

Kamenica 2013 Diary - Laurie Hurman

Prologue;

Spent all day Wednesday packing and loading up the car and trailer. Departed for the ferry at midnight and sailed on a glassy smooth sea at 06:00. I think that the crossing was the first calm and relaxed time that I had had for weeks.

We started driving at about 08:30 and everything went well. We stopped on Thursday night at a beautiful campsite on a lake near to Cologne. Up early on Friday morning and back on the road. We took the southern route to go via Nuremburg and Prague which turn out to have the disadvantage of a lot of roadworks on the German motorway. We were OK in the morning but as the Friday wore on each set of road works became a bigger and bigger traffic jam. We eventually gave up trying to make any progress in the afternoon and set up camp in a motorway service area somewhere near Frankfurt. Needless to say so did the rest of the world and the noise and activity didn't abate for one moment until the morning. Set off early in the morning but without any decent sleep the night before we just couldn't stay awake at the wheel and had to keep stopping to either sleep or drink tea, neither of which solved the problem for more than an hour or so.

Eventually we reached the outskirts of Prague and managed to find, with the assistance of a friendly native, another great campsite beside a lake. At this stage we decided that this was supposed to be a holiday – i.e. we were supposed to be enjoying it – so we gave ourselves a day off and spent Sunday sightseeing in Prague. Monday morning bright and early we set off again. Refreshed this time we were able to make great progress along some of the bumpiest motorways I've ever experienced all the way through Czech and a long way though Slovakia. The map shows the motorway in Slovakia to be in various states of construction and so it proved. We kept having to hop-on and hop-off the various bits of brand new road but actually there was so little traffic that it didn't slow us down significantly. The road surface in Slovakia on the "A" roads wasn't good but it was no worse than anywhere else. We stopped for the night at a motorway service area only about 50 miles west of the airfield at Kamenica. What a contrast from Friday night! Almost nobody else in the parking area and very little traffic on the road. I think the high spot of the whole drive for me was being up early the next morning and watching the sunrise. Just before the sun came up over the mountains to the east two deer cantered over the brow of a hill in the middle distance perfectly silhouetted against the dawn light. Perfect.

After one small navigation error (only my second of the whole trip) we reached the airfield at about 10:30 on Tuesday.

Spent all of Tuesday setting up camp on the airfield and building the big marquee. Then on Wednesday I rigged the plane and went for a little check out flight. We did some landing practise on Wednesday evening at a big tarmac airstrip half an hour north that Rob had found. Absolutely deserted except for pedestrians walking dogs and a couple of kids on a scooter.

The area we are in is all ridges and valleys. To the south of us is a huge plain stretching down to Hungary. We are told not to go east because the Ukraine border is only 15 miles away and there is a restricted zone around the EU border. North is a large expanse of hills, sort of like the Lake District but stretched out into long valleys and ridges. The Polish border is on one of those ridges. The hills are between 500' and 1000' above the valley floor and heavily forested. There are loads of place to land out in the valleys if the need arises because most of the crops (wheat and grass?) have been harvested and mown fields are everywhere. There don't seem to be many cattle and I haven't seen

any sheep at all but intensive pig farms are everywhere. Here you can eat pork in every conceivable form.

Kamenica airfield is on the north side of the tiny town/big village of Kamenica-nad-Cirochou. Between us and the town is the railway line where a comical little train trundles past at about running pace every hour. The airfield looks like a harvested grass field. The stubble is rough and the ground hard and dry. The "runway" is big but very rough and the taxi-way even worse. There have been a couple of nose wheel collapses already and there are bound to be more as the week progresses. They have found a bit of the runway that is less rough than the rest on which to place the spot landing deck and we practised on that on Friday evening. It was a bit like Popham only with people turning their engines off at 1000'.

The facilities are very good with a big hanger building containing a bar/cafe. There are 5 big sea-container style toilet/shower blocks and all the electric hook up us caravaners need. The daytime temperature has been in the high 3M's each day (actually since we crossed the channel). Half a mile to the north of the airfield is a little river which has provided a very welcome relief from the heat from time to time. There have been dire predictions of thunder storms ever since Thursday but it hasn't materialised yet.

One strange thing that we have not been able to figure out, there are loudspeakers on the telegraph poles in the village and sometimes they burst into life with talking and music. I make jokes about the new 5-year plan and reports of tractor production but I don't do it too loud in case it's true. I expect that might be a sore subject around here.

Next door to us in the campsite are the comedy Italians. Honestly, I kid you not each one is a caricature. There is the little curly haired Roberto Benigni character. All excitable and never stops talking. He actually speaks not bad English but it comes out sounding so funny it's hard to keep a straight face. Rob has started doing a really good impression of him explaining his latest near-death experience. He seems as poor as a church mouse, and flies a single seat flexwing that looks like it's been put together with a hammer. He does seem a bit accident prone. His team-mates are completely the opposite. They are the rich Italian playboy characters. They don't actually camp. They stay in a hotel in the big town of Hummene 8k east of the airfield. They always look as though they are wearing brand new clothes (I expect they are) complete with designer shoes and sunglasses. They all fly autogyros (and they are good too).

Thursday;

We did a practise task. It was very easy and a confidence booster. Only 4 photos and very easy nav over some very beautiful country to the south of the airfield. We were just about to take our plane to quarantine, in preparation for take-off when I noticed we had a puncture. Frantic scrabbling about to fix the puncture with the help of Mick Broom and his puncture repair kit and we eventually took-off at 17:18.

Friday;

We had free practise from 08:00 to 11:00. We planned to go back to the airfield where we had practised landings before but when we tried to take off the brakes were binding on and we aborted the flight. Spent an hour or three servicing the brakes and flushing through fresh fluid and we were

good to go in the evening's free flying window. Put in a measured amount of fuel and climbed to 5000' and then landed and measured how much fuel we had used for the climb in preparation for Saturday's task. An awful lot of my time in Comps is spent measuring fuel in and out again. Exiting isn't it?

Saturday;

Opening ceremony day. Mercifully short time standing out in the midday sun, parading behind little girls dressed in traditional costume. Speeches in Slovak and Pidgin English, then back to our camp and prepare for the afternoon's task. We had to take an empty and a full fuel can to the control area and weigh 14 Kilos of fuel from one can into the other. The can with the 14kg of fuel in it was then impounded in preparation for the task which we were supposed to fly that afternoon (but actually flew on Sunday). After an entire week of calm, hot, clear conditions within minutes of the first task being announced the wind sprang up and by the time we were ready to take-off it was too windy to fly.

Sunday;

Economy task that we had prepared for on Saturday. 14 kilos of fuel and how many turnpoints can you collect. The first two legs were scored for highest speed. The minor complication was that we had to climb over a 5000' mountain, and all while trying to burn the minimum amount of fuel. On Monday, when the scores were published, we discovered that we had missed the start gate on this task. We had gone overhead the location but had failed to pass through the imaginary plane of the start gate so we had no start time and could not score anything for the speed element of the task.

In the evening we did precision landings. The AL2 (2-seat, 3-axis) and AL1 (single-seat, 3-axis) went first but by the time us WL2 2-seat weightshifts had our turn it was getting very rough and a halt was called. It was a pity from our point of view because the rough conditions give us an advantage and we did a very good powered landing and I was hoping for good things on the second, engine off, landing.

Monday;

Up early because we WL2 had to do the second of our precision tasks that were deferred from Sunday evening. This time it was landing in the deck from 1000' with the engine off. Needless to say doing an engine off landing when you've just got out of bed isn't the easiest thing and I made a pig's ear of it. Lost too much height on the base turn and touched down a few meters short of the line. Nil point.

At 14:00 we were in quarantine for the afternoon's task which was a relatively simple Nav task. We were handed the map and photos at 14:20 and take-off for us was 15:20. I was very pleased to see that "planning time" was an hour. Planning time is the difference between the moment you are handed maps and photos, and the time when you have to take off (which is prescribed, you can't just take-off when you feel like it). In past Internationals this has been as short as 20 mins, which, as you can imagine, barely gives you time to tape the photos onto your mapboard and put your suit on. There is no chance to mark the map for your speed control or learn the photos in 20 minutes.

On this task we had to fly south over the big plain towards Hungary and see if the photos matched the churches. There are an awful lot of churches in Slovakia and they make very good navigation points because every village has at least one if not two or three and every single one of them is marked on the map. Got back at about 17:00 and had an argument with the scorers over the photo of the last church. We went to the local restaurant to eat as it's a big day tomorrow, briefing at 08:00.

Tuesday;

Briefed for the two tasks of the day but were told that we were not going to fly them! The organisers had planned one nav task to take us out to another airfield and another one to bring us back but then the weather was not good enough so we couldn't do them. Instead at 09:30 they announced that we would do more landing tasks – starting at 09:30! Big rush to get the plane ready and get over to the take-off area. We were supposed to do 2 engine off landings but actually only did one. When it was our turn we got up to 1000' and it was very rough. Again messed up the base leg turn and landed short. Nil point. Darn!

A halt was called when Vincent the Hungarian and his daughter came in a bit fast and got into a tank slapper and after fighting it for what seemed like the entire length of the deck, rolled it into a ball. At that point the organisers said perhaps it was too rough and we would stop for the day. Vince was taken off to hospital to have his wrist plastered but otherwise they were both OK. Vince is a lovely bloke and he and his daughter (who navs for him) are a permanent fixture at internationals. Their hospitality is legendary and they are very popular. There was a constant stream of people all evening over to their camp under the trees to commiserate and drink toasts to their speedy recovery.

The organisers decided that the day was not flyable and a decision would be made at 17:00 as to what was happening. We were free to do as we please until then so we went into the local town to explore. Late in the evening I noticed that one tyre that I had repaired last week was soft so I spent the evening repairing Frank's old inner tube in preparation for swapping that in in the morning. Set the alarm for early.

Wednesday;

Up at 5:30 to swap inner tubes on the soft tyre and was surprised to find I was not the only one about. It turned out that I was the only not to know that Tuesday's two tasks were on for today and we had an 08:03 start time. Ooops! Got the tyre done and all our gear together and made the start line just in time. Things can get very stressful sometimes. Being in the information loop is critical to success and we weren't. That was something we had to fix urgently. All information from the organisers comes to us over the intranet. Trouble is that the intranet connection to the camp is flaky. The connection in the hanger is good, but we spend all our time in the camp not the hanger. Every time the organiser puts up some new piece of information they play a tune on the PA system to let us know. They play the theme from the old MASH TV show. Picture the scene, you're on an airfield, you're camping, and the theme from MASH is coming over the tannoy. Surreal - but it works.

The morning's task was navigation on a known track but this time the track was a continuous curve which took us up to the airfield that we had done our landings on during practise week. We spotted most of the photos and were on track most of the time but our speed control is very poor and that always means that we get a low score for that. Had a picnic and put another 10 litres of fuel in at the airfield at Svidnik and then did another Nav task to get us back to Kamenica. The afternoon task was known and unknown tracks. Unfortunately we missed the first photo turnpoint on the task (we were having a disagreement as to where we were at the time) so we were not going to score very well on that one. Back at home field at 16:00ish after a long and tiring day. We decided to cook for the whole team and we made a big chicken curry. The evening team leaders briefing is at 20:30 so we waited around until 20:45ish to hear about what's in store for tomorrow. Long day.

Thursday;

Up before 06:00. I had thought in taxing on Wednesday afternoon that the brakes were biding again. I jacked up each wheel and discovered that the brakes were very tight. I removed the spat and cracked open the bleed nipple and that instantly cured the problem. I realised that the return valve in the master cylinder was not open so I made a brake pedal return spring with wing batten bungee (the P&M trike doesn't have one). Got everything working much better by 07:00 in time for our engine-off landing that we had missed on Tuesday. Took a more conservative approach this time and managed to put it in the box and stop before the end of the deck. Hoorah!

We were told that in the afternoon we were going to do a really complicated Nav tasks with unknown tracks (the triangle task if you're following it in the task catalogue). When we were briefed we discovered that actually we were going to do a nice simple Nav task with a known, curved track. Took off at 15:27 and the task took 90 minutes. We think we did quite well. We spotted all but 3 of the 16 photos (sixteen!!!) but unfortunately we marked 2 as being on track which were not. That means penalties to the value of 2 photos so our total photo score was only 9.

Off-track photos are a real bug-bear. They are photos that are often visible from the track that you are flying but are not actually on the track. You are supposed to "not mark" them on your map (which you hand in to the organisers for scoring). It's very easy to see the photo (i.e. the ground feature) and think, "Oh, I should be over there", If you do this you lose marks. It's a bad system and everybody I know hates it but it is a feature of some internationals.

Tomorrow is a simple soaring task with ten litres of fuel so at least we can have a lie-in.

Friday;

Had a nice lie-in. Got up and rigged the plane and took two fuel cans to scrutineering to weigh the fuel. Still early so I went for a run. Fuel weighing was until 09:45 so I'm OK till at least 10:00 right?

Wrong.

Plane had to be in quarantine before 10:00. Work that one out. Anyway Mary and Mick Broom took care of it while I got slightly lost on my run through the woods and when I reappeared at 09:45 they had taken care of the whole thing.

The task was the last one of the competition and was simple fuel economy time endurance. Take 10 kilos of fuel and stay up as long as possible. We calculated 75 minutes based on a fuel burn of 8 kilos

per hour, which is conservative. The take-off window was from 11:00 to 13:00. We took off at about midday and were flying really well. The Quik wing is too small to thermal in the normal sense but you can get a lot of help from the wind running up the side of the hills. The area to the north of Kamenica is all ridges and valleys so we had a lot of opportunities to get help from the lift. In some places we were flying level on as little as 3200 revs. Our overall fuel burn turned out to be 6 Kg/Hr which is about 8.4 Lts/hr.

Unfortunately after about 30 minutes of flying Mary said to me "I forgot to remind you to check the logger". Oh god. We've done the classic "leave the logger in the caravan" trick. Nil points. Again. Unfortunately the logger runs on batteries and needs constant recharging so you can't just leave it in the plane (which would be the safe thing to do). You have to take it to the caravan and hook it up to the lap-top every evening.

There really is so much to think about that it is inevitable that you are going to miss something - unless of course you're a professional which, if you look at it, most of the top guys are. I keep telling myself "don't beat yourself up, you're an amateur, you're just a recreational pilot". But in the exalted company of the world champions that we have in the GB team you can sometimes lose sight of that point.

Rob did a really good soaring task and we are sure he has won gold in the AL2 (2-seat, 3-axis) class. We all went to the restaurant to celebrate. The hanger party started at 20:00 but we didn't get there until after 21:00. The band's really cheesy but everyone's enjoying themselves with the help of free beer and tall stories about flying.

Saturday;

I got up early and went for a fly on my own. It was glorious to take-off at 06:30 in completely smooth air. The air at ground level was cold but at 600' it suddenly became warm. There was no wind at all and I flew around the 5000' mountain that is just south of the airfield, up and down the wooded valleys being ever-so-brave. Then I went and flew to the big lake that's south of the mountain at the start of the plain. I went down as low as I could but the lower I went over the water the greater my anxiety so I couldn't make myself go below about 20 or 30 feet. Not very brave after all. At one point I saw one of the markers that had been used on the competition that was still lying in a field near a village. I thought about landing and collecting it and presenting it to the organiser bloke but I couldn't quite overcome my inhibition about landing in a field next to a village at 07:00 in the morning. Markers are big white sheets of canvas that you have to spot and mark on your map the same as photos. They are only ever placed near to the start and finish because the organisers can't be arsed to drive half way across Slovakia to lay them out.

The closing ceremony was scheduled for 10:00 and actually started to happen at about 10:30. I was shocked at how many people had already packed up and were ready to leave. I didn't want it to end. I just had a big feeling of anti-climax. I couldn't understand why people seemed so eager to get away. Some did not even wait for the closing ceremony (which seemed to me just rude).

We had the speeches and the prize giving. Rob and John and Paul got their medals. We all got a "Championship Diploma" and they played the national anthem so sloooowwwly that it was impossible to sing along and we all got the giggles. I'm sure Johnny foreigner thinks we're very unpatriotic.

What none of us had realised was that the competition was sponsored by the local Salami manufacturer (more Pork). Instead of getting cups or trophies each of the winning crews got a picnic basket full of Slovakian sausage. At the end every competitor got a carrier bag full of salami. As you can imagine this started of a line of jokes that quickly descended to the inevitable. Rob and John didn't want to fly home with all that Salami so we ended up with four bags and were eating Salami all the way home.

I had imagined we would spend the rest of Saturday relaxing and then pack up seriously on Sunday but almost as soon as the ceremony was over most people were leaving. The internet and the electricity was soon turned off and the showers and toilets were locked a few hours later. We packed everything up over the course of the rest of the day and in the evening went one last time to the restaurant in the village with Frank and Emily and Mick.

Without the airfield acting as a campsite there was no point staying any longer and we left on Sunday. I was sad to be going. It had been home for nearly two weeks and I had liked it. Slovakia is such a beautiful country and we are so privileged to be able to see it from the air from where it looks its best. It can be untidy and disorganised but the mountains are stunning. Despite the hard work and stress we had had a memorable time. All that was left was to drive 1300 miles home again.

Best and worst of the whole thing?

Bad bits;

Missing the start gate on the first task. Beginner mistake. A lack of professionalism.

Missing the first photo on the penultimate Nav task. We had a system, it was working, I didn't stick to it. At the moment that I should have seen the photo I was trying to do Mary's job instead of my own. Lesson learned.

Forgetting the logger on the last task. We had a system to avoid forgetting (because it happens to a lot of people) but we failed to implement the system that we had. I feel bad about an error like this because the BMAA members support us and I think they deserve better than to have us throw points away like this.

Good bits;

The scenery.

Our speed control score was terrible in the first two nav tasks but a lot better in the second two. That was a major achievement.

The drive home was hum-drum and routine – we were seasoned travellers by now. I got stopped by the police on the motorway in Slovakia for not having my headlights on. The lights on the Land Rover are not wired through the ignition so you have to turn them on and off manually. I forgot and that cost me 20 euros.

A more serious incident occurred in Germany. We had stopped in a motorway service area for lunch and when we got back to the cars the traffic police were looking at my trailer. They examined all our documents and pointed out all of the things that were wrong with the trailer. It was a fair cop. The trailer is rubbish. It looks like it's just been dragged out of a hedge. I had been building a brand new mega-trailer but had (typically) run out of time and at the last moment stuck the new suspension and wheels on the old trailer. Now that was catching up with me.

The policeman pointed out all (really, all) the things that were wrong with the trailer and expressed astonishment that in the UK you can just build a trailer and take it on the road. He muttered things like “you will have to hire a trailer to put your trailer on if you want to carry on driving”. I had visions of huge expense coming up. In the end he let us go. He was a good bloke and I could see he was trying to think of a way to let us go without putting his own head in a noose. In the end he gave up and just told us to go. Phew!

Eventually we got home early on the morning of the 23rd.