

Delivering a Tecnam 2008 Part 1

The longest journey starts with a single phone call...

9am on a Sunday morning and my mobile is showing a missed call from Colin Dobney, Head of Training at Stapleford Flight Centre. Hmm..... I was flying one of Stapleford's aeroplanes a few days ago, so immediately I start wondering if I may have transgressed during that flight. Five minutes later and I've only mentally reviewed up to engine start, so I give up and call him back. "Aahhh Jeremy", he says, mysteriously, "I may have an interesting bit of flying if you're up for it...". Hell, we both knew I was always going to say yes.

4am on a Friday morning. The car park at Stapleford is unsurprisingly empty, other than myself, Asad – one of the staff instructors at Stapleford – and a space that should be occupied by a taxi, but isn't. The plan was simple – 4am report at Stapleford, taxi to Stansted, easyJet to Naples. But without the taxi to start with this plan is going nowhere. In due course the taxi does arrive, having driven from Cornwall (it's a long story, trust me). And so to Stansted, and on to Naples courtesy of an easyJet A319.

Don't you just love it when a country conforms so pleasingly to its national stereotype? The immigration officer at Naples is wearing more gold braid than I have ever seen on any living being; the car park outside the terminal is a spectacle of raised voices and arm-waving gesticulations; the autostrade is packed with budding Formula 1 wannabes. Nevertheless, little more than an hour after landing Asad and I are safely delivered to Capua airfield just northeast of Naples, home to the Tecnam aircraft factory. A familiar face is waiting for us – Tim Orchard, the UK Tecnam dealer. Tim ushers us into the Tecnam offices where we meet up with more fellow Brits – namely Ian Seager (yes that one – the owner of Flyer Magazine) and Robin Mincik, preparing to fly Robin's brand new Tecnam 2010 back to the UK. For our part, Asad and I are here to collect a brand new Tecnam 2008 and deliver it to its new owners – Stapleford Flight Centre. Asad flew Stapleford's first 2008 back to the UK a few months ago and so he knows the ropes. Therefore, the 2008 team decides on a division of responsibilities. Asad will deal with acceptance paperwork and flight planning, whilst I will take a personal guided tour of the Tecnam facility. I know, it's a dirty job but someone's got to do it.

My guide is Walter Da Costa, International Sales and Marketing Director for Tecnam, whose



The single-engine production lines at Capua

fluent English spares us both the embarrassment of my non-existent Italian. If, like me, you've never been inside a GA aircraft factory, I can assure you that based on Tecnam's facility it's a pretty impressive experience. Walter shows me the single engine assembly lines, starting with the basic components and sub-assemblies at the back of the hangar, through to completed aircraft ready to go onto the apron at the front of the hangar. The assembly line is impressive in its own right, but for a geek like myself it's just as interesting to poke around the back of the hangar, where some Tecnam historic airframes are gathered, witness to Tecnam's long heritage in the GA aeroplane business (that history would fill many pages by itself, but Chief Designer Professor Luigi Pascale has been designing aeroplanes since the 1950s, founded Tecnam in 1986 and still comes to the Tecnam factory each day – now *that's* heritage).

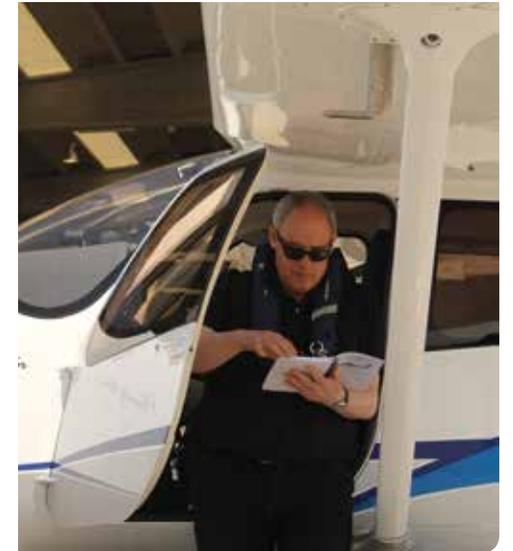
The hangar next door houses the twin engine 2006 production as well as the new 2010 assembly line. Again, components and sub-assemblies both from Tecnam itself and their local sub-contractors are stacked at the beginning of the line and you can literally walk through the construction process until you reach completed aircraft at the hangar doors, ready for flight testing and delivery. And all round is an air of quiet proficiency and professionalism – the people building these aeroplanes (around 180 employees work at Tecnam) clearly take pride in what they do and it shows. We're joined by Paolo Pascale, Tecnam CEO, and we talk for a while about their plans for the future. Tecnam are already producing about one single-engine aircraft a day and one twin per week at Capua and they have just opened an assembly plant in Sebring, Florida, with a view to breaking into the USA market. I'm curious about the 2012 project – Tecnam's 10 seat twin aimed firmly at the big Cessna twin

and Cessna Caravan market. Walter quizzes his boss in rapid Italian, then turns to me, "OK, we can see the 2012 but, please, no photos". Behind the scenes and top secret, this tour is getting better and better. Of course, if I had really been paying attention I might have picked-up some clues as to Tecnam's then still-under-wraps jet project. Suffice to say if there were any blueprints lying around, I missed them.

Our tour finishes at the far end of the buildings, where space is already being cleared for the next expansion of a site which already covers around 450,000 square feet. We then walk back along the production lines and I take in the destinations for the completed aircraft – two 2008s for a flying school in Switzerland, a P2002 for Denmark, some more 2002s and a 2006 for China and so on. And in front of the main hangar a British registered 2010 and Stapleford's new 2008, just waiting for their pilots.

I retrace my steps to find Asad and re-convene with Ian and Robin (who have the advantage of having arrived the day before). Their strategy for the day is to follow the same route that Asad has planned – up the coast to Elba for Customs and fuel top up, then to Cannes for a nightstop. That's around 500 nautical miles to cover, it's already midday and courtesy of their earlier start, the 2010 crew are ready to leave. Asad and I confer and decide that if we can leave Capua by 13:00 we should also reach Cannes before it closes, just in time for tea and medals, even though we'll be around 25 knots slower than the 2010.

Asad will fly the first leg as he knows the aeroplane type and he's flown this route before, so while he pre-flights the 2008, I busy myself stowing our gear and sorting out the survival equipment. I also take in the plastic covers still on the seats and the spotless interior. I'm pretty certain I've never flown a brand new aeroplane before – Walter has already told me that the aircraft probably has less than five hours total flight time and thus, in my view, we're still in 'shake down' territory here. In due course Asad and I are fitted out in our particularly fetching life jackets and the survival 'grab bag' is stowed



Ian Seager consults 'Teach Yourself to Fly' before setting forth in the 2010



Asad (right) and author ready to leave Capua in the 2008. Courtesy Tim Orchard

within easy reach – just in case... After handshakes all round and a couple of souvenir photos, we're ready to go. The start is Rotax standard and we make the short taxi to the runway holding point. Checks completed, Asad taxis onto the grass runway and with a final nod to those watching from the Tecnam apron the throttle goes forward and G-TSFC rapidly gathers speed until we lift cleanly into the clear air and turn north for the coastline.

For the beginning of the flight in particular I'm of little assistance to Asad and he copes professionally and uncomplainingly with flying the aircraft, talking to ATC (whose accented English he is picking up much better than I am) and operating the Garmin avionics. Meantime I'm concentrating on assisting with lookout, finding out where everything is on the panel, learning the key button presses for the radio, transponder, PFD and moving map display, and keeping up with our progress using the advanced Mark 1 'finger on paper chart' navigation method.

Fortunately the weather is near perfect CAVOK and the scenery is equally beautiful as we pick our way along the designated VFR routes, following the coastline until we near Rome airspace. The good news is that there is a defined VFR route through Rome's airspace. The bad news is that the route is 12 miles offshore at 1000ft. We try to persuade the Rome controller that 2000ft (or maybe even a bit higher) would be so much nicer, but he's not having it – rules are rules it seems. So 1000ft it is – Asad follows the dotted line on the Garmin 3x moving map



2006s awaiting delivery

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display whilst I keep a sharp lookout for the scattered shipping in the area in case the Rotax decides to give up on us. But happily the Rotax, and indeed the rest of the aircraft, is performing exactly to specification and I'm starting to settle in with the 2008. Clear of Rome's airspace we go island hopping, the parched hillsides and steep cliffs in stark contrast to the dark blue sea, all bathed in Mediterranean sunshine. Isola del Giglio looks particularly peaceful as we pass by, but Asad reminds me that this is where the *Costa Concordia* came to grief just over three years ago – a warning that, rather like the sky, the sea can be a very unforgiving place.

Even 30 miles away the island of Elba is clearly visible and we route towards a downwind join for the southerly runway. Marina di Campo airport has one of the more interesting approaches I've seen. Open to the sea to the south, on the other three sides it is surrounded by significant hills and as we join left hand downwind, but on the far side of high ground, we cannot actually see the airfield itself. As we clear the high ground Asad begins to descend prior to turning onto the base leg and it becomes clear to me that in the 2008 you can slow down, or you can go down, but it's not easy to do both at once. The base leg to runway 17 is essentially a matter of descending along an 'S' shaped valley, still out of sight of the runway, with final line-up only achieved at about half a mile from the threshold. Asad has been here before so whilst he winds along the valley I take in the steep hillsides rising above us and offer helpful advice such as "Gosh, those houses are really close" – which I'm sure was invaluable. We turn onto final approach at a couple of hundred feet and Asad makes a smooth touchdown using a fraction of the runway, so we turn straight into the apron. Here we are greeted by the sight of the 2010 taxiing out. We exchange hand signals that could probably be translated as 'See you in Cannes' and taxi up to the fuel pumps and the waiting refueller.

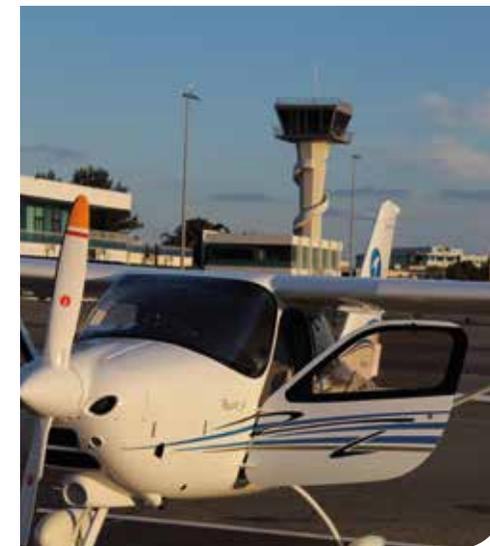
One of the best pieces of advice I was ever given about touring in an aeroplane was "Always refuel first". Even so, there is a short, sharp intake of breath when the fueller tells us that on Elba, AVGAS is around €3.50 per litre. Still, we need the stuff so the refueller brings the steps up to access the fuel tanks in the high wings. Except we can't get the fuel caps off. Asad tries, I try. We use different combinations of keys, twisting force and bad language, but to no avail. The refueller looks on patiently whilst I start to review our options, which are limited to say the least. Napoleon was exiled to Elba for nine months and just as we're starting to think a similar fate awaits us, I manage to free off the right-hand cap. I have a really good look at it whilst Asad dips the tank and instructs the fueller. I can't see anything wrong with the cap, the mechanism seems to work as it should, so I can only surmise that the brand-new all-plastic components need wearing in. I make a mental note to not lock the fuel caps on re-fitting them. Right tank sorted I manage to repeat my triumph with the left-hand cap and in short order we're refuelled. In the tiny briefing office Asad attends to payments and filing a flight plan for our next leg, whilst in keeping with the best traditions of two-crew CRM, I go in search of food. The miniature terminal building contains a cafe and almost no people at all and mindful that we've lost some time messing about with the fuel caps and anxious to be on our way, I indicate in my best sign language to the nice lady behind the counter that I'd like two sandwiches, to take away, as quick as she likes. She confirms in broken English and heads off to hand-make the sandwiches with tender loving care. Very careful, very deliberate, very unhurried, tender loving care. She carefully slices the ham whilst I watch on, trying not to drum my fingers on the counter top. The cheese is located and just the



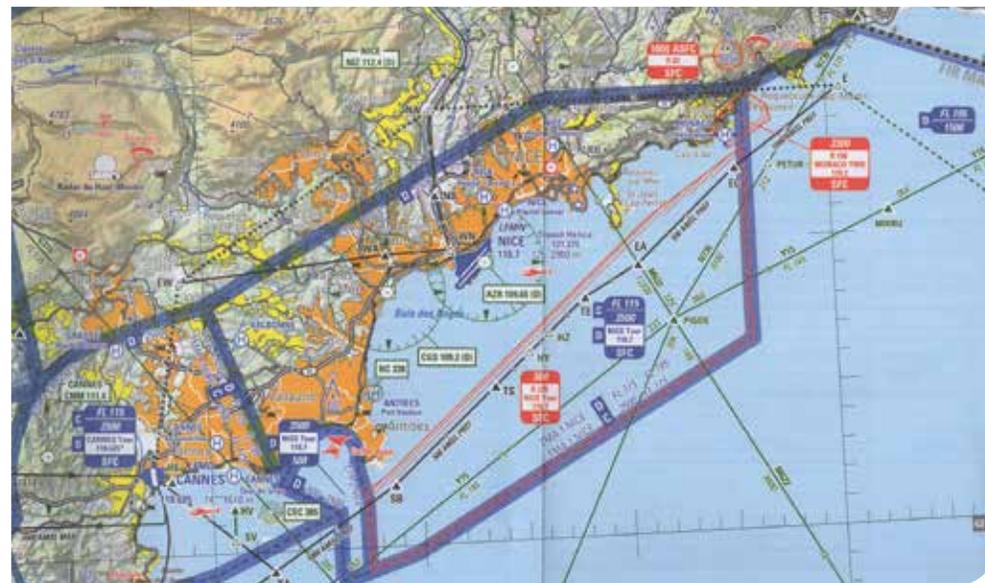
Approaching Elba

right number of slices are put to one side whilst the minute hand of the clock behind the bar moves on. Various bread products are assessed for freshness and suitability, I try not to look impatient. Asad joins me and we watch on as the grill is turned on and left to warm up, no doubt to reach exactly the right temperature. The shadows outside lengthen. It seems a shame to ask our lady to hurry up when she is taking such care, so instead we discuss the next leg of the trip. From Elba to Cannes there are two ways to go – straight across the Med, or around the coast, and I have a strong preference for going around the edge of the wet stuff. Asad and I discussed this a few days previously and agreed that we'd take the scenic route and even now, as the world turns and the sun slips lower, I still believe it's the best option. Asad, bless him, is still prepared to go along with this plan. Our lovingly prepared, hand-made sandwiches appear with a smile from Elba's most thorough sandwich maker and we try not to snatch them from her hands as we head straight back out to the aircraft.

Now I settle myself into the left hand seat as Asad conducts the 'walk round' and without undue delay we're strapped in, engine running and ready to go. There is plenty of spare runway from the apron entry points but I resist the temptation to turn right and instead make the short back-track to the end of the runway. Acceleration is brisk on the hard runway and the elevator comes alive soon after 40 knots, so that I am able to rotate and lift-off pretty much on the recommended speeds. Once airborne the initial climb rate is acceptable rather than startling, but improves once the take-off flap is retracted. I climb ahead over the sea until we can clear the high ground, and then turn North on track for the mainland once more. Pretty soon we're talking to Pisa, planning to cross their airspace using the VFR route that follows the coastline at 1000ft. "Stick to the coast" the controller stresses, "don't come too close to the airport". We promise to do just that, but a few minutes later she's admonishing us, "You're not following the coast!" Well, there's sea under the wheel on my side of the aircraft and beach under the wheel on Asad's side – I'm not sure how much better we can follow the coastline. Nevertheless, to keep the peace I move about half a mile offshore and that seems to do the trick. As we pass the city of Pisa we both try really hard to spot the leaning tower. I've got a vague recollection of where it should be from a visit there many years ago, but today it eludes us and the city is soon behind us. Clear of the VFR route we now have to route inland to avoid a couple of prohibited areas. It's noticeable how quickly the terrain rises even a few miles from the coast, and the jagged peaks of the high mountains are visible further inland. As the airspace permits we climb to maintain a reasonable terrain separation, reaching the giddy heights of FL55 or thereabouts. We track our progress around the no-go area on the G3X moving map, as soon as it's safe we turn west



Refuelling at Cannes



The low-level VFR route through Nice airspace

and thanks to the very helpful Genoa controller, accept a routing straight through his airspace towards France.

Up until now the weather has been perfect CAVOK, but as we head westwards cloud is beginning to form below us along the coastline and it's drifting inland to cover the hill tops. Right now the cloud is sufficiently broken to allow good surface contact, but I'm mindful that this is a VFR flight in a VFR aircraft and so with some reluctance I begin a gentle decent through the gaps until we're comfortably below cloud, around 1500ft above the sea. Visibility is now more variable, with the areas in shadow under the cloud distinctly more 'gloomy' and hazy than those areas still in sunshine. Nevertheless, following the coastline with the moving map and paper charts as a back-up is not an onerous task and Asad has set Cannes into the G3X so we now have a good idea of ETA. Although we're looking good to arrive before air traffic go home, I add a bit of power to keep our speed up and maintain a good margin to allow for any re-routing or holding.

We're now talking to the Nice controller and there's something I especially want to do, so I ask Asad to get in an early request for the 'VFR routing Echo to Sierra Alpha'. 'I'll get back to you on that' is the non-committal response, but at least we've asked. We pass Menton and then Monaco – the latter looking strangely unimpressive today under a dark cloud shadow, its crammed harbour looking tiny even from 1000ft. But the good news is that we get the clearance we've asked for and instead of having to route inland and scuddle around the hills and built-up areas, we drop down until we're just 500ft above the sea.

It is a fine thing to be flying a brand-new aeroplane at 100 knots and 500ft above the waves, bathed in late afternoon sunshine with the beaches and villas of the French Riviera to the right, the Mediterranean to the left and our destination just a few minutes away. There are

moments in flying that deserve to be savoured and this is one of them, I drink in the scenery with an occasional scan of the engine gauges.

We're passed over to Cannes tower and mindful of the number of jets that use Cannes, I fly a relatively fast approach, landing well down runway 35, followed by a short taxi to the self-service fuel pumps. No problems with the fuel caps this time and soon enough we're parked up for the night. I turn on my phone and a message appears from Mr Seager – 'We're waiting for you at the security gate, hotel is sorted'. Very civilised indeed and a short walk later we're booked into the Campanile hotel in the airport grounds. Half an hour later, on the way to the bar, my phone buzzes with another message – this time from Tim Orchard, still in Naples – 'It's dark here – are you safe in Cannes?' Well done Tim for looking out for us, and not clever of me to have forgotten to text him when we arrived. I send a confirmation that all is good and order a beer to assuage my guilty conscience. The four of us look for a suitable toast and Ian, with no small amount of long-distance flying in his logbook, sums it up best, "Here's to the Mediterranean behind us". Yes indeed, we drink to that.

Details of the evening that followed simply cannot be published for fear that young and impressionable minds might come across these words and find themselves corrupted, such was the debauchery and the decadence. As the philosopher Morrissey once put it, 'Caligula would have blushed'. I suspect that the others present will have a cover story about eating a quiet dinner in the hotel and retiring for an early night after a long day, but heh – what goes on in Cannes, stays in Cannes...

Will the intrepid four escape Cannes? Did Mr Seager come up with the bail money? Will Stapleford get their new aeroplane? Some of these questions may get answered in the concluding part, stay tuned.