

Flying Bristol to Toronto by the backroads

Back in the 1990s the germ of an idea embedded itself in my mind. I had already set out in pursuit of the most countries it is possible to fly a balloon in, and I had by then logged over 50. Challenges of access in the remoter locations seemed an obvious barrier and I decided that the perfect combination would be a venerable (1930s-designed) Beech 18 twin-engined aeroplane with a lightweight balloon aboard. In 2014 I found a Beech for sale and, with the help of my mother's legacy, bought G-BKGM, built for the Royal Canadian Air Force as a navigation trainer in 1952.

The painful process of preparing the Beech technically for our planned westbound journey towards New Zealand was overshadowed by the difficulty of finding pilots willing, able and with the right spirit of adventure to fly the aircraft. Wife Allie and myself are both experienced commercial balloon pilots, but no amount of additional training was going to get us fit to fly the big tailwheel twin.

After several false starts we linked up with John Herbert, a very experienced bush pilot from South Africa. Paperwork had to be converted to allow operation of a UK-registered aeroplane in a range of countries, not to mention the dreaded ELP (English Language Proficiency) certificate just in case John couldn't speak the language! The Beech meanwhile spent the winter of 2016/17 tucked away on the estate of the Earl of Suffolk & Berkshire near Malmesbury before a pre-departure check with RGV Aviation at Gloucester/Staverton.

As the whole project was Bristol focused (and indeed the aircraft resplendent in Bristol Airways' titles) departure from Bristol International was natural amidst the shiny airliners. A specially-designed ultra lightweight balloon under construction at Cameron Balloons in the heart of the city was test-flown at Staverton with the Beech on the main apron, then loaded aboard at Bristol's south side with media in attendance.

The world's first balloon & aeroplane adventure was on its way. First to Wick in Scotland, where the infamous 'Andrew' looks after a constant stream of ocean crossing aeroplanes in both directions. Egilstadir, Iceland (with en-route alternate Vagar, Faroes passed in the gloom) was our first overseas stop, enlivened by Allie flying our balloon down the runway (probably the first woman to fly a balloon in Iceland) and on our 'streaming' departure Mark Albery's RV-8 (G-RRVV) suffering a wheel fire on the runway. The airport fire service promptly attended with two immense vehicles to deal with their first-ever 'live' fire.

Onward to Isafjordur, via the most spectacular tabular volcanic mountains and an impossible-looking approach for a fjord-side runway, to an outdoor feast of seafood at the town's traditional restaurant.

Leaving the next morning in the cold grey overcast we knew weather would be critical for the long slog to Kulusuk in eastern Greenland. Sure enough the clag persisted and at FL75 we started picking up ice on the wings and screen. A dirty dive to 1250ft

above the sea sorted that out before breaking into the clear for a CAVOK arrival into Kulusuk's gravel strip.

The airport at Kulusuk, however, had replaced a wartime strip at Ikateq, better known then as Bluie East Two, and we were keen to be the first fixed-wing visitors for nearly seventy years. It is a mass of thousands of rusting fuel drums, collapsed hangars and derelict US army trucks. The Beech was chosen as 'lead' for the RV and Sam Rutherford's Saratoga (N3999) because it has big tyres and the strip was reported to be loose gravel. Just how loose became evident when, after two low-and-slow passes, John put G-BKGM down only to sink into the soft surface. No roads lead to uninhabited Ikateq, so outside help was discounted and we warned the other two aircraft not to follow. They cruised by for half an hour whilst John managed to get unbogged and we found a firmer strip for departure. Nail-biting indeed as John used sand-strip techniques learned in Africa to reduce drag and build speed, but we made it back to Kulusuk for a chastened (and expensive) beer.

From Kulusuk to Narsarsuaq promised stunning views of the Greenland ice-cap and its adjacent coastal mountains. We were not disappointed, and managed to avoid a once-common fate of landing by mistake in the white-out where ice, snow and cloud merge. Narsarsuaq, a favourite for ferrying aircraft of all sizes, was our second balloon opportunity, with Allie and myself making what we believe to be the first ever free-flight by balloon in Greenland. Add to that accolade the chance to taxi the Beech to the runway end, offload the balloon, inflate, fly to the parking apron, then collect and repack with the faithful Beech 'retrieve', and you have a historic first.

Leaving Narsarsuaq was discouraged by their ATC chief due to strong winds 26G36kt, but our pilots all agreed that if it was too bumpy we'd just turn back. In the event after the initial climb-out the ride was pretty good and we set course for Nuuk (formerly Godthab), capital of Greenland. As a capital it doesn't have much to offer, but pilot/controller Tom and his visiting German seaplane Examiner made us very welcome and we partied on into the 'night' (which of course was actually daylight at that latitude).

Heading next for Canada we finally felt like the continental transition was 'for real'. Mind you the sole RCMP police lady at 'Kik' (Qikiqtarjuaq to be correct, if unpronounceable!) welcomed us to Canada "as long as you're not bringing any alcohol with you" (as if!). The locals were queuing for free-issue seal meat - not for the squeamish. No (aircraft) AVGAS here, so we topped up with unapproved (car) MOGAS and were none the worse for it.

On departure towards Iqaluit (capital of Nunavut, Canada's far north) routed us past Mt. Thor, allegedly the tallest sheer vertical rockface in the world at 4100ft., and on via Pangnirtung. Circling a crashed but intact DC-3 en route which had run out of fuel in 1973, only when we reached Iqaluit's surprisingly sophisticated airport did we find our hotel booking had evaporated because the Prince of Wales was due to fly in next day on a Royal visit. More to the point we needed to be 'out-of-there' before HRH's aircraft blocked our progress.

From Iqaluit on was straightforward if less spectacular and, after a comfortable night in Schafferville, Quebec, we arrived at our chosen finishing point, Sorel Airport east of Montreal. Here for the first time we got weathered out, but it gave us a day to desperately seek long-term hangarage for the Beech pending her next adventure in spring 2018.

As a postscript, we were welcomed by the kindly folk of Edenvale, a private airport north of Toronto, where G-BKGM now shares a hangar with one of the few Avro Lancaster bombers still remaining, awaiting its re-assembly.

The Caribbean and Central America beckon.....