

PICKING THE PERFECT DAY

With favourable conditions forecast, Yves Gerster set off from Switzerland and landed out in Lasham just over nine hours later

EVER since I started gliding, I've been amazed by the infinite number of possibilities, views and adventure this sport creates. I enjoy every aspect of gliding, but I especially like doing experimental flights and discovering new grounds.

About five years ago, I drew a circle around Switzerland to see which places could be attainable in one single flight. That's when I realised that the UK is not that far away. I knew that some glider pilots have crossed the Channel in both directions using their engine. This gave me the initial idea to fly to France, use the engine over the water and then land somewhere on the other side in the UK.

A bit later I figured that there should be

a chance to cross the Channel without use of the engine by using a high-performance glider and picking the perfect day.

Weather

Aude Untersee, who is a very talented glider pilot and meteorologist working for the national weather service in Switzerland, helped me with the weather. She created an analysis using weather data and satellite images from the past 20 years identifying suitable weather situations for the project. One Sunday evening (24 April), she sent me a message claiming that the next Wednesday looked good for an attempt. I was a bit sceptical at first, but still started the preparation and required paperwork. On Tuesday evening she told me that it did not look perfect, but pretty good. She gave it a 60 per cent chance of success. Ideally, I wanted to hear at least 70 per cent, but decided to try anyway because often these flights need several attempts to work out.

The main issue was the early end of thermals at the French coast, close to Calais. I had to be there before 4pm to catch lift that would bring me high enough to attempt the crossing. Since the weather forecast for France looked quite good, I was optimistic that I could make it in time, or even be there at 3pm.

The flight

On Wednesday morning, 27 April, there was a thick layer of fog on the north border of Switzerland. In order not to lose the race to the coast within the first 30 minutes, I decided to take a rather high aerotow out of Courtelary. I released in Switzerland at the border to France and started a long glide into France. I had taken off as early as possible to take the first thermals at 10.30am, which was the forecast start of thermals.

The plan worked out and the first cumulus clouds started to develop right when I needed them. I expected to have to fly in weak thermals for the first hour of the flight. I did not expect the weather to be quite as



(Steve Longland)



weak for the whole crossing of France. Twice I had to leave a thermal, because I was on a collision course with a wind turbine that did not respect my circling direction. To be fair, they were there before I was. Besides the wind turbines I also had to share the French airspace with their military, who were quite active in this region. I was told several times to hold position while I could hear and see the fighter jets pass close to me.

Mostly because of the incredible performance of the JS1, I managed to make my way up north and eventually found better and higher conditions approaching the Channel.

Decision

At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, I got a message from Aude saying that the UK was completely overcast and the thermal height close to the coast was nowhere near as high as predicted. In this moment I had to decide whether to abort the flight and turn back, hoping to reach Switzerland before sunset,

or to continue knowing that there was no possibility to cross the Channel without use of the engine. After a couple of minutes of uncertainty, I decided to fly the remaining 150km to the coast to see how the terrain looks like and prepare for a future flight.

There were some rather low thermals at the coast which gave me some last climbs. My computer predicted an arrival height of about 50m above ground in the UK. With the rather easterly wind component, I figured that there will be some sort of lift at the coast close to Dover. However, if this would not be the case, I would have very little altitude to start the jet engine or to land in the water.

Crossing the Channel

Since I had already made peace with the fact that the flight did not work out as planned but still felt I wanted to explore more territory, I decided to start crossing the Channel and to start the engine while I can still safely return to the French side for a landing.

The engine did start and soon I had a ↗

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Lasham members gave Yves (centre) a warm welcome, including Annie Laylee (left) and Andy Aveling, who helped with a long aerotow for the journey back to Switzerland

safe glide into the fields behind Dover. I turned the engine off while still being over the Channel and went looking for thermals in the UK. The countryside looked quite different to what I was used to, and I enjoyed the sight-seeing tour from Dover flying west. To comply with the local conditions, I tried to thermal as left as possible.

There was a bit of evening sun left until around Brighton, which allowed me to continue the flight in the direction of Lasham. At Brighton, the sky was completely dark and overcast, however I discovered a ridge which seemed to be going into the right direction with a good wind exposure.

The ridge brought me quite close to Lasham, but I saw on my moving map that I probably wouldn't be able to make the last few miles to the airfield. While I was looking for some fields where I could start the engine, I stumbled into a thermal which lifted me from the ridge towards the rather low cloudbase. Without knowing how those thermals were created, I found a second one, which gave me a safe final glide into the airfield at Lasham.

Approaching the airfield gave me a bit of



a fright, because I saw large airliners parked close to a massive runway. I hoped that my GPS had not mistaken Lasham for Gatwick and continued to fly towards the airfield. As soon as I switched the radio frequency to Lasham, I was called up on the radio and given landing instructions. Apparently, they had been expecting my arrival for a while, as they had been following me on the glider-tracker.

The reception at Lasham was extremely friendly, warm and welcoming. I am very grateful to Lasham for offering me a free bed, and for Annie and G Dale providing me with everything I needed for the short layover in Lasham.

I am pretty sure this was the first flight in a glider from outside the European Union crossing the EU and landing in another non-EU state.

The way back

On the next day, I tried to fly back as far as possible. The issue was that the forecast for France was quite bad. I am very grateful for Andy Aveling, who helped me with a long aerotow out of Lasham which allowed

me to directly connect with the mainland in France. I was a bit late on my schedule because I did not realise that there was a time difference between Switzerland and the UK.

Arriving in France, it took a small amount of fuel to connect to the thermals. Once I found my rhythm, I was able to cover a larger distance than I expected in the blue, and weak and distorted thermals.

When the thermals stopped in the evening, I needed only another 150km to get to my home airfield and I had quite a lot of fuel. I started the jet and climbed until there was no fuel left in the tank. This brought me on an achievable glidepath for my home airfield. However, there were some mountains of the Jura in the way, which I did not manage to clear. Therefore, I landed 9km short of my home airfield, but inside Switzerland.

Overall, I am quite happy with the project, because not only did I get to meet great people and see old friends, but also managed to fill in some white spots on my gliding map and to see more territory.

One day, maybe, I will be lucky enough to fly this distance without the use of an engine.



Yves Gerster started gliding at the age of 15. He was immediately fascinated by all aspects of gliding, particularly competitions and flying over new territory. With 4,000 hours, Yves is three-time Swiss champion and New Zealand Champion. Flying from SG Biel, Switzerland, he holds licenses for gliding, powered flight, aerotow and paragliding. Yves is an aerospace engineer, who worked for several aircraft manufacturers before changing to the high-tech and electronic sector.