

GA ILAHFFT - DIVERSIONS, I COMMEND THEM TO THE HOUSE

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My wife and I took a week off in 2013 to try and tour Scotland, the Orkneys and Shetland in our Europa. Following a week's planning, we set off at the start of what promised to be a great two weeks of weather early in July. We chose a leisurely three-day route to keep the flying to no more than two-hours a day, and headed up the East coast to stay away from high ground and to visit friends and family in Durham and Cumbernauld. The crossing of the Moray Firth on the third day was one of the highlights – all in very nice, calm and warm weather - and we overnighted at Wick.

The fun then started. The cloudbase at Wick came down the next day (barely 600ft I think) so we amused ourselves visiting John O'Groats (like Lands' End - a bit dour) and other stimulating local sites. An unplanned second overnight and a re-visit to Far North Aviation's hangar, where the aeroplane was parked, killed further time. By the third day, we decided to abort our Orkney, Shetland, Loch Ness and Oban plans - including three expensive hotel bookings on the islands - and head back South to Cumbernauld via Dundee for fuel.

A bit deflated, we departed Wick with a cloudbase of about 1500ft but, as we tracked south over the Moray Firth, we got lower and lower in order to maintain VFR and a clear horizon. Being in the middle of that expanse of water at 150ft and 120kt is legal, but not actually much fun. The situation gradually improved though, and as we coasted back in at Banff the cloudbase lifted to about 2200ft.

The Banff to Dundee leg was going well, assisted by a busy but polite controller, until the southerly edge of the Aberdeen Zone, where we needed to climb over some hilly ground to get to Dundee. However, the cloudbase was touching the hilltops on the route we wanted to transit. 'Press-on-itis', 'go above the cloud' or 'see what's just the other side of the ridge' thoughts can be compelling in such situations, but with mountain flying advice of 'leave yourself a way out' ringing in my ears, we turned around in the valley (without difficulty) and headed back into the Aberdeen Zone to try and get around via the coast. Before too long, it became clear that the sea fog (affectionately called the 'Haar' by locals) and low cloud blocked that route as well.

We were not low on fuel but would have been after another hour and, given the low transit we had just been through, I was not keen on a 45-minute return to Wick over the sea. Feeling increasingly tense, I called Aberdeen radar and rather apologetically asked if a weather diversion might be possible. They could not have been more helpful; the controller immediately gave me a vector towards the field, helped me identify it, and held four heavy jets on the threshold for the three

minutes or so that it took us to join left-base and land on its 2km-long runway 34.

Highly embarrassed but safely on *terra firma* again, we were marshalled to the Bond Helicopters Echo apron, parked up and tied down, and considerately looked after by airport handler Signature Flight Support as we used its wi-fi to book an unplanned night in Aberdeen – which is a great city by the way – no recession there in 2013.

Because Aberdeen are party to the Strasser Scheme (see www.aopa.co.uk) which encourages a policy of not charging for emergency or diversionary landings at (about 85% of) UK airfields, we were not charged for anything at Aberdeen Airport except the fuel we took onboard. The remainder of the trip (via Carlisle, very nice) was uneventful, although haze hampered much of the journey home.

On reflection, I'm sure I did the right thing in diverting. I would absolutely do it again, even if the airfield concerned was not party to the Strasser Scheme. I'm less sure about the wisdom of my low-altitude sea crossing. I remained in sight of the surface, more than 500ft from anything except the sea, Lossie radar could see my squawk, we wore lifejackets and had a PLB onboard, and I had no qualms about what to do if I had to ditch (in my surfboard technology airplane). But I am mindful of that truism, 'One of the most dangerous things you can do in GA flying is to schedule yourself to be at a certain place at a certain time'.

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