

Solo to Switzerland

Grabbing the opportunity between the Covid lockdowns of 2020, one intrepid pilot takes his 1955 Jodel D112 to the EAS fly-in at Langenthal, Switzerland

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Bold indeed – Perry had only logged seven hours on the Jodel before he set off on his first solo tour abroad

Checking my emails over breakfast one morning in mid-July 2020, something caught my eye—an invitation to the EAS (Experimental Aviation of Switzerland—the Swiss LAA) Rally at Langenthal. I was interested, but my Jodel had only recently become airworthy and, due to a combination of the wet winter and Covid-19 restrictions, I had only flown her for seven hours since buying in October 2019. Additionally, the rally was in two weeks' time, so it felt like a bit of a stretch. I forwarded

the email to an experienced pilot friend with the message 'sorely tempted!' His immediate response, "Go for it!" was all the encouragement I needed.

I was no stranger to Continental flying. Within two months of gaining my PPL at the Halton Aero Club in 2016, I was flying a Cessna 152 through the Austrian Alps as part of the club's annual flying expedition. Trips to Elba, Norway and Spain had followed, with a few personal incursions into France in between. However, these were mostly in large groups and never solo, so the flight to Switzerland

on my own and in an unfamiliar aircraft would be much more of a challenge.

Planning the route

Examining the charts, it was around seven hours flying time to Langenthal at the 65hp Jodel's cruising speed of eighty knots. This meant a two-day journey comprising of roughly two two-hour sorties per day. I would plan to leave on the Thursday to arrive at Langenthal on Friday afternoon, and depart on Sunday to arrive back in the UK on Monday.

There were several constraints to be considered when planning

the route. I would need to avoid any French or Swiss controlled airspace as I didn't have a transponder and would need to clear customs in France and Switzerland. I also preferred an English-speaking control tower and a grass runway. Fuel limits and comfort also mandated a two-hour sortie limit.

Crossing the Channel at Dover necessitated a customs airfield in north-east France. Albert Bray (LFAQ) and Le Touquet (LFAT) were in Class D, which left Calais (LFAC) as the only viable option, even though it only had a hard runway. From Calais, I could fly to Abbeville (LFOI) which had a grass runway and a hotel right on the airfield for my overnight stay.

Onwards from Abbeville I searched for a refuelling stop. Troyes (confusingly to many Brits, pronounced 'trwah'—Ed) Barberey (LFQB) south-east of Paris in the Champagne region didn't have a grass runway but did have an English-speaking Tower.

I planned to clear customs at Ecuivillens (LSGE) and from there make a forty-minute flight to Langenthal (LSPL) routing to the northeast of the Berne Zone.

My return would be the reverse, except I would clear French customs at Montbeliard Courcelles (LFSM) and then route direct to Troyes. However, the best laid plans...

Departure day

On Thursday morning, after checking the weather and NOTAM, I emailed my customs form to Calais and submitted a flight plan on SkyDemon for departure from my farm strip base near Aylesbury at 12:00pm local time.

My wife dropped me off and helped me get G-BKAO out of the hanger, but wasn't helping my pre-flight nerves with comments like "you're seriously not flying to Switzerland in *that*!"

In blue skies and light winds, I departed on the north-easterly runway and then made a right turn towards Bovingdon, routing northeast around the London TMA and then south across the Thames into Kent.

Over Ashford a FREDA check made me realise that I hadn't heard anything from London →



Planning the route on the brilliant SkyDemon app, and...



... putting the plan into action, coasting out from England in perfect flying weather



First stop Calais

Be prepared

I would be using SkyDemon on my iPhone and iPad for all planning and in-flight navigation, so ensured that my subscription was up to date and that I had enough flight plan credits, as I would need to submit four flight plans as I flew from country to country. I also prepared and took along another iPhone to be used in case I lost the use of primary one. I then printed all the airfield plates for the intended landings including the diversion targets.

As I would be crossing the English Channel, I needed a lifejacket, which I borrowed from Halton Aero Club. I already had a Personal Locator

Beacon (PLB) that I had bought for previous trips.

I started to think about packing and what else I would need to take. With only me in the cockpit, weight was not going to be a problem as with a full sixty litres of fuel, 43kg I would still have 66kg available. More of a problem would be space, as apart from a parcel shelf behind the seats the D112 has no luggage hold. I decided to take two bags, an overnight rucksack and a flight bag. The rucksack could sit strapped into the passenger seat and the flight bag would sit on the parcel shelf alongside the tie-down kit, SLR Camera bag, canopy cover and spare oil.

- In my Flight Bag alongside the usual array of charts, checklists and stationery I would also need:
- Passport
 - Currency (euros and Swiss Francs)
 - Pilot licence and medical certificate.
 - Spare glasses (a condition of my medical certification)
 - Aircraft documents (Permit and CAA cert plus insurance certificate)
 - Copy of interception procedures
 - iPhone & iPad cables, chargers and battery packs
 - Power adapters for France and Switzerland
 - A gilet jaune

Information recently. No response from the subsequent radio check had me worrying that the radio had failed. On closer inspection it seemed that my kneeboard had slipped onto the centre console-mounted radio and had helpfully decided to dial up its own frequency. Switching back to London Info, I checked whether I had missed anything and gave them a position report.

I landed at Calais on R06 and refuelled. After parking on the apron, three masked customs officers came over, asked for my passport and checked all the bags in the aircraft. They also enquired whether I had more than €10,000 in cash. I wish! And the irony being that I didn't have a single cent – *seulement le plastique!*

On departure, the controller reported seagulls over the airfield and held a large turbine aircraft that had lined up behind me while the bird scaring team got to work. Apparently, I wasn't worth the bother!

What then followed was a very pleasant late afternoon flight in warm sunshine down to Abbeville at 1,500ft. On arrival there was no traffic in the circuit and no one on the radio. I checked the windsock and called blind that I would join “vent arriere pour deux, herbe”. The landing was fine – hard for it not to be, on such a wide and long grass runway, and in such benign weather conditions.

I fuelled up, paid my landing and overnight parking fee, and then parked on the lawn in front of the hotel and tied her down. There was no forecast of winds overnight, but I knew I would sleep better having done this.



Well-deserved beer on arrival!

A long second day's flying

After breakfast, I checked the weather and NOTAM and performed the A check. I took off just before 9:00am on Runway 20 and headed for Troyes, a straightforward bit of navigation around the north-east of the Paris TMA with no restricted airspace to worry about, as long as I kept under 3,500ft.

A headwind had reduced my average ground speed to 74kt, and I landed just under two hours later, on the southerly 1,600m hard runway. I backtracked to the fuel pumps and filled up with 34 litres of 100LL using my credit card at the unattended pump. Fuel consumption at seventeen litres per hour was within with my eighteen lph planning assumption.

I called the Tower after fuelling and was directed to park directly in front of the small terminal building, where I paid my €10 landing fee and then headed to the restaurant for lunch.

Following a decent buffet meal on the terrace, I re-checked the weather and NOTAM, submitted my flight plan via SkyDemon on my phone and departed Troyes just before 1pm.

During the flight I was in contact with Basle Information who were tracking me via reporting points, e.g., “Report abeam Dijon” etc. However, the reception faded as I flew south-east across the Jura and at some point, I lost contact. A little while later the transmissions suddenly re-started, and so I tried calling them again but got the response, “Alpha Oscar, I’ve no idea where you are, goodbye!”

It was a hot and humid day with a real threat of thunderstorms. As I climbed higher over the Jura, I noticed large white towering cumulonimbus storm clouds in the distance and was nervous for a while until I worked out that they were sitting over the Alps more than fifty miles away.

Eventually I climbed to 6,000ft over the final Jura peak on the Franco-Swiss border before dropping 3,000ft into the plain below to get under the Payerne TMA. The view was breathtaking.

I had been flying for an hour and fifty minutes and still had a further twenty minutes to →



Day two stop at Troyes, where Perry also topped up his reserve supply of engine oil



Buffet lunch at Troyes no beer this time, note – lots more flying still to be done!



Heading towards lake Neuchatel, following a route planned to keep Perry and the Jodel well clear of Berne's airspace

The Jodel's fuel gauge – a wire on a cork – was getting low

Ecuvillens. The Jodel's fuel gauge—a wire on a cork—was getting low, but was still bumping around with a couple of inches left to the minimum, thirty-minute reserve indication. As it was, I landed with fourteen litres remaining—around forty-minutes flying time. Not as much as I would have liked, but enough to get me to my diversion airfield at Yverdon, fifteen minutes away, if required.

The circuit for R27 at Ecuvillens was spectacular, following a rocky ravine and with views up a scenic alpine valley towards Gruyères. The Jodel floated and rolled for quite a way on the very hot 800m tarmac runway.

I fuelled up again and left Ecuvillens just after 4pm for a fantastic flight in the late afternoon sunshine to the north, over lake Neuchatel to avoid Berne airspace, and then southeast to Langenthal, a picturesque airfield nestled in a forested valley.

I joined the Langenthal circuit downwind for R23 with one other aircraft on final, which I watched land as I turned on to left base. I was way too high. Having no flaps, I sideslipped to lose height, but came out of it too early and was never going to land on the threshold of the 585m runway. I applied full power and went around.

The next time I managed to touch down on the numbers, but there was still a fair amount of careful differential braking to be done to ensure a timely exit from yet another baking hot tarmac runway.

That brought the end of a long, but satisfying day's flying. Having been *en route* for nearly eight hours and in the cockpit for five of them, I was more than ready for two days of sunshine, good food and drink, and plenty of aviation banter with EAS members and other visitors from abroad.

Not such an easy return

Just after 10am on Sunday morning, I departed Langenthal from R05 and headed north. After leaving the zone I changed frequency to Zürich Information to activate my flight plan, which took me to Montbeliard in France via GAFOR valley route S51.

I followed the base of the Jura mountains to the north-east and then noticed that I had completely missed the entrance to the S51 valley. I performed a 180-degree turn, found the narrow and well-hidden entrance, and was rewarded with incredible views and some beautiful scenic mountain flying.

I exited the valley and headed south-west to avoid the Basle CTR. However, the weather ahead looked ominous, with menacing dark clouds obscuring the top of the mountains and claggy cloud and mist below. Not what was forecast! I orbited while

I called Basle Info for the latest weather report for Montbeliard, but the controller was unable to provide it.

During the orbit I noticed that I could see straight down the main runway of Basle-Mulhouse International Airport (LFSB), about eight kilometres away to the east. I immediately requested a weather diversion and the controller instructed me to head directly to the airfield, enquiring whether I had visual on an A320 departing in my direction. The Tower then gave me a straight-in approach on R33, even though it was the opposite runway that they were currently operating on. As I approached, an EasyJet A320 was asked to hold short of entering the runway pending my arrival. I exited right at 'Foxtro' and was passed to ground control who welcomed me to Basle. I mentioned that it was an unexpected visit, to which she replied "this is Murphy's Law!"

I called the apron and requested transportation to the terminal. I then chocked the aircraft, covered the pitot tube, put the canopy cover on and removed my flight and bags in preparation for what might be an overnight stay.

Once in the terminal I had plenty of time to re-plan, as heavy thunderstorms were forecast all



Jodel amid fly-in visitors at Langenthal



The hapless Jodel gets a soaking in the unexpected and most unwelcome rain at Basle-Mulhouse

afternoon. I examined the chart and decided to try and get to Colmar (LFGA). It was only thirty minutes' flying time due north across a flat plain and would get me out of the way of the constant stream of storms heading north-east from the Alps. The weather radar showed a ninety-minute window from 5pm. This was my opportunity to get away from the weather and be in a more pleasant place overnight.

Approaching the aircraft across the soaking wet tarmac, I could see that the canopy cover had slipped to one side. This was bad news, as the cockpit doors were →



nowhere near watertight and the rain had been torrential at times.

My worst fears confirmed: the radio, headset and seats were all soaked. I dried these items with clothes from my overnight bag, my biggest concern being the radio. As I unclipped the handheld unit from the centre console to dry it, the BNC aerial connector fell off, with several small pieces scattering across the damp cockpit floor. Perfect! I was in a hurry and now I needed to repair the cable before I could even test that the soaked radio to see if it still worked. Once reconnected, I powered it up, put my headset on and called ground for a radio check. To my huge relief everything worked.

I called Ground for start-up and was quickly given clearance for taxi and departure. This is where my smooth departure started to unravel. I had sat in the terminal for close on five hours waiting for a gap in the weather and planning the next leg, but had totally neglected to study the departure procedures. So, when the controller asked me to route to 'November Echo', I was clueless. However, I quickly located it on the SkyDemon plate and set a direct route, repeating the procedure when asked to route to 'November'.

I eventually cleared the zone and landed in Colmar thirty minutes later, just before 6pm and enjoyed an impromptu overnight stay in this magnificent medieval Alsatian town.

Back on track – nearly

The next day I flew west to Troyes to get back onto my original route. After fuelling I checked the weather which did not look good at my destination of Abbeville, with storms forecast all afternoon and early evening. The next day's weather was set fair, so I decided to stay overnight at the nearby Airport Hotel and plan to leave early the next day.

The following morning, I walked to the airport and readied the aircraft. The canopy cover was wet from an early morning dew and for the first time on the whole trip, the fuel check showed a couple of millimetres of water in the fuel drain.



ABOVE: weather radar check on arrival at Troyes, on the way home

LEFT: Colmar – nice place for an 'impromptu overnight stay'

I departed the still deserted airport at 7:35am local time, climbing out from Runway 35 for the two-hour flight to Abbeville.

It was a smooth flight in the still early morning air with pockets of mist and fog dotted here and there over the beautiful French countryside. I then started to wonder about fog at my destination. My concerns rose as I neared Amiens, where there were fog banks along the course of the Somme, the same river which ran through Abbeville. As it was, I arrived overhead the airfield in bright sunshine to see a microlight arriving on R20, and as no-one was responding to any of my radio calls, I followed suit.

I taxied to the fuel pumps, chocked the aircraft, and walked to the airfield office. Although the door was open, the presence of an arrivals logbook and an honesty box pointed to there being no one around, except for a small black cat that ran in after me and jumped up onto a bar stool, which then span around a couple of times. I wasn't sure whether this was its regular greeting party trick or a complete one-off! →



ABOVE: worrying time over the Channel, with radio failure and unexpected low cloud ahead

The forty-minute flight and eventual arrival at Calais were uneventful. Landing on Runway 24 in sunshine with light and variable winds. I fuelled up, even though on paper I had enough to get back, as I was taught to never miss an opportunity to “fill ‘er up!”

I departed Calais to the west, heading for Cap Gris Nez, to ensure the shortest possible Channel crossing. I changed frequency to Lille Information and although I could hear them, they could not hear me. What I should have done at this point was to head back to Calais and sort out the radio issue. But ‘pressonitis’ had me. I was nearly home, the Channel looked calm and I could see England. So, I headed across the water without a fully functional radio, which while not illegal, is without doubt foolhardy.

To make matter worse, as I headed towards the Kent coast there was unexpected low cloud and I passed over the White Cliffs of Dover at 600ft. Not anywhere

near what I was expecting. Fortunately, the cloud base lifted as I flew inland, but I could still not raise London Information on the radio. As I was passing, I called Rochester airfield for a radio check and traffic information and explained my Channel crossing radio difficulties, and asked if they could relay this to London Information. The helpful controller told me to stand by, and then duly came back to tell me that London Information were now fully informed. He then wished me well on my onward flight.



Cheery Border Force greeting

Nearly home, I flew over the Chiltern ridge just to the west of Wendover and headed for the farm strip. As I flew overhead, I was distracted from looking at the windsock by the presence of three uniformed officers standing next to the hangar. The Border Force, who everyone had told me, “never turn up” had done just that.

I landed and taxied up to the hangar to meet the waving trio and closed my flight plan on SkyDemon before exiting the aircraft. The Border Force officers were friendly, polite, and seemed genuinely amazed at the fact that I had just flown back from Switzerland in this small, old, wooden aircraft. “A pleasant change,” they informed me, “from checking bizjets at Farnborough.”

After they left, I tidied up the aircraft while reflecting on a thoroughly enjoyable trip, a significant personal achievement and yes; some lessons learned.

The journey in numbers

- 11 flights in 5 flying days
- 16 hours of flight time
- 1,200 miles flown.
- Average speed 74 knots
- 9 fuel fills, circa £500 in total