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Microlight Flying

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GT450

Meet big brother

Go west, young man!



Our Journeyman Balladeer Andy Oliver, being a gent, is not one to abuse those who prefer to recline in the old clubhouse armchair, complaining about the cost and restrictions of modern day flying. So if he challenges readers with 'Shouldn't you get out more?' he is also keen to support those who answer 'Yes'. Here he offers a brief guide and incentive to a short tour of his native West Country.

February. I hate it. A microlight pilot gets distracted at the tail end of a windy winter. The yearning is physical; you just ain't getting enough! OK, you can read the magazines, use your imagination, go through the motions of pulling the bar in: but, let's face it, you're gagging for the real thing. Some of the chaps in the clubhouse are satisfied with a quickie, thrice round the circuit and bit of local loitering sort of thing. The Journeyman Balladeer, however, likes to go on a full weekend bender. Go on, you know you want to!

Getting there

There is not much controlled airspace down here. The main ambush for 2007 is the new airspace on the way in. There is unbroken category D from west of Cardiff, through Bristol and almost right up to Lyneham in the east. If you go between them you are forced below 2000ft over the water.

Approaching from the north, I would recommend skirting west of Bridgend and crossing the Bristol Channel between Porthcawl and Exmoor. If you're happy staying low, cross the 12 miles from Nash Point VRP to Porlock Bay, and talk to Cardiff. Approaching over Wales has the added benefit of flying the Welsh Valleys and the Brecon Beacons. In zero wind this is a low-level blast of the first order, over open, empty hills. It certainly gets your juices flowing.

From the east come see us via Oxford, the Berkshire Downs and along the north of Salisbury Plain – beautiful rolling, arable land. The military range is well marked with white posts and flags. Dropping off the Mendips onto the Somerset Levels is the start of a clear run all the way to Land's End 150 miles away. Be aware that naval jets and helicopters make full use of an AIAA that, centred round Yeovilton, runs from coast to coast.

Coming from the south, just follow the lingering smell of burnt two-stroke to Spamfield, then head north east over the Solent to Beaulieu and Stoney Cross VRP. Compton Abbas is good for fuel and food, but it's for proper pilots, so have £8.50 ready.

Once you are on the peninsula just keep flying south-west until you run out of land. The prevailing west winds will mean that your return journey is likely to be quicker; much quicker. (But don't forget to drop in on one or more of the airfields that run the length of the peninsula. We've included a list overleaf.)

Seeing the sights

From this thread of bases along the spine of the peninsula you can divert for a whole side pannier full of visual treats.



The Journeyman Balladeer's favourites include Exmoor and Dartmoor. For the latter, Exeter or Plymouth will advise you on the temperature of the northern ranges. 'Hot' means you'll get shot at! The south has real cool valleys and no people, if you get my drift.

Lundy Island is essential. You can get as high as you like and talk with RAF St Mawgan on the way over. Here you are in another world, and a post-prandial nap on the grass outside the Marisco Tavern will restore your energy and *joie de vivre*. The strip has some surprises, and you'll bounce on landing as much as you did in the cliff air on either approach. I was invited to land in the field by the church on a recent visit. The manager of the island is 'one of us', and he 'just wanted to see if it could be done!' It can.

So you do like to be beside the seaside? On a weekday off season you can get down over the surf for miles of empty beaches. In the summer you will have to restrict yourself to posing at 501ft. If a complete circumnavigation is your aim then RNAS Culdrose and Predannack are not busy during the week (but have gliders at the weekend) and you might well get permission to do an extended MATZ penetration to complete the aerial version of the coastal path. Otherwise stay high. Remember, if flying clockwise round the peninsula, always look for a field on your right if the engine stops.

Havens of tranquility

It is possible, with permission in advance of course, to brew your tea at one of the many farm or private strips. The Journeyman Balladeer can recommend (in a clockwise direction

Clockwise from facing page: Exmouth; parked up at Lundy; the edge of the Scillies; and Tracy Island

from Bournemouth) Newton Peverill, Branscombe, Farway Common, Halwell, Truro, Sheepwash, Gorrel Farm, Belle Vue and Weston Zoyland.

Wing Farm near Warmister is well placed, and you land 20ft above the owner's bungalow; legally. Clench Common is another suitable stopping place if you are using the Salisbury Plain route. Not marked on the map are Studely Barton Farm (managed by Wright Flight, some 5 miles north of Tiverton) and Bolt Head (near Salcombe). The Bishop Brothers will welcome you to Tracy Island (2 miles east of Chard), so named because the hangar is underground.

A quiet word in your ear

Our many seaside resorts attract regular off-showings by a small cloud of Hawk jets, all painted red. Stick your aircraft into this particular quiver of arrows and you could be in for a non-coffee interview with the CAA, with big bill. The schedule is published in March.

So what are you waiting for? This is an easy long weekend of quality views, changing countryside and seascapes, and the not a few cream teas. The Journeyman Balladeer challenges you to fly a field, or five, further in 2007.

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Turn the page for a list of peninsular airfields ▷



Clockwise from top: Approach to 35 Dunkeswell; view of the Scilly Isles; and Portland

The chain of missions

Just as there is a chain of old Spanish missions up the coast of California, each a day's journey apart, so there is a chain of good airfields to allow you to pick your stops according to your fuel or bladder capacity. My notes refer to avgas availability, so check if you want something less refined.

Dunkeswell

Gateway to the west and home of the brave! Devon and Somerset microlight clubs might have their new clubhouse open, but anyway you can get fuel and food at the club on the east end, or microlight-type support and conversation from the three hangars on the north-west perimeter. At 850ft it can be breezier than the Levels. It is busy on a summer weekend, and occasionally a visitor will land at Upottery by mistake. You can camp here, and there is a good pub 500 yards away in the village, or the club bar is open late.

Eglescott

Another 35 miles brings you to this well friendly grass field. A warm welcome from Pat and Pete, but, while there is avgas daily, there is cake only at the weekend!

Bodmin

Press on another 40 miles, over the low lying moor, and you reach Bodmin. Well served by several runways, though you may need to check if the restaurant is open. Camping is possible, but bring your own provisions.

Perranporth

Do the legal thing round, through or over St Mawgan (known as Newquay by civil pilots) and you will be made most welcome at this ex-Spitfire base, 25 miles from Bodmin. It may be your first cliff top landing. Hot drinks, no solids.

Land's End

After another 25 miles you can line up over the ocean for two of Land's End's three grass runways. There is a full daytime ATC here, supporting the Islander shuttle and the Penzance helicopters that serve the Scilly Isles. Lightweight café open during the day and good facilities for camping, but you need to be self-sufficient for food and agile enough to scale the fence after hours if sallying forth on the rampage.

St Mary's - Scilly Isles

More water to cross here than the Channel, but worth the trip. Exciting flying, not least for the two concrete cliff-top strips. Blue sea, white beaches, islands, lighthouses, seals, the works! A true cherry on the cake of your expedition. If you sneak below 1000ft the man with the binos in the tower will spot you. There are multiple B&B options within a mile, but book ahead during the season. Don't plan on a Sunday visit, or even Saturday afternoon in the winter, because it will be shut.

