anything of interest for the next day. The search results weren't *quite* what we were expecting, so how about Salzburg as an alternative? Mark searched the web and it kind of ticked all the boxes. I prepared for the flight, filed a flight plan to Salzburg and we booked out but, for some reason, working out our landing fee at Linz



Using an electric bike to visit the many sights in Salzburg

seemed extremely complex, as if they had never done this before. Five, ten, fifteen minutes went by and still no bill coming out of the printer... It was already past 8 pm and I pointed out that we needed to go, otherwise we wouldn't make it to Salzburg before dark. Finally at 8.15 pm came the bill.

We paid and rushed out towards the aircraft as if we were doing a runner. Get in, buckle up, start the engine, do pre-takeoff checks while taxiing,

requested takeoff from the first intersection and off we went. Whoa, that was stressful, and rushed too. Direct to Salzburg at maximum cruise speed. With at least

We touched down in Salzburg at 28 minutes past sunset. Just in time

twenty minutes to go, the sun went below the horizon and it was getting darker by the minute. Salzburg ATC was very helpful and cleared us for a straight in, and showed off by switching on all their approach and runway lights. Fantastic view from the front row – well, there is only one row in 'FR!'. We touched down at 28 minutes past sunset. Just in time. Yes, we made it – what an experience!

The next day we stayed in the town centre of Salzburg, a truly beautiful city well worth a visit. We visited Mozart's house, enjoyed good food and the nice weather. In the evening, we relaxed in the 'Alchemiste Belge', a pub with many of the favourite Belgian beers. If we had had more time, we would have stayed longer. ➡



Looking back over the tail on the way home, flying in ideal conditions and burning just 13.4 litres of fuel – approximately £30 worth – per hour

Day 8: Salzburg – Speyer

We wanted to get home by the end of the following day and Speyer sounded like a good idea for a stop, being about halfway on a great circle from Salzburg to Wevelgem. The weather at breakfast was too marginal but would improve in the afternoon, so by 3.30 p.m. we were airborne and heading north-west. The cloudbase of about 2,000ft AGL for almost the entire flight prevented us from climbing into the levels and the flight was uneventful in a steady 15kt headwind.

It's difficult to miss Speyer airfield: simply look for a Lufthansa 747 in the distance that appears to have just lifted off. As you get closer you see more and more interesting aircraft on display at the aviation museum adjacent to the airfield.



While 'FR has a full IFR panel fit, Stephen flew Day VFR

Speyer is a nice quiet airport, very close to the town. A twenty minute walk takes you to the beautiful town centre. I can highly recommend a visit to Speyer as a trip, or just for an overnight stop.

Day 9: Speyer - Wevelgem

It's going home day! Just one leg of 245nm to complete the trip. With a 20kt

headwind, Mother Nature made every effort to stretch the flight time-wise. As we entered Belgian airspace, sights became more and more familiar with little new to discover. But what was behind us was a fantastic and unforgettable flying experience, covering nearly 1,800nm, and visiting six countries in nine days. Total flight time was almost 26 hours.

And G-XIFR enjoyed it as much as we did, and deserves a medal for exemplary behaviour and performance. Over the entire trip, fuel burn averaged 13.4 lph and, even with no alternative to avgas available at the larger airports, fuel cost was still under €30 per hour. No oil was added, and we didn't encounter a single technical defect.

As for me, I'm already dreaming of my next trip... 📍

LEGS, LANDING FEES & OTHER COSTS

Wevelgem - Troyes 162nm; landing fee at Troyes €10

Troyes - Lyon Corbas 165nm; landing fee at Macon €10; landing at Lyon Corbas €12

Lyon - Calvi 284nm; landing plus two days parking at Calvi €32

Calvi - Perugia 168nm; landing and parking €17; handling €60

Perugia - Zagreb 225nm; landing and parking €37; handling €80

Zagreb - Graz 80nm; landing and Austrocontrol navigation fee at Graz €21.50

Graz - Linz 140nm; landing fee at St. Georgien €13; at Linz €22

Linz - Salzburg 55nm; landing, parking and handling at Salzburg €41

Salzburg - Speyer 230nm; landing at Speyer €20

Speyer - Wevelgem 245nm; landing at Wevelgem €18