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The ICS Syndrome

When Steve Kinder and Daniel Frohriep-Ichihara pack their trunks and set off for Chisinau - shades of Nelly the elephant - for those old enough to remember that favourite of 2 way Family Favourites - who knows whether the alleged promised training flights on the IL-18s of Grixona will come to fruition but there is only one way to find out.

This year has not been spectacular – having been made redundant on April 1st 2010, then spending three weeks in Afghanistan in February and subsequently finding that all my tours with Ian Allan Aviation Tours having been cancelled for whatever reasons. Now so close to that magical age of 60, then despite being somewhat broke, the somewhat magical lure to go back to Moldova to fly on purported training flights of Grixona, no doubt a massive blow to the wallet which is now surviving on the cashing-in of private pensions, (peanuts come to mind), then confirmation of these flights gives cause to go and be damned of the consequences. But, as always, life in these countries is not so cut and dried - as we were to learn to not only our peril - but to our cost.

As always the tale is weird and diverse -but if you never venture - then nothing will ever be lost—as Del Boy stated!!!!

Background

The original plan was to charter an AN-12 in Belarus of Ruby Star Airlines. Turned off by unreasonable price hikes by a newly involved broker and the denial of ramp tours and photo permissions in Belarus due to the political situation, we turned to “Alex, Mr. Fixit” Marcenco in Moldova for help and – yes – chartering an AN-12 for our desired period of time was absolutely “no problem.” After receiving favourable quotes and a mouth watering flying plan for the day and many, many guarantees, that really this time nothing possibly could ever go wrong, we accepted, in consensus, with the proposed participants to once again choose the “Moldovan option”. Famous YA-KAD of Kabul Air was planned and promised. In addition “Mr. Fixit” Marcenco

obviously got carried away by his organisational talent and confirmed that we – the organisers – will “definitely” be on board the final ferry flight from Chisinau to Riga where it was destined for the museum.

As always, these things are so special and trust is always uppermost in one’s mind but then this scenario came crashing down over our heads – once again – “quelle surprise!”

This time, the wounds of our disaster number 4 have not healed yet, things should be really different and “Mr. Fixit” was determined to prove that he is more than a man of “Big Words”. Denied the possibility to hop onto one of the very last international flights performed by IL-18, “Mr. Fixit” disclosed the distinct possibility to join an IL-18 training flight in Chisinau in September 2011 on the generous invitation of Mr. Grixona, Mr. Ghilan himself! Any problems? “Absolutely not, we are in full control and all decisions this time and not depending on the mercy of third party providers”. So then, what are we waiting for? With little option, I took the call from Daniel. “Book a one way ticket to Munich, we are told to come to Chisinau no later than Wednesday, September 7th if we want to join the training flights” What else could I do----nothing ventured, nothing gained! And from then on, the story unwinds!

Tuesday 6th September 2011

With Sarah having left - that is my wife - for a canal experience with her three American friends, then and I was expecting a very quiet week at home, but now no chance. I could not sleep and despite setting the alarm clock for 04.30 hours, I awoke at 02.30 hours and descended from my bed at 03.30 hours. The taxi was booked for 06.00 hours; imagine the horror when I opened the back door to see the rain lashing down. No problem then, the rain stopped and the taxi arrived as always, early.

The driver did not speak, certainly a relief as I was not in the best of moods. Sadly I could not really afford the £21 but what the hell.

Check in with Singapore Airlines -what a way to fly- takes less than 60 seconds and I can only once again state - what a way to fly. Imagine, I have seat 54G offered at the time of booking but the fare is higher because it is a one way fare.

One more cigarette and it is time to go through to departures. This is just intended to cut down on smoking but as usual, I surpass the call of duty.

A little old lady is in front of me and she seems totally disorientated. And she is on the same flight but going to Australia. I shepherd her to security where I am of the impression she will be OK. The “new” body scanners are awesome and I am through them in seconds. I then see a little old lady stuck in one of the body scanners. And then it gets even worse. I wait for her, basically guarding her bag, but then she is “apprehended” and her shoes removed! Finally she comes through and I am there to take care of her. Her experience is not a happy one but interesting enough, I too have buckles on my shoes, but the alarms never went off. Finally she is through and I now have to explain the departure boards and she is somewhat happy, am I too good to be true?

Of course, the gate is 205 - it always is - as the Singapore Airlines montage is at the gate.

So it is time to read the “Independent” and relax. It is also the time to check the weather in Munich - 15 degrees and raining-more of that shortly.

Imagine the surreal image at 07.55 hours, when as an unbiased observer, a set of drooping wings came around the corner - was I dreaming - an IL-76 – and yes it is not

a prop liner but it was from Volgar Dnepr Airlines, the only re-engined operator sanctioned in Europe.

So it is time to board 9V-SWI flight number SQ327, a B777-300 ER with only 40 passengers.

Seat number 54G is really good for my bad right leg. But I still am concerned about the little old lady. Flying time is just one hour and 55 minutes.

On arrival in Munich, once again the little old lady is disorientated – where is the transit area and is there a smoking area? All sorted to her approval, it is time move on! The weather is stunning and with much time to kill before meeting once again with Daniel who is arriving on a Lufthansa flight from Frankfurt at 16.00 hours then we have time to kill.

So I ask directions to the visitor's park, check it out on the internet. Go into Terminal 2 follow the "skywalk" signs and take a shuttle bus, not now, end of story.

So I ask at the information desk which is really cool as I speak little German but no Bavarian.

So I must take the 635 bus and get off at stop number 4. Gesticulations lead me to the bus station but then things only get worse. The driver does not speak any English so I have to inquire on the bus, it is a girl from the Singapore flight and everything is just about sorted! Four stops and get off!

One thinks four stops is far too many, but all becomes clear. Terminal after terminal

And then the Bavarian driver indicates it is time to dismount.

So now in glorious sunshine, I just about see the tail of the Connie I have come to shoot. A five minute stroll even that is an understatement as I am now beginning to sweat. I see signs - in Bavarian - entry 9 Euros --- no way! Now somewhat sweaty and tired and confused but still determined I proceed. The first dilemma is whether to climb over the short fence and then of course even with a basic knowledge of German "Ausgang" is an exit not an entry.

So whatever, I have now to get change for 1 euro to get inside - the restaurant is painful but finally provides the change and then I am in!

At last, it is the ultimate chance to photograph D-ALEM L-1049 of Lufthansa which used to live at Frankfurt, HB-IRN DC-3 of Swissair and finally D-ANOY Casa C352 of DLH.

And then it is time for a smoke! Totally knackered at this time and then there is the sign - Terminal this way the sign only states mother and child, not an ageing geriatric but another muted conversation states go this way.

It is now only 1200 metres back to the terminal - ooh err missus - oh god, the sweat pours down! And then finally I arrive back at the taxi rank entrance to Terminal 1.

So now with a 10 minute stroll back to the Airbräu. it is time to meet with my very good friend, Daniel Frohriep-Ichihara.

And then finally at 16.40 hours he arrives, the German answer to Rag, Tag and Bobtail of the UK - Daniel has arrived on the flight from Frankfurt, so we are to leave, where is the S-Bahn? Say nothing but just follow the guide.

Downstairs, everything is downstairs at Flughafen Munich, so no problem until the price comes up, Euros 10, what for such a short journey? But no way the S-Bahn goes south and then one has to change to travel back up north to the town of Markt Schwaben.

There is no question on the money saving objective as it is just the periphery of the Bavarian "Octoberfest" where the prices just rocket, by this time the Hotel Kempinski at Munich Flughafen want Euros 530 per night.

So we finally arrive on the S-Bahn at our destination it is so cool that Daniel has now written instructions on how to walk to our hotel. Even better, we ask a local and then walk across the tracks up to the main road and then we find the Hotel am Markt, Euros 40 per night!

You cannot imagine the huge sigh of relief issued by ones self on finding some sort of sanctuary that normally means bed and food, beer is a bonus!

Everything is just about sorted and then a body appears at the open doorway, normally one would be abrasive but then this is Manfred Kühl—(“I am only stopping for one Beer”), Daniel’s friend who works at Munich Airport.

So after checking in and paying the bill, Euros 40 for each of us I should have put it on my credit card, then it is party time if that is what you can call it. Despite the invitations and protestations of our host to eat and drink in “his” restaurant we “do one” and duly eat and drink across the road at the “Bar Wirtshaus im Oberbräu”. It is here that Manfred suggests that the best way back to Manchester is with Easyjet. Apparently the Munich aviation fraternity fly to Manchester in a morning with Singapore Airlines and return at night with Easyjet.

So much for the “I am only having the one”, Manfred was still with us after 3 hours!

And then saying Auf Wiedersehen to Manfred, Daniel does the strangest of things we then meet the hotel proprietor and do a deal, no breakfast in exchange for free drinks and Daniel appears with two pints and two schnapps chasers, this is really cool!

So finally it is time for bed Hallelujah with only one promise! There are no telephones in this hotel so Daniel promises to knock on my door in time to ensure that I am up and ready for the 06.15 lift back to Flughafen Munich with Manfred!!!

Wednesday 7th September 2011, day No. 1

I am up and getting ready when there is the slightest of taps on my door “OK Daniel I am up” and the packing only takes minutes. I am first downstairs where “quelle surprise”- breakfast is already laid out. Well the young lady offers me a coffee and returns with a cup the size of the moon. Obviously there has been no communication between proprietor and staff about the deal, but then Daniel appears, another coffee and then so does Manfred!

No time to waste as the gleaming 4 X 4 waits complete with Mrs. Manfred and away we go free gratis a lift to the Flughafen Munich is totally priceless at this time of day. The breathtaking view of the Alps at sunrise is fantastic if only we had had more time. Mrs Manfred is dropped at the western end of Terminal 1, where I returned from the visitor’s park and Manfred proceeds to park his 4 X 4 in the car hire return of Terminal 2 who am I to argue? Bon voyages issued, it is time to follow his master; his word is now the command. We check in for our flight to Chisinau I am in row 22C and he is in row 21A and the other seats are now blocked off. How do you do this? A fantastic bonus on a nearly full flight, but one now knows never to question the system!

First we proceed to the Easy Jet desk to inquire about my flight back to Manchester, but there is no one there. Manfred had stated the previous evening that the Munich spotting fraternity took the early Singapore Airlines flight and returned on the late Easy Jet flight to Munich for a reasonable price and got a full day’s action. We proceed through security with no problems and then sit and wait at Gate 28 for permission to board, we know our flight will be from a remote and it will be the first of a type for me.

And so we board the bus, the first ever flight on an Embraer Emb 195 D –AEBC of DLH on flight number LH1742, and as always, Daniel has his ways, releases his video camera so I just hang around open jawed at the passing Luxair ATR-72, but well prepared for the Air Dolomiti ATR-42.

Just imagine, this is the coolest way to travel, here we are and every thing just stops!

There is no way that we shall repeat last year's debacle - I just board and go to my seat. No cockpit this time, no manic repercussions from Cityline!

Seat 22C is just fine and Daniel has managed to book off the seats on 21A how do you do this? And 22A dead cool as we struggled to actually make the flight, this was so serious that we had to book the return flight in business class to even have a prayer of a getting back.

And so we left Munich, roughly on time, but do I care? Tired but not tired, the only thing now that matters is the in-flight DLH catering how good is the sad looking bread with currants, even better when another turns up.

And this is a first. Drinks are served and of course it is a glass of white wine! And then a hand comes out and demands more, cool, drink as much as you want when the cabin crew realise what we are doing.

So finally we land at Chisinau - yes here we are again and we taxi to stand. The one good thing about arriving in Chisinau is that passport control is so simple!

We are in, so easy and bags are collected – so much quicker than Manchester and then we see our really good friends, Vladimir Russu, the IL-18 pilot and Alex Marcenco Mr. Fixit - so it is a free lift to the Hotel Cosmos where once again our very good friend and the “boss” Anastasia looks up and thinks - “not these two again”.

A very good room rate-Euros 23 per night and we are fixed!

Vladimir asks “how long can you stay?” Without suspecting a deeper meaning to this harmless question, the reply was “til Sunday, September 11, latest”, however for an IL-18 flight we would even “sacrifice our own grandmother”, so we could manage somehow until Tuesday next, provided we are given accurate and up-to-date information for rearrangement of work schedule and return flights. At this stage it shows that direct communication between Vladimir and us is no problem and interpreting Vladimir's “meaning of the word” to us or our “meaning of the word” to Vladimir is completely unnecessary. So, we do not really know what deeper purpose is fulfilled by the everlasting presence of a Mr. Fixit Marcenco and Vitalii, the Embraer system engineer from Air Moldova. Using hands, feet, gestures, mimics and rudimentary Russian, direct communication works fine with no misunderstandings nor misinterpretations.

But then we get a problem. Vladimir and Mr. Fixit Marcenco have the glorious idea to exchange Daniel's German SIM card with a Moldovan SIM card. Daniel has never enjoyed the privilege of owning a mobile phone with all the pleasures of 24 hour availability included. On this trip however, using a mobile phone was inevitable, so Daniel travelled on the mercy and generosity of his dear wife Eriko and took her mobile on loan. Somewhat reluctant to the idea of having some involuntary surgery performed on the back side of Eriko's mobile by a complete stranger, within no time Mr. Fixit Marcenco managed to insert the Moldovan SIM card in exchange for the German one. The new pin code is “1111”. We are set to go except during this process Daniel's own sim card on lease mysteriously vanishes.

Our two friends then advise that there will “maybe” be no flight the next day, maintenance work yet to be completed, stay tuned for further information and keep the mobile “on”, Hmmm!

So it is up to “newly refurbished” rooms 507 and 509 to unpack. Refurbished is a bit of an overstatement as in room 507, that is mine, the window is cracked and held together with sticky tape and the balcony wall looks ready to collapse at any time but would we have it any other way?

It is time to exchange Euros for Lei, and we are fortunate that another “old friend”, the exchange lady who has just returned from Italy is here but the coffers are empty although her purse is not.

So it is off to the Veranda Bar and Restaurant, not a five minute walk away to await further news. “Blonde Beer” here is 20 Lei with an exchange rate of 16 Lei to one Euro, provides excellent value.

Fed and watered, it is then off to bed for the first night in Chisinau, interrupted by a call from “Mr. Fixit”. “I am waiting for you in the lobby”. Information alert? No, just a social call.

Thursday 8th September 2011, day No. 2

What to do with a girl like Maria comes to mind because what do you do all day in Chisinau? A leisurely breakfast of coffee, when the kettle boils, Goat’s cheese, ham and feta cheese starts the day off well.

In an attempt to get some new information on the situation we call “Mr. Fixit” at 08:30 AM. This was not a good idea. “Mr. Fixit” is in the mid of his night, his attitude “Daniyellll, do you know what time it is right now????” no new information, hmmm!

What to do next is the big question.

The only answer is to go for a walk so it is off to the railway station. As luck would have it the Chisinau to Moscow express is on the platform and access to the station is no problem. No planes so trains are the next best option. It is hauled by a double diesel engine and as it leaves, the cloud of fumes is just unbelievable.

We then wander into the surrounding flea markets, in truth where the more elderly residents sit in the railway car park or adjacent streets and try and sell their unwanted or surplus goods. It is only now that one gets a true impression of the poverty that is prevalent in the city. We slowly get to know the deeper meaning of Moldovan life style, lots of surplus time to kill, no work, no money.

So with that done, there seems to be little option but to wander once again into the “Veranda” bar for some more “Blonde” beer. These days my intake is very limited and I have to be near a toilet. As I am now sixty years old, then problems with the old waterworks are an issue. Having consumed sufficient alcohol, it is time to return to the hotel for a snooze, Then Daniel has a bright idea. “Let’s go up to the roof.” Now I have one golden rule, never do any thing after beer consumption. The lift carries us up swiftly to the 24th floor. We quickly find the stairs up the next two floors, even passed the motors for the lift, we are then intercepted by what can be very politely described as a very old and dirty gentleman but as Daniel can speak rudimentary Russian, we are out on the roof of the hotel in seconds. There are no fences and the view, if somewhat scary but in reality, is awesome. And then it happens. I need to relieve myself and I have no choice, but to do it on the roof. Retracing our steps, the old guy is now fast asleep in an equally dirty chair.

Back to the rooms for the now long overdue snooze, we once again appear after two hours and again make our way back to the “Veranda” bar. More beer and then food and then “Mr. Fixit” appears. Will the flight be tomorrow? We are promised to be collected at 10.00 hours from the hotel.

Friday 9th September 2011, day No. 3

Daniel visited Anastasia's office frequently to check his mails and to kill time, the only item, of which people in this country have more than enough. So next morning once again before breakfast, Daniel disappeared in a "certain" office. To my embarrassment he later told me, that he wrote the complete "roof incident" not sparing a single embarrassing detail to his daughter in urge to receive some empathy from his beloved and yes... his darling daughter Julia has sent a reply! Daniel... awaiting news from far away home... expecting words such as "I love you Daddy... !" or " When are you coming home, Daddy... ??" or "I miss you so much, Daddy...!!" , the words Daniel actually read were to his great shock and astonishment a simple and dry "Make new friends", period!... Oh well old age and incontinence makes new friends all the time.

Vladimir and Alex "Mr. Fixit" Marcenco are outside waiting to take us to the airport. The journey is only fifteen minutes in duration and we park at the security entrance. We obtain our visitor passes in exchange for our passports and start to walk the half mile distance to the couple of waiting and gorgeous IL-18s.

We are almost immediately intercepted by security and advised of a problem. It could only happen here. The Prime Minister is about to depart on a Learjet 60 and we need to walk very quickly to our destination, that is passed the terminal Anywhere else in the world and we would be forced to sit and wait until he has gone. Imagine this being England and David Cameron is about to leave – well so would we? Walking now at such a pace is not so easy for me especially with the bad leg but we pass the terminal just as the Learjet 60 is being towed into position. One also notes that the large Chisinau sign that should be sat on top of the terminal is now sat on the tarmac - not the best of advertisements for an airport.

We arrive at the IL-18s-that is ER-ICS which has spent the summer in Male in the Maldives and our very good friend ER-ICB, on which we flew in 2010.

This time once again, but not the last time from now on every morning our ears shall be subjected to these words "Steve, Daniel, BIG problem !!!! " The "BIG" problem today: the mechanic to sign off the plane is abroad. Today only engine run up to be performed. In the hopes for better news, we can live with that for today.

It is a good hour before the tow truck appears to take ER-ICS to the test bay. This gives us more than enough time to explore the aircraft internally and the surprise find is a Morrison's plastic bag on the floor of the fuselage.

Also it allows me time to photograph ER-AZX Antonov 24 of Skylink Arabia and finally find a registration for ER-AZN, another Antonov 24 of the same airline which is parked behind but is devoid of any registration. ER-ADD Antonov 12 still sits here, more than likely never to fly again.

In fact, it is almost like being in a time warp and none of these three have moved in the last twelve months.

So we then decide what we shall do next. Daniel opts to stay on board and I will follow the aircraft in a vehicle.

The aircraft is then towed down to the test area and then chocked up, ready to begin running its engines. I am advised - or warned - against standing in front as the aircraft may move forward. Who cares – what a way to go. One by one the engines start and the noise is deafening. The concept of the engine test is to get the aircraft up to cruising speed and this engine run takes fifty minutes by which time all my associates are somewhat bored and sat in Grixona's vehicle which leaves me to shoot the aircraft

at different shutter speeds so as not to freeze the propellers. This is without doubt another of life's great experiences - a very grand old lady.

Daniel has filmed a full hour on board the aircraft. His attempt to complete the footages of this graceful old lady with some outside images, was then frequently interrupted by "Mr. Fixit's" effort to get himself into the limelight well into position between the real "Big and Important" of Grixona and the Airport, himself between all the Four Stripes Holders and the CEOs. "Daniel, you must film the people!!!! Daniel please.... Steve.... tell Daniel that he must film the people, Steve...please!" The rest of the world might be aware of the fact, but "Mr. Fixit" seems not to know that the technical specification of a video camera always includes the recording of voices too. This surreal situation is all recorded on tape now for public embarrassment and humiliation.

Then as always things swing towards the bizarre. Daniel is now back with me in the vehicle and Daniel is told to film the aircraft from the front seat next to the driver so we can shoot the aircraft as it is towed back to the Grixona apron. But the aircraft is to our left so we have once again another mission impossible scenario.

So that is the first step out of the way. We know we will now be wined and dined at 18.00 hours at Vladimir's apartment so our first stop is at a supermarket to acquire provisions. I think my wife cooks meals that are too big, but one gets the impression that an army is coming to eat.

Then Vladimir offers Daniel his car keys whilst he pays for the food. And then it happens. For what ever reason, Daniel sets off the alarm on the BMW and cannot get it to cease. Vladimir and Alex return with the provisions but cannot succeed in stopping the alarm. And of course, the car is also disabled. It would appear that the battery in the key fob is knackered so Alex is instructed to go and purchase a new one. Imagine being sat there in this gleaming BMW with the alarm going off. Finally Alex returns with a new battery in the key fob and away we go. Next stop is another first. We pull up outside a beer shop with a difference. Inside are lots of gargoyles and one chooses which beer you want, hand over your own empty bottles and out of the gargoyles mouth, comes draught beer. Certainly different!

And then, it is on to Vladimir's apartment. Shoes off and the next two hours are spent watching DVDs, eating and drinking both beer and vodka. Mrs Vladimir is present but spends most of the time in the back room. We soon realize that we are watching the same DVDs that we saw last year. So I quickly concoct a cock and bull story that Daniel feels faint and we need to leave.

We do not leave without confirming the setting of a new date for the training flights. We are now told that the mechanic will be back from his trip abroad and that all necessary formalities will be completed by the weekend.

"This is guaranteed, there will be no more problems, you must learn to trust me, don't ask Vladimir so many questions!" With these words in our ears, the taxi takes us back to our hotel.

Saturday 10th September 2011, day No. 4

Once again, we are left to our own devices, another leisurely breakfast and another stroll to the railway station. Today however, we are both struggling. My legs are playing up so I have to wear the knee bandages and would you believe Daniel is struggling with the ICS Syndrome. After the best part of an hour yesterday on his knees in ER-ICS, videoing, his thighs were now proving to be somewhat painful. We just felt like two old fogies mooching about!

Once again we wander the flea markets in search of aviation artefacts but to no avail. It does need to be mentioned that the weather is just glorious - it would have been a great day for flying. We then stroll round the block of the hotel which once again goes to highlight the haves and have nots of Chisinau - superb buildings amidst the poverty of the high rise flats

Once again, it is into the "Veranda" bar for more "Blonde" beer. Then it is time for the regular snooze and then out to eat in the "Placinte" restaurant across the road. Alex "Mr. Fixit" once again makes his obligatory appearance but still with no definite news on any flights. "There will be no problems. Don't ask so many questions!!"

Sunday 11th September 2011, day No. 5

A significant date in the aviation calendar but today we are being taken to the general aviation field of Vadu lui Voda, a thirty minute drive from the hotel. Here we quickly arrange that we can both fly separately on AN-2TP ER-07863 of TiramAvia with Pioneer titles, whilst it is doing parachute drops. The first flight will not be ours, but the second will be Daniel's and the third will be mine.

Interesting enough Yellow 11, another AN-2, which is close by is going to have its wings put back on so it too can join in the fun.

Once again the weather is glorious. The aircraft returns from its first drop and Daniel, complete with video camera is ensconced in the co-pilot's seat. In the pilot's seat is the owner and no one less than the World Champion of parachuting, Sergey Zinchenko the man himself. I have now calculated that the aircraft is airborne for forty five minutes and away it goes. It is then suggested that I could fly in Wilga ER-WOA, another first for me, so it is into the BMW and across to where the Wilga flies from. I am then verbally accosted by a male who angrily states that all United Kingdom's residents are arrogant as he had read a piece in a national newspaper, obviously, as he stated, written by someone who had never been to Moldova. A little taken aback, I questioned which paper it was and after a somewhat hesitant pause, he replied "the Daily Express! Need I say more?"

There was also the most beautiful cocker spaniel here which was so friendly and I love dogs, but as the animal smelt my hand, it started to growl, it must have known that I was foreign.

So it was then up for a ten minute spin in the Wilga and back down in time to see Daniel land.

It was then my turn to go up in the AN-2TP but I was not in the co-pilots seat as that was the privilege awarded to my minder. On board, with another interloper were seven parachutists and the aircraft was to climb to 2,000 metres. One by one the parachutists left the aircraft and oddly enough the door would not close. I had requested that the aircraft would spiral down and did not expect what would happen next. The G force was incredible, to such an extent that I could not even lift my camera, shades of a similar experience, in a Piper Cherokee, out of Blackpool, some thirty three years ago.

So that was the day finished, and so then we were treated to a trip to Vladimir's dacha, where I was privileged enough to see my first two red squirrels; more food and drink, and even, a walk down to the river.

Sitting on the rear of Vladimir's car on the trip back to the hotel, Vitalii Ambarli, the system engineer of Air Moldova and I were discussing options of using the remainder of the life time of a totally repainted IL-18 in spectacular colours for sponsored

display flights to the most odd locations on the planet. Picture a huge display of athletic foot wear thundering throughout the United States.

Tonight we decide to eat in the London Steakhouse where we are joined once again by not only Alex but his friend and no doubt chauffeur Alex Cataman and his charming girlfriend Natalia. "Mr. Fixit's" mobile rings frequently. Today, September 11 is day 5 in Moldova without any accomplishment so far. "Mr. Fixit" promises to call first thing next morning for arrangements to meet us at the airport for the training flight and ramp photography of a group of newly arrived AN-12s. The training flight was now scheduled to depart in the afternoon in superb weather. That was the plan.

Monday 12th September 2011, day No. 6

After breakfast at 9.00 AM and still no call from "Mr. Fixit"; having known "Mr. Fixit" for three years by now, on day 6, Daniel becomes more and more desperate and agitated. No news from "Mr. Fixit", no answering of E-mails and an active answering machine always means bad news!

Still no call from "Mr. Fixit". At 10 AM the first attempt to call "Mr. Fixit's" mobile. The answering machine is on. At 10.30 AM another attempt, at 11.00 AM a third attempt. Although told never to call Vladimir directly, Daniel calls Vladimir. A tired voice on the other end... "Daniel, BIG PROBLEM !!!! I am sorry... BIG PROBLEM !!!!". Mysteriously right after this call in a fourth attempt, Daniel was able to reach "Mr. Fixit" who asks in the most innocent sounding voice "So Daniel, what's the news?"

Daniel needed to inform his employer about this delay and the new situation. The return flight needed to be rearranged, this time in Economy class helping us to restore our budget considerably.

While Daniel's mood deteriorated below freezing level, this was to be my day. I needed to photograph the Antonov 12s that reside here. A taxi was ordered from the hotel to the airport at the princely sum of 55 lei / 3.50 EUR. We walked to security where our "Mr. Fixit" Alex Marcenco was waiting. Once again visitor passes were issued in exchange for passports. The three of us then leisurely strolled around the top end of the apron to where the three Antonov 12s are parked. Even the nineteen Kamov 26s are still here and so is everything else. Nothing has moved in the last twelve months and it can only be a matter of time before the axe man starts to break up the TU-134s and aging Antonov 24s that live here. Ironically Daniel is refused permission to do any videoing even though he had put in a written request to Mr. Fixit.

S9-KHC, still wearing the faded Aeroflot colours, looks like it will never fly again, but rest assured, it will. S9-KHD now wears a revised scheme for Transliz which used to live at Sharjah but no more. An added bonus was an invitation to go inside the aircraft, not an offer to be refused. S9-KHF still wears the "old" Transliz scheme. This also still carries a faded ER-ADG registration on the tail.

There was some activity around Antonov 26 ER-26406 which gives the impression that this airframe has some work somewhere. Other than that nothing seems to be happening. Antonov 24 ER-26204, wearing the tail colours of Mosphil Aero still stands in the same spot as it was in 2010 having just returned from its lease.

The only other change is that Antonov 24 ER-46885, which did carry Tandem Aero titles, is now back in Air Moldova titles. Not a new scheme, just the titles removed. Oh how Daniel would like a window out of one of these machines!

So it is time to go. It is only fair to mention how proud and privileged I felt even being allowed to do this. If only “Mr. Fixit” Alex Marcenco would not keep mentioning those cameras---what cameras? For an airport not to have its main sign on top of the terminal, they certainly cannot afford CCTV.

Now a word of warning! We have to take a taxi back to the hotel. Do not take a taxi from outside the terminal! The general consensus is that if you are foreign then you will be charged at least 150 lei. The safer solution is to go inside and book a taxi there which will set you back 80 lei.

So back once again to the hotel and once again time is spent in the “Veranda” bar---well what else is there to do?

Daniel decides that tonight we will eat at the London Steakhouse where the starter of Caesar’s salad is enormous and the follow up of a half split massive steak just that. Sadly this steak decided to remove a filling from my teeth and as a result that particular tooth has now been removed from my mouth. Alex “Mr. Fixit” Marcenco once again appears uninvited and tonight we get the low down on his upbringing which goes some way to explaining his mannerisms.

But the crucial question remains - what about the flight tomorrow? “We will meet at 8.00 AM at the airport, we will do the flight tomorrow morning at 9 AM sharp, all is confirmed and final and Daniel, refrain from calling Vladimir directly, don’t ask any more questions, please...”.

Tuesday 13th September 2011, Day 7

Well we are still here and today really is D-Day. We will have to leave Moldova as Daniel has to return to work but we are also promised a training flight on ER-ICS. We managed to get the restaurant at the hotel to open early so once again a healthy breakfast can be consumed. We order a taxi and yes, even that cost has escalated up to 100 lei. Once again, we arrive at the security gate. By now, I am more than conscious that lots of people have seen these “foreigners” and believe me - we do stand out. Alex Mr. “Fixit” arrives and now we wait patiently for Vladimir to arrive.

One only knows when all is not right. Daniel is now pacing up and down the car park -I can only see his feet but that is more than enough. Alex Mr. Alex “Fixit” Marcenco stands silently away to my left. All cannot be right but in this situation one has to remember - achieving anything in the “old” Soviet block is an accolade. Many workers arrive and note the presence of a “foreigner”.

Finally Vladimir arrives and once again with a lowered tone in his voice, yes, we now have a “Big big problem - no confirmation by the insurance company received”. No insurance, no training flight... quelle surprise !

Once again, visitor badges are exchanged for passports. This time also Vitalii is present; we never quite understood the role of Vitalii in connection to Grixona’s flight operations.

Cars arrive this time to take the “interlopers” and escorts down to the IL-18s. There is now a whisper that the insurance has finally been issued and the flight is now ready to depart. Although this problem seems to be solved, Vladimir’s facial expression turns darker and darker. His attempt to speak directly to Mr. Grixona fails, Mr. Ghilan will not answer the phone. Haven’t we seen this communication pattern before? What has happened now??

The Moldovan CAA has serious questions for Grixona.

What are two foreigners doing on the ramp and what is their mission in connection to the Grixona training flights?

We now “learn” the long known lesson in aviation: Only those inmates with proper insurance are allowed on board.

All persons listed as crew on the GENDEC are covered with proper insurance. Only holders of permanent airport passes with proper security checks qualify to be enlisted on the GENDEC. As we are only holders of temporary day passes we do not qualify to be listed on the GENDEC.

The only way to participate, is to board the training flight as passengers. In order to board the flight as passengers, we must fly on board a passenger flight. A training flight is not a passenger flight. In addition a passenger flight can only be performed on board an aircraft licensed for passenger transport. ER-ICS is only licensed to carry crew and cargo, not passengers. The CAA authorities threaten to revoke the AOC of Grixona and to send over an inspector to join the flight to make sure that myself and Daniel will remain on the ground. We also learn that the flight will be for cabin crew training - that is a first - cabin crew training on an aircraft with no seats. It is all now getting very messy, too many people’ know we are here. To compound our misery, we are invited on board that grand old lady-ER-ICB now devoid of seating and that smell. I end up sitting in the pilot’s seat with the window open.

The weather is still glorious but I, of all people, watch the clock because if we are leaving, then we will have to return to the terminal and check-in, the deadline is 12.15 hours.

Time ticks on and nothing but nothing happens. Daniel by now is close to suicide or something similar and by now, let’s be honest---we are not going flying. I need to leave ER-ICB and go for a smoke. Whilst it may one day kill me, it also gives me the chance to evaluate exactly what is or what is not going to happen!

So after almost a week of broken promises, remember we were promised two flights one on September 8th and one on September 9th, it is now September 13th, and nothing is happening. I am slowly going bankrupt and Daniel needs to get back both to work and his family. So it comes to that critical time---the one to leave!

We get a lift back to security and retrieve the passports. If only, we could rid ourselves of the company of Vladimir, Vitalii Ambarli and Mr. Alex “Fixit” Marcenco, this wasted venture has cost money and precious time. But to no avail. We are accompanied to check-in, is this their way of making sure we are leaving? We first have to go up to see Slava, the Austrian Airlines Station Manager, to downgrade our business class return tickets, to economy. This guy really cannot believe we have not been flying but then the understanding of our objectives, goes right over his head. We then bid our hosts a “fond” good by-and check in. A great reminder of the size of the terminal, there are three flights scheduled to leave: ours, a Turkish flight to Istanbul in Star Alliance colours and an Air Moldova flight to Rome. Chaos ensues at passport control but, who cares! Mission failed dramatically and we have more than enough time on our hands.

And to compound our woes, the Lufthansa flight back to Munich is late in arriving. And even worse, there I was just enjoying the moment in the departure area when a large gentleman with a shaved head, remonstrated with me for having one foot on the seat. Is nothing sacred?

Finally we are called for boarding flight LH1743 back to Munich. There are two buses, one for forward entry and one for rear entry. It does not really matter as once again Daniel has managed to swing the permission to do some filming it always amazes me that, if you know the right people, you can wander around doing whatever you want.

The relief as I sink into my seat on Embraer Emb 195 D-AEBG is stunning. At least we are leaving Moldova. We taxi out and take off. Food is served and so are the drinks. Then I notice that Daniel is drinking pink champagne – well then I too have to do the same. The great bonus is that the cabin crew have left a bottle of white wine in the rear galley. You can only guess that this bottle was empty by the time we approached Munich.

On landing and parking once again on a remote, we are bussed to the terminal where Daniel has to rush to catch his flight back to Frankfurt. I now have hours to kill so the first stop is at Easyjet. No problem, a ticket back to Manchester departing at 22.00 hours will be just Euros 166.95 - that is £147.42 at the time of the rate of exchange. So now it is just time to sleep as time is more than on my side. It is only 14.00 hours Munich time but at least, I am going home. Sleep, sleep and sleep with the odd cigarette break thrown in. And finally at 20.30 hours, it is time to go to departures. And finally we are called to board the bus to our aircraft home-G-EZGN, an A319 of EasyJet, back home to God's country.

By now, I was completely parched so I ordered a water - what? And two gins and two tonics! A flight is just a flight and landing on Manchester's runway 23L was another bonus – only because 23R is closed at night for maintenance.

The bag that Afghanistan bag appears in no time and then we have a new problem, my mobile is out of credit so I have to return to Manchester's Terminal 3 to use the telephone. It only costs one pound to order a taxi. The gorgeous Mrs. K is sleeping and refuses to collect me. The taxi only takes fifteen minutes and low and behold, it is the same driver that took me to the airport to catch the early Singapore Airlines flight to Munich. So finally, somewhat weary and now somewhat skint, I get the key to the house and make my way to bed—another adventure-another homecoming!

Summary- Make new friends !

So what went wrong? No maintenance check performed in time? A licensed mechanic to sign off the plane appears to be suddenly abroad? No insurance? Suddenly alerted authorities? Poor communication? Unprofessional handling? No information? No coordination? Best intentions?

Despite all the promises that were made, we never got to fly. It is pointless blaming anybody especially Vladimir Russu who is just a pilot flying for Grixona. He is the greatest of guys but is at the mercy of his employers. Mr. Alex "Mr Fixit" Marcenco could be held responsible but given the benefit of the doubt - we are all at the mercy of the Moldovan CAA. So that is it then - three visits to Moldova and no more! It was still a great experience to walk the ramps, a greater experience to stand in front of one of the world's last flying IL-18s doing engine runs but once again, it is just the experience of being there that counts!

Returning home with empty hands makes us realize that we must learn to accept the fact that the "Golden Age of Flying" has come to an end and that more and more niches in affordable locations are being closed for good. The efforts in time and cost to fly these aeronautic dinosaurs are getting out of any reasonable proportion. It is time for us to say "Good Bye", to say "Thank you" and... to "make new friends".

My sincere thanks to Daniel Frohriep-Ichihara (and his wife Eriko and daughter Julia for their tolerance of this insanity), Mrs Kinder for the same reasons, Vladimir Russu and wife for their continued support in this madness, Alex Cataman and Natalia for their superb company. And to Alex "Mr. Fixit" Marcenco" ---one person who we will never do business with again!!!!!!