

SOUTH *with* ZULU VICTOR

DELIVER A CFM STREAK TO THE SOUTH OF FRANCE? OH, ALL RIGHT THEN, IF I MUST, SAYS ANTHONY PRESTON



SOMEONE'S got to do it. A CFM Streak 912, G-BXZV, must be delivered at once to Gaillac in the south of France.

The overnight post and a quick service from Transair has two maps and a reference book, *Flying VFR in France*, on my desk the day before departure. Even better, the nice customer has equipped his Streak with a state of the art Garmin GPS

"Ten minutes of playing with the Garmin and I'm in love"

295 ColourMap. Ten minutes of playing with it and I'm in love.

That evening, Thursday 26 July 2001, squatting on the living-room carpet, maps spread, chinagraph pencil poised, ruler somehow making the distance seem less, I mark out the route: Parham (Framlingham) to Le Touquet, Le Touquet to Tours, Tours to St Junien where I plan to stop the night. Seems the right thing to do. My mother and two sisters live there, and it lies dead on track.

It's late by the time I'm finished, yet I have a nagging feeling that there ought to be more to do. Thoughts about clearance with DGAC, customs, flight plans, weather, heights to fly at and what to wear

drift around the subconscious but don't disturb sleep. In truth, most time is spent worrying about what to pack in the way of clothes.

The Garmin 295 helps with the flight planning. There's a huge Jeppesen databank stored in there and it tells you all you want to know. You don't need the satellites at this stage; it can all be done in simulated mode. The 295 and I are going to get on famously. I can tell that already.

Do you remember how it was with early Word for Windows? How often it was: "I don't want you to do this." Or: "What are you doing now?" Now it's: "How did you know I wanted to do this?" So clever!

As it was with Windows, so now with



Garmin. Friendly little pop-up menus pop up all friendly like when you need them and give you the choices you want. Way-points can be selected from the database, from coordinates or by moving the cursor across the map by the rocker pad. Then select Go To. A coloured trace marks the track. Controlled airspace is shown by a green outline. If you want to know more about it, you flit the cursor into the area and Enter. A block appears with all the info you could wish for.

Want to know about an airfield? Flick through the menu (it helps to know the four-letter identifier) and select.

You'll get runways, frequencies, approach patterns, fuel availability, restaurant, special notices, telephone number, facilities, bordelli – heavens, you name it!

Early start is frustrated by morning mist. Go back to sleep, then up at 0700. It's the kind of mist you instantly feel is going to burn off. So when I get to the airfield, which feels heavy with damp, mist squished to dew on the corn, I yell up into the milky void: "Burn off, will you" adding: "Please, as it's me." Of course, it works. Soon cheeky patches of diaphanous blue peek out. To the east, the sun fights to dazzle.

Roll the hangar doors apart, witnessed by an early skylark who, from a fixed and invisible spot above (on IFR, I guess), shrills his admiration at my effort (one door badly needs oiling).

Wheel the Streak out and the car in.

Close the hangar doors. Windsock hangs limp. I think about puffing in its direction, hoping to get the mist to blow away, but quickly realize it's one of those irrational thoughts that come before breakfast. Baggage into the rear cockpit; things I need for the journey within reach in the front (including essential bag of Brazil nuts).

All checks done, and it's time for that sacred moment: the faintly religious rite of sliding sensually into the cocoon that's the front cockpit. It's a wrapping up in wellbeing, like settling in a warm bath. It never fails. As you sink into the reclined position, letting the cushion take your weight, and look about you, there comes a feeling that I can only describe as bliss. All is suddenly and surely right with the world.

Airborne from runway 24 at 0820 local. Track direct to Lydd would take us over rather more water than desirable, so the Streak is placed on a more westerly heading, to follow the coast, bending east at the Thames Estuary. To ignore the track that the crow flies has the benefit of showing the GPS who's boss.

It takes just over the hour to Lydd. Lydd Information has difficulty reading my call. Have we made a mistake with this Comunica system? Ralph (to rhyme with waif) had given me a long, fascinating and very convincing argument to fit Comunica, even though the customer was keen on Bose. I try again, only with the mike this time like a bruise on my lip. Fine. On the

journey I get to like the headset, intercom and trusty Icom IC-A22 radio almost as much as the Garmin.

At Lydd, flight plan and customs clearance are conveniently completed with the help of the young man at the desk. The forms go off by fax and there is traditionally up to an hour's delay for the approval to come through. That's no bother, as breakfast in the Biggles Bar area is scheduled and it's always a treat. Look out for the Chipmunk climbing into unequivocal IMC.

The young man asks politely about a lifejacket and seems more reassured by the reference to under 50 miles than by my mendacious claims to being related to Johnny Weismuller.

The mist has returned, and the Channel crossing, almost exactly 30min, is what you might call featureless. At one point, a grey de Havilland Dove floats spookily round behind and to port in a gentle turn to starboard. I pick up his call-sign. He's also headed for Le Touquet, and I position accordingly. ▶

Above

The orange ZV in the hangar, ready for collection. The yellow one with tasteful livery now lives in France and belongs to the author

Facing page Streak with wide body and Rotax 912, the author at the controls



▷ All friendly and casual at Le Touquet. The monsieur in the tower decides that the Streak should park alone on the grass, in front of the restaurant, even though there's a large expanse of vacant apron. I kind of appreciate the thought.

The trip south is largely uneventful. I have the sky to myself. I try Lille for flight information service, but they are so busy it seems unfair to add to their burden, so I listen out and maintain a keen scan of the wide French sky.

Map-reading is always entertaining. There's something philosophical, godlike,

in the process of resolving the symbols on the chart into real objects and features on the ground, and it's so rewarding when what is depicted is observed.

The GPS adds both comfort and convenience. It endorses decisions and also simplifies the holding of a track. By orientating the map so the trace comes from the top you get the aircraft symbol riding along the track exactly as in the real world, making heading corrections instinctive.

The leg to Tours is 2h 50min. It's hot. After about 2h, with not much to do but admire the countryside, I get the idea

it might be nice to remove my shoes. It isn't one of my best ideas. The Garmin 295 is bigger than the Pilot III and sits on a stalk between the knees. The Streak trims hands-off, so lifting both feet off the pedals isn't a problem. Left foot relieved – careful to make sure shoe gets stored safely behind head.

Right is a different matter.

Space between sidestick and Garmin is less than thickness of leg. How much of a roll to the right can I tolerate for the sake of the freedom of five toes? It's a struggle. There's no way I'm going to put them on again, even if I have to dig holes in my heels to operate the brakes.

South of Poitiers, I decide again to scorn the advice of the Garmin and follow the river Vienne down to Confolens. Check on the horses at my sister's farm near Lesterps and then to St Junien via the other sister's home near Manot. Broadcast on St Junien frequency, but no other traffic, land and taxi up under the nose of a surprised 88-year-old mother who is clapping her hands.

I stay at La Brousse for two nights, then am up early Sunday, with an ETA at Gaillac of 10am. But *brouillard* again frustrates. Fog fills the valleys. Finally, I get away just before 0930 and arrive at Gaillac 1h 45min later.

The Streak attracts a lot of attention. Miles of *Flyer* magazine hints that it's a hooligan's aircraft. I question (I must, mustn't I?) the epithet, but know what he

"After about 2h, with not much to do but admire the countryside, I get the idea it might be nice to remove my shoes. It isn't one of my best ideas"

means. It is therefore clearly going to appeal to the French *aviateur*.

Some local flights are scheduled. It is very, very hot, and unwisely, I had had no protection from the sun in the cauldron under the front canopy. No time to stop for a cold drink at the charming restaurant, next the 21 runway threshold, where restful green tables invite, in the shade of neatly trimmed trees.

When the demo flights are done it's off to Monclar, with the owner in the front seat. The strip looks short, maybe 200m?

Approach is over a field of sunflowers; trees to the right, trees to the left. No wind; high density altitude. Make two low passes and plop in without difficulty. We park the Streak by the half-completed hangar and get collected in a Range Rover.

Our chauffeur, a musician, says his dad is keen to learn to fly. There's the very aeroplane for him in the Parham hangar: Tom Palmer's Star Streak, G-FAME.

Our destination is a hilltop where a village community is staging a bucolic festival. There's music under the trees. An isolated trumpeter perches, lost, on a bough. A shock-haired cellist, looking as if he ought to be in a chamber, provides mellifluous accompaniment to singers who are rocking to a non-existent breeze. There's an odour of burning grass. Some way off, table tennis and badminton is being played desultorily by cherubic children.

Next day the Streak owner and I mount his two new Harley Davidsons. I take the Fat Boy and he takes a fatter one, and we ride from his home to Monclar. I take Guy (to rhyme with he), the owner of the strip, for a demo flight. It serves as a test of take-off run.

With a final glance at my not-so-slight host I tell him, with regret, that we're not leaving Monclar together. He departs by Harley, I by Streak, and Guy starts hacking at the hedge at the far end of the strip.

Back at Gaillac and more demo flights, followed by conversion training for the owner. Then it's back to Monclar where I leave the Streak in the hangar and ride the Fat Boy the 10 miles or so home. That evening we take the two bikes and view the sunset across the French countryside from the saddle. They say you can



tell a happy motorcyclist by counting the squashed flies on his teeth.

Return to England is Tuesday. We leave from Toulouse. The owner's other aeroplane is a new Piaggio Avanti P-180. He describes it as cool. You couldn't disagree. A cruising altitude of 41,000ft and getting on for 400kt makes this futuristic machine a hotship.

Full Collins EFIS displays and systems not dissimilar to his usual B-757 and 767 help Mark in the left seat to feel at home at the controls. The owner sits in the co-pilot seat, and I have the choice of seven plush real-leather seats in the cabin.

The two PT-6 turboprops sound turbo-propish on the ground, but once airborne it takes an experienced ear to tell you're not in a jet. I spend an hour or so in the right seat.

The route back is to Fair Oaks via

Prestwick. The owner does the take-off from Prestwick and predictably holds the Avanti down, building speed for a zoom climb that leaves the VSI off the clock for a ridiculously long time. Looking back through a rear window, the earth accelerates away, making one think of NASA shots looking aft from a rocket launch. Mark gives me a quizzical smile.

The Avanti is a long way from a Streak, but there's a shared idiosyncrasy about it that might appeal to a sophisticated hooligan. □

Facing page

Designer David Cook with the factory demonstrator Streak on Thorpeness beach (top); and CFM Shadow with Rotax 582 (bottom)

Above Streak with Rotax 912