

Liberating

Libya may appear to be one of the most restrictive countries in the world in which to fly but recent light aircraft tours made by private pilots show the country may be opening up to the possibilities of GA.

Dan Tye reports.

“You’re going to fly over Libya? In a light aircraft? Are you mad?” That was the reaction of my friend when I told her I was joining prepare2go’s first-ever flying safari to the country.

“Is it even safe to go there,” she continued? And she wasn’t the only one to share those concerns.

Libya is seen as having some of the most restrictive borders and airspace in the world and I admit to having struggled to come back with any reasonable answer to reassure my friends.

I further admit to having felt slightly apprehensive about flying a light aircraft there. In fact, I think probably all of the nine private pilots who signed up to prepare2go’s flying safari in November shared that same sentiment.

There were two sides to my apprehension; the first was Libya’s reputation in the media and the second was a fear of becoming stranded in the desert after an engine failure with no hope of rescue.

In both cases, the media had fuelled these fears over the course of my life. Hollywood movies show victims wandering over sand in the searing heat and TV reports repeatedly feature Colonel Gadaffi, in full military regalia and big shades, standing in front of thousands of chanting followers. This does nothing to make Libya appear a welcoming nation for tourists.

Further to that, the country doesn’t allow General Aviation amongst its population, so it certainly seemed that it wouldn’t have the infrastructure to support a group of private pilots from the UK.

But, when Sam Rutherford, the MD of prepare2go, and the man who would be leading us on this first-of-its-kind organised tour, told me how Libya is one of the most beautiful places in the world and that the people are kind and friendly, I had to re-assess my assumptions.

This was helped, in part, by seeing some incredible photographs taken by Sam and his wife Bea from Sam’s aircraft, a N-registered Maule with the nickname Never Say Never. I certainly never imagined I’d fly over the Sahara desert but seeing Sam’s shots of the Maule’s wingtip over stunning sand seas put me there in the cockpit. Knowing that the pair had made a successful recce flight (by themselves) a year beforehand put me much at ease.

Sam first came up with the idea in 2008. A former Army helicopter pilot and master

Panoramic views from the cockpit of the Robin.

Libya

logistics man, he'd been working with car rallies over the desert dunes for three years.

For aerial film shots of the rally, Sam transported in microlights and gyrocopters by road and, after successfully flying them there, Sam decided to fly in his own plane in 2008 using permissions gained from the authorities.

But this is where Sam had the difficulty; the Libyans had systems in place for dealing with 'aircrew' and systems for dealing with 'tourists' but they didn't have systems for 'aircrew that are also tourists'.

He explains: "For the flying safaris I had to let the Libyan Civil Aviation Authority know the routes we were taking in the air but then I had to speak separately to the tourism department to tell them what we were doing

on the ground. The difficulty was getting them to talk to each other and making them understand that the trip involved them both."

With the authorities happy with Sam's plan, he could then accept pilots on to the tour, which would start in Cannes, France, and then head over Sardinia and Corsica to Tunisia on day one.

From there it was on to Tripoli in Libya on day two and then from the capital we'd fly an anticlockwise route over the desert to airfields at Ghadames, Ghat, Ubari then Sebha and back to Tripoli, taking nine days in total.

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There couldn't have been a more interesting mix of GA types on the first safari back in 2009; two twin Cessna Commanders, two Robins, one Grumman Tiger, a Cirrus SR22, a Cessna 172, a Piper Warrior and finally, Sam's Maule. I floated between different aircraft and crews throughout the trip, each leg allowing me to glimpse into how the rest of the group felt about this magnificent country.

We almost never got off the ground at all as, just days before the trip, the Libyan authorities wanted Sam to place a Libyan policeman on each aircraft – a request that simply wasn't possible. Some last-minute fixing and the authorities changed their mind and we were left to fly over Libya with just Sam as our leader. This was remarkable freedom really from a country that seems so strict, and it felt like we had the skies over this immense country all to ourselves.

Sam's first briefing in Cannes put the group at ease and answered those questions which had been on everyone's mind; how we'd navigate, what to do if we had to land in the desert, how we'd be flying together, where we'd be staying and what the weather was likely to do. Sam started off by saying, "Libya is a fantastically beautiful part of the world. It's actually very easy to fly here. The main rule is that we stay above 2,000ft. There is no radar; there is no radio service either until you start talking to the next airfield. We'll file all our flight plans based on the airways but it'll be up to us how high we fly."

All of the pilots who had signed up to Sam's tour were no strangers to adventurous flying but, even so, flying over the desert has its unique challenges and Sam met each question with reassuring responses.

Someone asked about sandstorms. "The chance of a sandstorm is about zero," Sam replied. "I've been working in the desert for 10 years and I've only ever seen one. What's more likely is a very strong wind, which can pull sand up into the air and make it murky ahead. In that situation, fly on your instruments. There may be times when you look out and around and can't see a thing but, actually, you're never really that far from an airfield."

Sam then broke down another of my assumptions that we would be flying over endless

sand seas. "The majority of what we're flying over isn't rolling dunes, it's just flat desert."

Someone then asked about our routing and how we'd navigate? "For good or for bad, most of it is on the GPS using the African database," said Sam. "The only airfield which I don't think you'll find on your GPS is Ubari."

What about the weather? "Weather reports for the south of the desert are, in short, non-existent," he explained. "Generally this time of year it's 10km visibility and no significant change. It's winter here, so it's not going to be scorching hot."

Next was some discussion about aircraft captains 'buddying' up just in case anything went wrong in flight. We'd at least have one other pilot to assist.

"There is, ultimately, a lot of self-help in the desert," Sam explained matter-of-factly. "You all have sat phones and personal locator beacons (PLBs) and there are many 4x4s out there. These things should all be talked about, but fears of the desert shouldn't overshadow the whole trip."

For me, the true nature of the trip didn't really set in until I plotted the route on a road map of Libya. Suddenly, the endless desert I'd imagined in my head became less remote; there were roads and towns passing through it and if I at least found myself down on the ground I could navigate by foot to the nearest road.

The USAF produced some ONC/TPC charts of Libya around 40 years ago and, although

Remarkably, the controller at Sebha trained at Bournemouth and gave us the warmest welcome of the whole safari.

That's not to say we weren't treated well elsewhere. Even with our nine call signs all radioing in within close succession of each other, Libya's controllers may have never worked so hard, but they kept their composure, never once broke out of speaking English and met our demands as best they could.

I remember one particular leg from Sebha to Tripoli where Derek Alway and I, in a Warrior G-BOPA, relayed a message from a British commercial airliner to the controller. Referring to every controller we spoke to as Sir or Madam, helped greatly too. A little respect goes a long way.



Refuelling in Libya is the next prime concern for anyone considering a trip here. Getting fuel appeared straightforward but this was largely down to the great organisational ability of Sam beforehand.

Libya is not at the stage where you can just fly in and refuel from a pump. The Libyan Air Force uses large black AVGAS pillows to refuel its Marchetti aircraft (the only GA-type aircraft in the country) and Sam had negotiated so that we could refuel from these too with each aircraft captain handing over US dollars as payment.

Both Ghadames and Ghat had fuel pillows but at Sebha an old bowser refuelled us, very slowly.

The accommodation surprised me too – from the pleasant but amusing Diplomat Hotel in Tripoli to the Dar Ghadames Hotel out in the middle of the beautiful oasis town, which is also a UNESCO world heritage site.

Ghadames is fast becoming a major tourist attraction in Libya and is helping the country gain popularity with travellers – something, it seems, President Gaddafi is happy with.

It's bringing more money into the country and helping with Libya's image to the outside world.

As an old trading town in the desert, I expected Ghadames to be quiet and rustic but a mass of new construction projects at its fringes signifies a trend towards making Libya more tourist-friendly.

Our night stop out in luxurious tents in the Akakus desert was equally impressive. With fresh, clean white linen and silk sheets hanging from the tent roof, the tent even had a hot shower to wash



lacking airspace, they do at least show some useful ground features. For me though, the basic road map helped me keep my situational awareness.

Before we left the capital and took flight over the desert, for flight planning purposes the group was named Fox formation, with call signs Fox 1, Fox 2 and so on for each aircraft. Sam would file daily flight plans for each aircraft in much the same way it's done in Europe and the desert airfields at Ghadames, Ghat, Ubari and Sebha all, surprisingly, had the ability to file these plans for us, even if they couldn't keep a close eye without radar. All of the tower controllers throughout Libya spoke excellent English too, many of them having trained with ATC controllers in the UK.



away the sand before dinner. That night, while watching a sunset and stargazing in the desert, we all truly felt like Arabic royalty.

The only weak link in the accommodation was the Tikikiba Camp, near Ubari – a complex of huts and shared toilets – but even that was manageable for two nights before returning to the relative comfort in the Diplomat in Tripoli once more.

Foodwise, I never went hungry on the trip. Lunches consisted of roast chicken and chips with main meals of couscous and camel stew. There were even shops in Ghadames and the Akakus to stock up on snacks, canned drinks and chocolate bars.

One lasting surreal food-related memory for me was flying with Martin Gosling and his wife Annette in their Robin over the sand dunes at sunset, weaving above the orange and black-ribboned contours with Jelly Babies in my mouth.

Just as we all took away our own lasting memories, Sam has made more after just returning from his second Libyan flying safari. This time round a ‘Dynamic’ microlight and an R44 helicopter joined in, showing that even these types can cope with Libya’s ruggedness.

This recent trip also included some more ‘firsts’ with some pilots making landings in the desert and on roads. Needless to say, the success of these past trips in Libya is firing Sam up to prepare to go there more often. He is currently planning a Saharan ballooning trip in March, the first time ever that balloons have flown in southern Libya. Then, next October, it’s a helicopter Libyan Safari especially for rotary licence holders supported by a team of ex-military helicopter pilots.

Sam is certainly not one to rest easy and it’s largely down to the key relationships he’s built with the Libyans. He’s currently working with them to write rules on ‘off-pavement’ landings in the country. “We intend to continue pushing the boundaries of GA, particularly in Africa, where we have the most experience and best contacts,” he said proudly.

And for the future? Well, it seems that Sam is living up to the name of his plane, Never Say Never. Safaris to Australia and to Jordan (via Iran and Beirut) are also on the cards. “We’re even looking at a North Pole trip,” he added. “But ultimately, in Africa, everything is possible.”



On Safari, from bottom left: Paying for fuel at Sebha; Sebha control tower with a warm welcome; and the old bowser did the job.

Above left: The GA fleet that made the tour – and the Libyan desert from the ground.