

Flying from New York to Alaska – returning via Canada
30 June -12 July 2007
By Jaap Rademaker

This all started when I read “Alaska” written by James Michener – he wrote about Alaska from the beginnings of time, via Inuits and the Russians sailing across, fur and gold rushes to bush pilots flying their floatplanes. Even today, the vast expanse of the sparsely populated Alaska, with its absence of roads, means that locals rely on their amphibian planes, able to land on land as well as water. Of the mere 5,000 seaplane and floatplane pilots, the majority are resident in Alaska. I had always been fascinated by travelling over sea and through the air, having sailed all my life and having flown “normal” planes for eight years now.

One year, having sold the sailboat I lived on happily for many years, bored with my house, I was searching for and reading up on the perfect boat. That in my opinion was the aluminium Ovni, a capable 44 footer with which Jimmy Cornell, a famous multiple circumnavigator, chose as his third and final boat. That is quite an endorsement, to be the chosen vessel for an enormously experienced liveboard yachtsman. So one summer five years ago, I drove to the factory in France, on the Atlantic coast. The interior wasn't perfect but everything else was. The financial director of the factory said she would send my details to a fellow banker who lived in the US but bought his boat in France and was to sail it back to the US. The owner, Evan, got in touch with me and invited me for a cross channel trip which needed to be done to avoid VAT becoming due. As not only a sailor but also a former tax lawyer, I could not resist.

The ovni turned out to be the best boat I have sailed in my life ! I missed some sailing the next year due to work commitments, but the following year I joined Evan on a leg bringing it from Canada to the US. Meanwhile on a business trip to New York, I had also flown with him from New York to Martha's Vineyard, an island in Long Island Sound – we were accidentally both leisure pilots. As he was also interested in seaplanes to such an extent that he got one and based it in Florida. I sent him the book Alaska – which describes the birth of seaplanes and their extensive use in Alaska.

And one day an email appeared where he invited me for an expedition to Alaska by seaplane. It was long after I had accepted that I actually looked at a map and realized that the distance from New York to Alaska is actually 3,000 nautical miles. To go there and back would mean 60 hours of flying, it would be 1/6th of the way around this earth ! And flying is weather dependent – so how would that be ? But what an amazing opportunity to really see a country unfolding before your eyes, the perfect way to see the beautiful nature on the way, the countless islands. The reason I learnt to fly was that it is by far the best way to see landscapes – you can't see a thing from a car, but if you've got 1,000 feet of altitude, you see things more than you'll ever imagine. And it would be a unique way to see people going about their lives in out of the way places. This was in many respects the most interesting and challenging travelling of my life ! Here the day by day scribblings, mostly made in the air on my Nokia personal organizer.

Saturday 30 June 2006

Leave early, with takeoff at 0650 local. Great visibility, smooth until 3 hrs later approaching Niagara. Tested 10,000 ft ceiling with full fuel and luggage. It climbed slower the higher we got, but the Lycoming pushed the Lake Renegade, callsign N1971 to that altitude, after which we would need to have oxygen. OK !

Quick stop in Niagara and we are off already over Canada, passing Toronto. I look at the maps and realize how vast this country is. We are attempting to use the good weather and fly aggressively, full days in the beginning with three legs of about three hours. Before we cross Lake Huron, scattered cloud and some turbulence hit us. That's what the midday sun does, heating up the air unevenly. After an hour of being bounced about we cross Lake Huron which provides smooth air over the water. It makes me realize that turbulence is tiring.

Smooth air after that with a well trimmed and happy N1971 is excellent, time to look around the plane, newly fitted beige leather interior. 1984 build, cruise around 100 kts. Honesty compels me to say that it has actually sunk once - it collided with a log - and the right wing was rebuilt last year after a hiccup with the landing gear on a boat ramp. It is however a massively strongly built plane, so as to be able to cope with shocks associated with landings on roughish water.

At the end of the second leg of the day, near Michigan, Evan executes a perfect landing on Otsego lake near the airport, my very first water landing ! It's important to note that water landings are far harder and more dangerous than land landings, and require great skill – the trick is to judge the height above water and for the last part have a very low sink rate. Have a look at the books which can be downloaded from www.lakeflyers.com if you want to know more. The touchdown was smooth notwithstanding the short waves. Planing half speed downwind to take off again gives a cool feeling. But really unexpected and unsurpassed is the takeoff - the perspective of the flat water becoming distant rapidly is majestic !

Quick lunch at a typical diner, having borrowed the courtesy truck (red ford f150 with 321k miles :-) from the airfield we were refuelling at and we are jumping into the sky again.

Flying over Lake Michigan, largest fresh water lakes in the world. Magic to see islands with tidy airports, roads and farms. The amount and quality of airports really is unbelievable compared to the UK and European flying I am used to.

We fly into Gull Lake, moor the plane at the beach in front of a comfortable resort (with jacuzzi overlooking the beach).

Sunday July 1, 2007

Up at 6 am. Plane stuck at beach, we wonder if it has taken on water. Yikes ... extra weight in large quantity is not a good thing at all. We get it planing on the water, or as it is called "on the step", quite easily. Bit of a nervous water takeoff, and in rain and grey cloud in 5 mins we touch down at a very big set of runways called Brainerd.

Off again after taking on 50 usg of fuel, at 0730 local. Weather improved. Flying over more lakes, gradually becoming very big farms. Suddenly the lakes and forests are gone and we are over immense flatlands, looking remarkably like the reclaimed lands or polders we have in The Netherlands !

Flying low now to test the terrain function on gps in good visibility conditions, it works well, turning yellow and then going lower, red and indicates the electricity masts well - even in the middle of nowhere. The terrain has changed from square perfectly tilled agricultural land to rougher land, not that even with intermittent lakes. Good to have so much flat land and lakes as emergency runways - as a pilot you are always looking for these in the back of your mind. Very bumpy at these low levels, but less headwind so we bounce but have an extra ten knots. At higher altitudes, there is usually a jetstream giving westerly winds in these parts of the world. They would help us on the way back, but now they were slowing us down from our normal cruise of just over 100 knots to 90ish knots. Flying at lower levels the tradeoff is you burn more fuel. And of course we only fly low when the terrain is flat with few obstructions.

Just checked the weather, barometer - altimeter setting - dropping a lot. Yesterday it went up each time we heard a change on the radio, we were flying through a high pressure system. Today it's flying through a low pressure system. The weather is becoming murkier and hazier. We decide to stop off at Bismarck airport, we are reaching the middle of nowhere, now in the state of North Dakota.

In the courtesy car we get the same country and western song we had in our truck yesterday - " I had a one night stand with my best friends baby sister", "worked for a tank of gas and a case of beer", " wish ma mamah had wrung my neck".

Takeoff from Bismarck's massive runways after a courtesy car lunch at Wendy's in a typical square laned little town. New experience in following a wide interstate motorway, next to a traintrack. With 120 knots or 130 mph we are faster than the cars below us, but passing seems slow due to the altitude. We consider touching our wheels down on a truck to break the relative boredom but decide to postpone that to Canada - we vow to touchdown on a deserted highway there.

Speaking of the travel - the first day was intensive, getting used to the situation, now it is comfortable and feels more natural. We try to keep alert though, doing all the checks and monitoring oil, hydraulics and temperatures and pressures. It's getting hot. Following winds finally giving us speeds of 120 knots instead of the 80-90 knots over the ground we had yesterday, things are moving. The massive state of Montana is next - high mountains to cross there.

ATIS – automated terminal information service, available for bigger airfields and broadcast on specific frequencies - tells us that due to high temperatures, with the ground level having risen to 3,500 feet, we should make approaches as if we are flying at 4,600 feet, the "density altitude". A lot of airports have ATIS here, the airports in general have better standards than I have ever seen anywhere - comfortable lounges with separate briefing rooms equipped with computers, food machines, rooms to spend the night, keys of cars lying around which you can use free of charge, just fill up the tank when you are done, unbelievable, a dream for every pilot. The airfields are all put in with federal money, tie down fees of 100 dollars a year are common, and fuel is half the price. Now why was I living in the UK ?

Some statistics - we have 40 maps with us - each map is about 400 nm wide, we go through 3 or so a day at the moment. Guilt about carbon footprints mounts as we calculate we will with 6,000 nm burn about 3,000 litres of aviation gas. This is flying at an unprecedented scale for my doing - my longest flight so far has been 3 hours from South England to The Netherlands.

At 1230 suddenly, the landscape changes from flat green agricultural land to endless little mountains with exposed white rock. We climb higher. We are entering mountain country. These flights are like a geography lesson - we are now more than half way across the US but we cannot fly straight lines anymore soon due to Rockies - in a straight line it's now 650 nm to the Pacific. In a day and a half from the Atlantic in New York. Darn its a lot faster than sailing !

At about 1500 we land at Lewistown, 4,200 ft above sea level. Huge hangars, just two people who give us some water, we are able to buy hydraulic fluid from them and talk about how to best cross the mountain ranges to the west. There's no substitute for local knowledge. Noel builds RV kitplanes out here in the middle of nowhere for customers worldwide. Famous, sleek low wing planes that look like aerobatic planes. They are fast, have inverted systems so are fully aerobatic, and these are fitted out with every conceivable extra from oxygen systems to autopilots.

Full fuel, by the time we aim to reach the mountain foot in an hour and a half we should have burnt half of that, right weight to climb well. Thunderstorms - two - make lots of menacing noises. We are kindly allowed to check the radar and it's great to see how exactly you can see them. We leave in the rain, skirt inbetween the big two developed thunderstorms, and are in the sun and clear if turbulent skies again soon. It's amazing how quick you get used to turbulence, man gets used to anything, just tighten seatbelts and off we go. Bit of nervousness with the hydraulics and the landing gear light not going on in the up position, must be a switch. After letting it up and down again it pops on. Mountains here we come !

1720 local – we have are crossing timezones all the time - crossing the continental divide with 10,000 ft peaks either side, bouncing about in up and downdrafts like mad. Initially we had trouble

getting over 7,000 ft which was worrying but eventually we caught updrafts. Leaning engine, feathering props, steep climb, all tricks pulled to climb. Engine temperature over certified maximum, but thankfully due to lower outside temperature at altitude it goes down to normal levels again. Heading through the passes now to Polson on flathead lake. That's a 3,500 feet altitude strip, lower than Lewistown we just landed at - good practicing !

Good mexican dinner along the shore of Flathead lake, which has Indian roots. Our hotel is also on the shoreline, great views of mountains. It has a casino, a privilege of the indians. In yet another jacuzzi we contemplate the remaining mountain crossing. We will go early to avoid the heavy turbulence of this afternoon.

Monday 2 July 2007

Up at 5am, weather checks, oil refill, more fuel calculated to not give too much weight for the mountain crossing. We take off on the runway facing the lake, great in case we would have engine failure on takeoff. For the non pilot readers - it is standard procedure to always assess options for a forced landing; you look for flat land or in our unique case flying an amphibian plane, lakes or rivers. This quality of the plane is a great comfort for the flying we hope to do in Alaska as well - if bad weather pushes you down to very low levels flying over water, you'll be able to land. Large waves will destroy the plane but you'll walk away. Then of course you'll die of exposure to the cold, but hey walking to work is hazardous as well. I did not bring my Musto HPX drysuit for weight reasons but I should have !

After takeoff we take a wide turn over the lake whilst climbing, we wave goodbye to Polson and find that the morning air is perfectly smooth. Trimming out for a cruise climb, N1971 steers herself. It must be a she by the way - being a flying boat. Today climbing goes well, and soon we have a beautiful wide vista of the mountains in front of us. No emergency landing options anywhere but the beauty is breathtaking, seeing valleys filled with clouds, rivers that have been carved out over countless years. The air stays fabulously smooth all across, fine visibility whilst we keep checking temperatures and pressures. Another 45 mins or 80 nm later, the peaks become lower and we once again have flatter and lower land. We've crossed the continental divide !

Whilst I'm keeping an eye on the plane steering itself, Evan checks his emails, I'll do that as well later to keep an eye on work - at 8,500 feet. We're again in yet another time zone now, having gone west more. We are now about to reach the pacific ocean, after which it's north northwest, so we'll be in the same timezone for the next week or so.

We fuel up and find that on a previous stop, someone filling the tanks filled the reserve tanks under the wing, called sponsons - they function as floats to keep the plane horizontal when in water. Main tank is 40 gallons, wing tanks 17 gallons each and the small sponson reserves are 7 gallons each. In a way it has been good that we have been flying heavy - the plane performs well with all the weight. It is a four seater with a good luggage compartment. In Alaska there are sufficient runways, state maintained gravel without fuel. So all tanks will be needed to get through Alaska. I don't exactly feel comfortable with the main tank being a bladder tank that's 23 years old but it is checked each year. The sponson tanks are never used so I mistrust them as well - aluminium with steel caps and rust around them. Dirty fuel is the main reason for engine failure but I check and there is a filter. Also the sponsons take on water a bit, and the drain checks show water in the fuel. Now how does that get in there !? I had read all the books on Lakes I could find, and know that there is a known problem with that, it seems to be the drain plug that gets pushed in somehow at water landings. The placard warns to drain off water before operating. I ask Evan that we only use the sponsons with a couple of hours flying over water, so we might live if the engine protests. Found oil for sale, organized charts by phone next stop, Bellingham, north of Seattle. Quick breakfast in all american big girl country and we are off again. We still have to go over high mountains for another hour or so. Slowly and steadily we climb, 6 and half, seven and a

half, eight and a half, ten thousand - the highest you can go without oxygen - max half an hour at this altitude. Engine looking good.

This part is actually impressing and concerning me a bit, there are clouds in the distance over the mountains, and they look high. As we get closer we can see that they are scattered. Snow covered mountain tops popping out of them, so we calculate with the chart we should just be able to get over them. Clouds do worry me. The Pacific coast is known for rain and fog, just as the Atlantic affects Ireland and Scotland. It goes well, we are just higher than the clouds, they are not too many and quickly we are over them. The visibility is amazing - we see the vast expanse of Seattle in front of us, and even across the bay and behind that another mountain range which according to the chart is over 100 nm away ! I check and recheck but it is true, over 100nm visibility wow.. We are blessed with this continuing good weather. From now Alaska is about 700 nm north. After that we will have to do another quite long crossing over high mountains on the way back but for the next week it is Alaska with its endless stretches of sheltered water so we can land whenever needed from a visibility point of view or when the engine has trouble. It is magic to travel this way with such long legs carrying us far, floating through the air.

1230 takeoff from Bellingham, in the US just South of Vancouver and the Canadian border. The weather looks bad, rain and low cloudbase at times on the way northwest. We file a flight plan and intend to fly to a customs airport called Port Hardy. It's over water all the way. Through busy Vancouver airspace for the first half hour, seeing fleets of motorboats below us. Beautiful natural harbours, islands in the strait of Georgia, huge rafts of trees towed behind a tug - thanks to the logging industry, the many local sailboats will have to watch out, I see loose logs floating everywhere and lying on beaches. Finally flying in amphibian plane country, I feel relaxed flying over water. It's raining a bit here and there but nothing too bad. We've reached the Pacific Northwest from New York in two and a half days ! We're joking we should keep going via Siberia and China to end up in Europe next week with this kind of progress, but at the same time realize that there will be some days of bad weather. Having now flown some 28 hours in two and a half days, I will be fine with that, some R&R. Having said that, this is so much more comfortable than driving. Today has been great with absence of turbulence so far which feels positively luxurious.

Channel narrowing, mountains either side, water below, cloudbase lowering. We see two floatplanes flying the opposite direction, it's like we are in a street ! It widens out again, but the rain starts to become heavy and we are in such bad visibility we can barely make out the mountains left and right as dark grey shadows. Driving rain, 400 feet, welcome to the Pacific Northwest.. We radio ahead to Port Hardy to learn that there is still ok visibility there. The lady in the tower very matter of factly tells us that in showers vis drops to nothing and asks us for an accurate position. Hmm.. In five minutes we get through the worst but it still is rubbish. There is cloud near us which seems stationary, we realize it is actually nearly keeping up with us somehow - we have some tailwind but not a lot. Eerie. Fifteen more minutes and we are positioning for landing. As soon as we land the fog quietly envelopes the airfield. Someone is trying to tell us something. We will have to respect the Alaskan weather.

Tuesday 3 July 2007

Up at a normal hour, normal breakfast. Short flight in bad weather, hour and a half. 500 ft all the way, beautiful though, low over fishing fleets, ferries and plenty of yachts. Very cool strip on Denny Island, with a place called Bella Bella, tarmac. We walk out, the rain then of course stops and meet a wolf ! Evan thinks it's a dog but later on we have things confirmed. He grew up in a city, what can I say.

We walk for half an hour, when we meet the first car which is Verne's, our lodge host. We drive along the one road on the island with his ancient jeep Cherokee, stop off at the attractive marina and main square, arrange a boat for a salmon fishing trip, we buy fishing licences and some food at the grocery store. Bella Bella island has a population of 64. Then on to the lodge by jeep and short walk to his house and adjoining cabins. The cabin is a very nice split level house, with a view of the bay. The waterfront is reached by ramp and pontoon. Verne has worked on yachts

skipping for 20 years and knows the pacific coast well. It is telling that he has picked this spot to retire. It is well protected and offers good fishing. I expected Alaskan inflated prices but we pay 90 USD per person for the little house with two bedrooms.

Off fishing with a little boat and a great guide, Grant the "lunchbucket" – I apologize to him, I still do not have a clue what the word means. I've never done any fishing really so it's good to see how the gear works. We trail three rods for quite a while in the rain, I've always wondered why people fish, I don't quite understand the sport. But there is a lot of excitement all of a sudden when we have two biting - not in the bait but shiny "flashers". We both catch equal size salmon, club them and store them. The weather closes in and it gets rough, so we move to an inshore spot and around slack tide Evan catches a big one. Back to base, we get one cooked at the restaurant and vacuum the other two for Fedexing back to Evan's office in New York. During dinner we meet Christie, Mary and some other staff who are about to start a busy season - and have games of pool, darts and shuffleboard. Good evening. Some native tribes in Africa run for days, then stop - to let their soul catch up because they have been travelling fast. I feel the same somehow, Bella Bella is a good place to let that happen.

Wednesday 4 July

After a fabulous breakfast cooked by Verne's wife, we file a flight plan for Ketchikan, Alaska. It's the US again, that was the plan as we want to celebrate independence day. We take off and fly low over the Shearwater fishing resort and little marina which are lower than the runway.

We run into quite bad visibility after having gone out to sea - we did that to have easy flying in bad vis - if there is nothing to hit and you are in an amphibian plane, it's ok to get pushed down. The ceiling comes lower and lower and we are closed in completely for the first time. Evan switches to instrument flying and we carry on in driving rain in grey nothingness. It is hard to describe how unnerving zero visibility is when you are doing 100 knots or more. We are at 300 ft in and out of bad visibility for over an hour. Most of the time we can still see the waves right beneath us so we know it's down to 300 feet vis. We are both navigating and fly slower with the flaps down in case we are forced to land. Over sea it becomes clearer again at times and we can prepare for an imc/instrument landing, setting up the gps which has instrument flying approaches built in. Fortunately Ketchikan has good approaches and no mountains nearby, it is parallel to the water so I am ok with all this. I don't mind flying over water in low vis but looking ahead to crossing the mountain ranges from Juneau to the North into Canada in a few days, I would be worried. It is the most challenging thing I have done in my life, things can go wrong quickly when you are flying at high speeds.

Vis becomes better, we have another hour to Ketchikan. We get there with a 500 foot ceiling, thankfully a massive 7,500 feet runway with lighting. We land in rain, only using 2,000 feet of runway in a very smooth landing - this weather has the one benefit of non being turbulent. On the ground we stand and wait for customs – you are not allowed to get out of the plane before customs arrive - watching "Beavers", floatplanes, land on the water next to the runway, one after the other, these horrid conditions don't stop them from flying. At the same time jets are leaving in the opposite direction, the air traffic controller calmly directs, you can tell this is everyday stuff for them. It's magnificent to see all these floatplanes working away. A friendly lady from customs clears us in and we are off to a comfortable hotel, again with a free courtesy car. This is our fourth courtesy car - each time we get into one, we turn the radio on and it has the same song on the radio - the one about "the one night stand with ma best friends baby sister". Ketchikan is the first port of entry for Alaska, lots of cruise ships, quite run down city. We do a rubbish bus tour taking in a waterfall, bald eagles (impressive) and a couple of totem poles.

Thursday 5 July

Weather is forecast to be bad, the whole region indicates IFR (instrument flying only, no visual flying which is the normal, VFR Visual Flight Rules way of doing things. We are not impressed by the cruise ship destinations, shame that the one historic place where the Russians first landed around 1740, called Sitka, is covered with rain and cloud on the radar. Shame but we want to carry on, there seems better weather to the East. As also there are fresh water lakes to land on (as opposed to salt water landings which we have avoided so far).

Flying over the Pacific Ocean with visibility is enjoyable, we are trying to find whales but are unsuccessful. Countless little islands and typical red roofed lighthouses pass under us. When the land is flat and under the cloudbase, we fly low over the land - no bears in sight. After an hour of flying whilst being able to see ahead for an hour and even some holes showing blue skies, we reach Prince Rupert in Canada. These places are always deserted, nothing there ... except a couple of private jets - for some reason no matter where you go there are a couple of big gleaming new jets standing quietly. It's cheap to keep them here rather than hangar them. We find an overview chart showing vfr routes through the mountains and after paying our firearms licence over the phone - for the rifle we are carrying to take care of bears that like our food too much when we are camping at a lake in the middle of nowhere (when there are no roads, somewhere becomes nowhere), we plan our route through a mountain pass with a river - allowing some emergency landing options.

The two hour trip goes well, beautiful snowcapped mountains either side, winding themselves over a river. We're keeping a lookout for bears but haven't seen any so far. After flying through a higher valley, the green expanse widens out again in front of us and we decide to land at a lake with a seaplane base - shown on the map. We descend from mountain crossing altitude to landing height by just pointing the Lake to the ground - because of the engine on top of the plane, it does not accelerate to more than 130 knots even with the engine at cruise power, which is unusual for a plane. Evan says dryly in the steep dive "a Lake flies like a dead cat" and provides interesting facts like a human body in freefall not going faster than 110 knots. It's great to have fresh water lakes to land on, great fun suddenly being in a different environment and to sit on a calm lake on the nose of the plane, paddling it to shore is a memorable experience, I feel one with the Lake Renegade which is carrying us through the skies day after day.

Staying in a little hotel in Smithers, 6,000 population, ski place in winter, quiet town with friendly people. After dinner a quick hike around the local river, amazingly nearby, too many mozzies though, there's always a downside !

Friday July 6

Up at 7am, off through the mountains to Prince George, we land at one lake along the way, try to on the next but waves too high so we take off again. Practice makes perfect, good to know different conditions bit by bit. Landing on water is completely different than on land, much riskier. Quick fuel and off again through the "trench route" which winds its way through the vast Canadian Rocky mountains. We have a great flight inbetween sundrenched, snow capped mountains. It's a long flight to Spring banks near Calgary, all through mountains. For an hour or two we are above a lake in a valley and conditions look good for a water stop, the lake not being too high to prevent taking off again - something to watch out for! We anchor off the boat, I mean plane, after sitting on the nose paddling it ashore. On a beach with fine sand, we get the rifle out and do some shooting at tree trunks with a remington 30.06. My god it is loud with these big cartridges.

Off again quickly as in Canada you must file a flight plan for each flight. More flying through high mountains, we should reach the famous Banff soon. As I write, we are in a very high part, flying again at 10,000 feet, our maximum without oxygen. The down- and updrafts are aggressive and the mountains are bald, being above the tree line. Just near Banff the mountains narrow and we get unbelievable turbulence, up 1,000 feet per minute then downdrafts pinning the vertical speed indicator to 2,000 feet per minute. Full control inputs needed to keep wings level. There is a

runway at Banff but for emergencies only. A hairy upsloping strip where we have been told the windsocks at bottom and top can point in opposite direction. I do not want to land there. I am getting deep respect for high mountains and am glad we had the most of it for our trip. My maniac friend who owns the plane dryly remarks that it's not as bad as in a thunderstorm. I worry about him.

Landing at Spring Banks just west of Calgary is lively as the gear lever got stuck and we lost hydraulic pressure so the flaps would not come down. Landing at high speed wrongly trimmed at an airfield at 4,000 feet on a hot day. Evan does a decent landing nevertheless, the guy is a proficient pilot with the sharpest of brains. Spring Banks has dozens of Hangar houses connected by a maze of taxiways, I have never seen a plane city like that.

An old lady kindly lends us her golden mercedes, about 1980 build. Very cool vintage car by now, in pristine condition and comfortable. We can't easily get a rental car as it's out of the way and there is the "Calgary Stampede" going on at the moment, an outdoor event involving rodeo, horseraces and a big fair, so every hotel and rental car is booked. We drive to Banff, only 45 mins away and get a bland motel for the night. Dinner is bland too and the couple of bars we visit after that not interesting either. I'm just not into that kind of stuff, give me sailing or flying any day. Banff is a ski town really, quite big, feels like a plastic gridded shopping mall. It makes me like Europe more and more, same feeling I had in Australia - quaint non linear buildings and a quite a few centuries more of history and a diversity of that history and architecture which I love dearly makes Europe so much more attractive to me although relentless overpopulation is quickly spoiling that too.

Saturday 7 July 2007

In the morning we go for some horseriding around Banff. Great ride with a couple of crossings through fast running rivers! Then off to Calgary for a look around this famous "stampede". Horse and bull rodeos are going on, but what really gave me goosebumps was the barrel race, women racing their horses around barrels in a pattern, the horses sprinting to the next barrel after rounding one. Truly spectacular to watch, man and beast working together to perfection. Even kids participate seriously in an event whereby three little kids try to hop on to the back of a wild pony, helping each other to try to control the pony. In all these rodeo events it is worthy to note that the animal always succeeds in getting rid of the humans involved in a matter of seconds. Very darwinian.

Late afternoon we decide to fly to Swiftcurrent, where friends live who emigrated there from England last year, they are currently camping near a Lake 20 nautical miles to the North. We are losing light and Evan has a sore throat still, left over from an afternoon fishing in wet cold Alaskan weather and doesn't fancy camping overnight, so we'll overfly and come tomorrow morning to say hi to them. In Swiftcurrent the local best western is full but as we offer up one of our rooms to someone that stood next to us and turned out not to get a room, the management kindly rewards us by giving us a normal room and one suite - I have the one normal empty room next to the noisy swimming pool pumphouse while the P1 has a suite with Jacuzzi in his room. Some guys have all the luck !

Sunday 8 July 2007

From Swiftcurrent to Diefenbaker Lake, Saskatchewan landing where we circle the area to wake our friends up and land in the water. We find N1971 a good berth in grass swampy shoreline - grass is always safe, and the spot is next to the parking lot of the marina yet around a corner from the entrance to the marina from the water. We check the grassy swamp has no rocks and put the anchor in the ground ashore. Jason and family meet us with their waterski boat, and after a cup of tea we go "tubing" and wakeboarding - great fun and it turns out Evan is a very good wakeboarder, jumping and turning behind the boat. Good afternoon with fun and games on the water. Some lunch, and at the end of the day Evan takes two of Jasons kids up for a short flight,

whilst Jason is kindly manoeuvring the boat around to allow me to make some cool stills and video, for once from the outside. Pleasant dinner and walk over the hills with the dog, camping in a big tent with air mattresses - the token sleeping bag/roughing-it-without-a-jacuzzi bit.

Monday 9 July 2007

During the night the forecast bad weather and 40 knot winds arrive – landing on water with a lot of wind is very tricky, more a problem than on land. In the early morning as expected the wind died down again, and with a break in the rain we fly to Swiftcurrent to drain the plane, it didn't take on much during the night. No fuel services available at this early hour so we calculate we should have enough to make Regina. Obligatory flight plan, weather has us right south of a low pressure area so we have rain and poor visibility all the way to Regina. There we look at the radar to find the bad weather is moving with us, but we can fly faster so we decide to go right through it to stay ahead of it. Rain and more rain ! We have a couple of leaks that let water into the cockpit, the gear up light doesn't want to work (well, better that than the gear down light!) and we're keeping the avionics dry with the few bits of spare clothing that the weight limit allowed me, all good stuff.

After another take off, to a place called Morden in the middle of nowhere but with fuel. Very Lord of the Rings, this whole trip. Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba are deserted and flat, not much to see other than farmland. The ground is so dry they seed by airgunning in seeds - if they would plough it would just break up into dust. First hour and a half in heavy rain and bad vis, but finally we get ahead of it and the sun even breaks through - that of course brings turbulence but hey, nice change. Evan goes to the back of the plane to change out of water shoes and shorts, we're getting quite used to flying now. I have to resist giving him zero G whilst he is in the back seats, that would get his adrenaline going but would also start a vendetta which is not a great idea as his danger threshold is considerably higher.

At a cropdusting field called Morden we fuel up from a very old pump, agree a price - novel - and we go right on again to the lakes. Clusters of German named villages on the chart remind me that it's immigration a century or so ago in the industrial revolution times that made Canada what it is today. Also lots of Scandinavians settled here. Cold long winters and short hot summers. The clouds are lowish and scattered, for a different view, we go above them. We're faster there as well with a tailwind, doing 130 knots over the ground. Beautiful and relaxing ! Clear blue skies above and white cauliflower below, magic ..

The lakes start very suddenly - like someone drew a north south line on the map, it turns from what looks like the polders or reclaimed lands with neat green and yellow rectangles, into lakes strewn around everywhere. We land in the middle of somewhere, Atikokan.

Tuesday 10 July 2007

The weather looks awful, high winds and thunderstorms, sheet rain and hail predicted. We think we can slip through and around it all but I have a bad feeling about this. We set off nevertheless but right after takeoff we are in cloud hugging the treetops, and we forgot to set our altimeter. That works like a barometer off pressure, which has changed during the night. Cardinal sin which henceforth we will not forget. We decide to turn back and land again at Atikokan. Evan wants to be back in New York soon to see his wife and kids but I really don't want to fly in this. He's also convinced today is a writeoff though. We are usually glued to the weather channel anyway - at the end of this day lots of footage about big hailstones and torn out trees further southeast.

We spend the day as if in a surreal television program. Atikokan has about 3,000 residents, double that in the past as it had iron ore mines. North Korea outcompeted them, and a dying town with lots of incredibly cheap houses is the result. Very run down. We visit the museum, play darts at the Royal Canadian Legion - darts is huge in winter - and stop off in some empty bars to find out that in the weekends people from wide and far flock to this place to drink.

Wednesday 11 July 2007

The weather seems to give us a window. We go for it, right after takeoff very low ceilings again, but good visibility horizontally. In all its dangerousness, it is beautiful to have the trees, a thin line of horizon and dark grey menacing clouds above. We carry on flying through fluffy cloud at only 400 feet above the trees. Evan jokes that we have to keep the landing gear down. And it doesn't matter that the engine above our heads - unusual as normally it is in the nose of a plane - is in the clouds.

Soon the lowest layer thins and has holes so we decide to climb above that, and find the next layer is considerably higher. It's magic to see the lakes, trees and low misty cloud moving beneath us in the early morning. After an hour or so we are above Lake Superior - fresh water, 300 feet above sea level. The Lake is hundreds of miles wide. Rainshowers are visible from afar, and we are able to navigate around them.

We fly into Wawa, which stands for goose and explain the many geese statues standing around. Wawa has a very different feel than Atikokan which was hidden in forest. It's got lots of waterfront and has a well-to do feel. Quick lunch and after a chat with the weather lady at the airfield - who is busy letting up helium balloons to measure with a stopwatch the low cloudbase, we fly off to Killarney. The weather is not too bad - again we stay over the Lake to avoid thick dark grey layers of cloud over land. After a couple of hours we find and land in picture postcard perfect Killarney with a stiff crosswind. The sun breaks through as we walk into town and reveals a picture perfect little waterfront town with marinas. Time has stood still since 1950 here, we stay in a lodge which could be right out of an old technicolor movie.

The owner fought in the airforce in the past and I suspect he is behind the big runway - with fuel pump which is however out of use - and the event for amphibian planes held here every August. His lodge has a shallow ramp that amphibian aircraft can use with lowered gear, to drive up to the lawn and park. Walks, lots of pictures and a bit of relaxing looking out over the bay and its lighthouse in the sun. A "happy campers" evening with a live interactive music event in an octagonal glass building centred around a chimney and giving a good view of the lagoon.

Thursday 12 July 2007

Our final destination of Westchester, just north of New York, is now in striking distance. We transfer fuel from the reserve tanks before takeoff in Killarney. After takeoff, bad vis and low cloud but quickly conditions improve and we fly over the Great Lakes to Waterford International in the US, where we land and stay in the plane until customs arrive, making calls and working on our blackberries to keep up with work. On the way to Waterford we had a quick stopoff in a small lake, our last water landing.

From Waterford to Westchester is a two hour hop, only in the last hour, with Manhattan and its skyscrapers in sight, do we have busy traffic situations - we did not have that during the entire trip. In fact we only saw traffic once or twice apart from Ketchikan in Alaska where everyone was buzzing around in floatplanes.

We're ending the trip here, 60 hours of flight with nearly 6,000 nautical miles covered. A big expedition, but I've learned time goes quick, much quicker than in car driving, and actually quite relaxed when you get used to it all.