



The £200 burger

On a beach in the Outer Hebrides with night falling and the tide coming in? There's nowhere Tom Dawson would rather be



IT was a Wednesday in June last year, there were 10 aircraft on a beach in the Outer Hebrides, night was falling and the tide was coming in. So, where would you rather be?

After handing over Fly-UK to Mat Burnham in 2019, I felt compelled to be involved in some way, and I love a beach landing, so I devised a cunning plan...

By tradition, Fly-UK is held on the week which includes the longest day – 21 or 22 June – so after a word with Mat, the start date was set to Friday 21st.

Spring tides, when the sea comes in further and floods the beaches, occur every two weeks. Not only that, but spring tides go out further as well. This leaves great expanses of sand which are very tempting to land on, but if you don't get off in time you may find you're underwater when the tide returns.

Neap tides, on the other hand, leave less of the beach exposed, but there's always some left to park on, and the sand is likely to be firm.

Mat did a great job of selecting the route by using his experience of previous years on Fly-UK and my database of airfields. The result was a fabulous week and one which everyone enjoyed. Between them the pilots raised £8651 for the charity Children with Cancer, which Fly-UK has supported since 2005, raising almost £74,000.

With Fly-UK 2019 around the time of a neap tide, my thoughts turned to Sollas on North Uist in the Outer Hebrides, with a beach landing, overnight camping and a barbecue, since there's no pub or café nearby.

I asked Colin Johnson whether he'd be willing to help with carrying the gear to the island, setting up camp and helping with the barbie. Of course he was! The event was on.

Earlier in the year the beach had been trashed by the local farmers' spring ploughing competition, so what we needed was some stormy weather to level the surface and bury the rubbish.

We were in luck, and by the end of June the conditions looked promising from my armchair in north London, but it would take a low-level fly-past to confirm the suitability of the beach.

Fly-UK was scheduled to be at Sollas on Wednesday 26th, and I decided that arrival on Tuesday would give us time to set up the camp and buy rolls, salad and the trimmings from the local shop.

We rendezvoused at Plaistows on the

Tuesday morning and loaded up my Shadow and Colin's Skyranger. From Plaistows, we landed at Shotteswell airfield, just north of Banbury, and walked two miles to Hanwell village for a leisurely lunch at the Moon & Sixpence.

After that our route was Ashcroft, then St Michael's for an overnight, then the next day lunch on Bute and on to Glenforsa, where we found several Fly-UK aircraft and shared the hotel's loan car to refuel from Salen village garage.

It was almost 6pm when we set off for a flight along the coast of Skye and across the Little Minch to the Outer Hebrides and our destination at Sollas beach. It was a 100-mile leg, which wasn't too far, but with almost nowhere available to land along the route, it seemed like a long hop.

Good points

- The assistance from Colin
- The welcome and accommodation at St Michael's
- Dave and Tim's fuel stash there on the way south
- Beach landings and barbecue at Sollas
- An evening with friends and Pete Goff's singalong
- Glorious weather on the return
- Getting back before Plaistows closed

Bad points

- I couldn't go to Croatia: my fuel tank had sprung a leak
- Colin's still got my tent canvas

Costs of the trip

Two-stroke fuel	£310
Benbecula landing	£21.65
Bread rolls	£26.40
Salad, charcoal, etc	£71.93
Less contributions	£30
Total	£400 ish

Colin and I arrived overhead Sollas at about 7.30pm. Careful examination showed little evidence of the ploughing match, and the preferred area for landing was clear.

In a strong crosswind we set down on firm sand, tied down our aircraft, put up my 1970s frame tent, and cooked our emergency rations for supper.

Pilots had been asked to bring their own meat, so the next day we made the three-mile round trip to the shop and bought salads, sauces, cheese slices, charcoal etc.

And then – a crisis: no rolls! So I flew to Benbecula to get some.

The £26 landing fee is a bit heavy, but normal for Highlands & Islands Airports. I wasn't allowed out of the airfield because I didn't have my passport, and the delivery driver from the bakery 400 yards down the road wasn't allowed onto the airfield.

We weren't even allowed to pass the box of rolls from one to the other across the open gateway, so the gate guards had to collect the rolls on one side of the open gate, turn and hand them to me.

Job done, I flew back to Sollas, where Colin had marked out the runway on the sand, and I erected my portable wind-sock. Just the bunting to fly, and we were ready for visitors.

The promise of strong winds and rain in Western Scotland was a little pessimistic, and this put off some of the more prudent pilots who had reached Glenforsa but didn't fancy a trip across the sea.

In the early afternoon, half a dozen arrived from Broadmeadow Farm airstrip, although they couldn't stay for the barbecue, as they'd booked accommodation at Benbecula. Too posh for camping, boys? (Only joking).

By evening, there were 10 aircraft on the beach, and we had a very pleasant evening sitting around the barbie, which we later turned into a campfire with the addition of driftwood, accompanied by music from Adrian Jones' iPad, followed by an excellent session of microlighting songs written by Pete Goff and accompanied on his ukulele. Many bottles and cans were emptied.

For breakfast, everyone helped themselves to what remained of the barbie, and since I had an appointment for the Friday – flying my Shadow to Croatia with the team that provided the report in MF November 2019 – I was keen to get home for Thursday night.

With a low cloudbase and poor vis, it was not until 8.50am that Colin and I were first away, and clear skies after 10 miles made the run to Glenforsa much sweeter, then on to Mull, Bute, Kirkbride and St Michael's by 4.25pm.

There was no one on the field, but prior arrangements on the way north meant that the key for a hangar full of fuel was available for us.

Brimming all tanks and cans, Colin made his own way back to Willingale, while I topped up my tanks at Sittles and made it to Plaistows at 9.12pm, just 10 minutes before the airfield closed after sunset.

The trip back home was a little over 535 miles, completed in 12h 22min with 9h 17min flying time.

This year we have not been able to raise so much for our selected charity. If you have enjoyed reading this, please help by giving £20 to Children with Cancer at uk.virginmoneygiving.com/fly-uk. □

Photos

- 1 Paul Hollands crosses the threshold
- 2 That's more like it. Barbie up and running
- 3 Camping on the Machair
- 4 Broadmeadow arrivals