

Propliner

No.118

£5.00



The international review of
classic piston-engined and
turboprop transport aircraft

DAY TRIP TO BALTI - BY IL-18



Opportunities for flights aboard classic Soviet airliners are rare enough, and a recent enthusiast charter of a Moldovan Ilyushin Il-18 proved to be an experience without parallel. STEVE KINDER takes us on a memorable journey from Chisinau to Balti one day in April

Steve Kinder's passion for old Soviet 'propliners' has become legendary within the pages of this magazine. His daring exploits have allowed others to savour the excitement of flying aboard many of Russia's dwindling 'prop' powered airliner fleets, and in April he was lured to Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, for a flight aboard an Ilyushin Il-18. In his own inimitable fashion, he describes the background to this latest escapade, which would contain "more twists in the tale than on a corkscrew, but in the end, everything went like clockwork." Steve now continues his personal account of his latest adventure.

OUR MAN IN CHISINAU

Several months ago I had learned of a proposed enthusiast's flight aboard an Il-18, an airliner type that has disappeared from the

world's skies at an alarming rate in recent years. The flight was not cheap, not least because of the cost of actually travelling to Moldova, from where the charter was to take place. Consequently, initially only a provisional booking was made, and as the time approached, the credit crunch and worries about job security and other matters, caused many a sleepless night. Reluctantly, the decision was taken to cancel the booking. It helped to know that the break-even point for the trip had been achieved, and so my dropping out would not be detrimental to the success of the trip. And then a funny thing happened.

A message arrived from an associate in Germany, whose name I shall withhold to protect the innocent, asking whether I would be interested in chartering the Il-18. Well, of course, who would not be? Within minutes, another message arrived from Alex Marceno, a young man in Chisinau, who was actually organising the enthusiast's flight on the Il-18. Suddenly the whole idea accelerated with a speed that would embarrass Lewis Hamilton, and within hours plans had been drawn up to charter the aircraft in both 2010 and 2011. Not only that, but here was an invitation to join the proceedings in Chisinau as a VIP guest of the operators in order to check out the aircraft, and to meet the organisers and flight crew. My main concern at this stage was that this invitation might upset the German organisers of the original enthusiast's flight, but the temptation of such an experience coupled with the needs of all 'propliner' fans meant that a visit to Moldova was a high priority.

While it may not be difficult to fly to Moldova, be assured it is expensive. There are several options flying by S7 Airlines, Air Moldova, Moldovan Airlines and Austrian Airlines. The first option came in around £650 flying from Manchester to Frankfurt, on to Budapest, and finally Chisinau. Other options were investigated, but shelved due to unsatisfactory connecting times, and eventually I placed the problem in the hands of the experts, Ian Allan Travel. Within hours an itinerary had been drawn up, with the only drawback being a 90-minute connection on the return leg, which, if missed, would lead to seven long tedious hours isolated in a boring international airport. The booking was also made on the understanding that no luggage would be involved, and so I was soon on my way.

ON-TIME TOUCHDOWN AT CHISINAU

Take-off from a slightly foggy Manchester takes place some time after the appointed 09.30 departure time aboard a Lufthansa Airbus A319, but arrival in Frankfurt is only twenty minutes behind schedule, and

HEADING PHOTOGRAPH: Impressive view of the former Grixona Ilyushin Il-18 ER-ICB running up her mighty Ivchenko AI-20M turbo-props on the runway at Balti Airport.

LEFT: Immaculate Il-18D ER-ICS parked among a bevy of old Soviet airliners at Chisinau is owned by Tandem Aero.



One of a number of redundant airliners lying in store at Chisinau was An-24RV ER-46508 of Air Moldova, together with a number of engineless examples. (All photographs courtesy Steve Kinder)





in ample time to make the transfer to the Air Moldova Airbus for its flight to Chisinau. Having already crossed paths with a friendly Dutch enthusiast, once armed with my boarding pass a chance meeting with my first and foremost German associate leads to the consumption of a beer or two before our flight is called.

Punctuality is clearly important to Air Moldova as the Airbus A320 rotates on time and I relax into my aisle seat for the flight ahead. While the in-flight service is good to us, the catering may be of question, and the wine reminds me of that ghastly concoction once served on the Aeroflot Shannon to Havana flight, that would have been better used for cleaning spoons. Our arrival in Chisinau takes place at the scheduled time of 18.20, and we are greeted by some fantastic weather. The queue through passport control is short – ours is the only flight – and with no visa requirement for either EU or UK passport holders, we soon emerge into the terminal. Here I meet up with good friend Alex, who directs me to the bus, and Kevin Perry, who has travelled all the way from Saudi Arabia for his Il-18 experience. It just goes to show the commitment to the cause, whatever the cost! The rest of the Air Moldova Il-18 refugees are now on board the bus, which now conveys us all to the Hotel Kosmos.

A twenty minute journey from the airport, it is the typical “old” Soviet-bloc hotel, which is more than adequate for our needs. Allowing all the other ‘eager beavers’ to check-in first, I gingerly climb the concrete steps of the hotel to discover that my good friends from the world of air traffic control are waiting to greet me, namely Paul Joules and Duncan Campbell. Currency exchange problems and tiredness put to one side, it is time to discuss business and plans for chartering the Il-18 in 2010. It is wholly gratifying to see the amount of work devoted to drawing up the plans by the organisers. After an hour or so of lively conversation and discussion, the hotel doors swing open, and Finland Blue One’s most notorious pilot makes his entrance, one Teemu Tuuru. Someone who could be considered to be my best mate but also a walking disaster, Teemu would no doubt follow me into hell given his addiction to the wild, wonderful and dangerous. Few of us can boast of spending a night in jail in Gabon after being apprehended by the authorities for photographing the local Antonovs. Never mind Teemu, next time it could be bigger spiders, and yes, it could be snakes, or even worse, a bullet through the head.

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Flight briefing takes place the following morning at 06.30. It is freezing cold, there is not a cloud in the sky, but today calls for a coat. There must be thirty or more enthusiasts who board the coach outside the hotel, and make the journey back to the airport to check-in for the Il-18 flight. The departure gate reads ‘Tandem Aero’, not Grixona, who formerly flew the airliner. Grixona lost their AOC a couple of years ago, and so this answered my main query as I had wondered how the organisers would circumvent this situation, as the advertised flight had been with Grixona. Having passed through passport control and into the departure lounge, all eyes stare out across the aprons. Ilyushin Il-18B ER-ICB (c/n



The party prepares to board Il-18B ER-ICB at Chisinau.

188010603) has been moved down the apron in preparation for boarding. This aircraft was originally built in January 1968 as the prototype of the military transport version, and served with a number of organisations and airlines before joining the Moldovan register in August 2003. Our flight, TQ1410, is due to depart at ten o'clock local time, and everything seems to run like clockwork today.

Twenty two years have elapsed since my last flight on an Il-18 of Interflug from East Berlin (Schönefeld) to Budapest and return. My abiding memory of the day was the glorious encounter with the East German authorities when we were all arrested due to the lack of an appropriate visa. The years in between have clearly mellowed me, because there is much more sublime acceptance now of these magical moments, and today the mood is more relaxed although the presence of three somewhat irate Germans may yet provide a challenge when I place my foot on the stairs to the aircraft.

The airport bus draws up and the masses herd on board seemingly oblivious to the old adage, “last on, first off”. Disembarking from the bus, a walk round tour is taken of what can be only described as a very gracious old Soviet lady. This matriarch appears to be in really great condition, with the faded or painted out “Grixona” titling still visible. We are soon beckoned aboard, and a climb up the aircraft stairs is followed by the selection of a suitable seat in the rear cabin on the starboard side of the aircraft. Minutes later, the four 4,015 eshp Ivchenko AI-20M turboprops come to life one by one, and the cabin is now consumed with new noises and vibrations. With excitement building, we begin to move and soon we are lined up at the end of the runway. Take-off power really brings the lady to life, and after a brief run, the gracious lady lifts effortlessly into the air at 10.11 local time, no doubt trailing those characteristic plumes of black smoke from her four engines.



The main passenger cabin of the Il-18, which today will see little more than half her seats occupied, thereby allowing relatively free movement around the aircraft during the flight.

The Il-18 sets course towards Balti, an airport some twenty five minutes flying time away to the north west of Chisinau serving the city of Belt'sy. A pleasantly uneventful flight ensues, culminating in a firm landing on the runway at Balti, where we seem to run the entire length of the 2,000 metre long runway. As the rear passenger door opens, there appears the stairs from hell, a clear relic from the Soviet era, a set of “airline” steps powered by Russia’s version of the Land Rover which cough and belch their way into position amidst both smoke and fumes. As the occupants disembark from the aircraft, it is realised that the Il-18 is parked right down the middle of the runway. This is the first time in nearly 25 years of doing this sort of thing that I have ever been allowed to step on to this piece of hallowed ground direct from an airliner. But sadly, this is aviation Moldovan style, and there are no domestic flights in this poor country. One wonders when did an aircraft last land here?

But guess what? I had been briefed on this airport beforehand and realised that there would be an Antonov An-12 here. Not the one that the Grixona chaps had promised, however, but An-12BK ER-ADP (c/n 8345702), a real oddball and, no doubt, one with a dubious past.

CREW PUTS IL-18 THROUGH HER PACES

There are almost forty people milling around the Il-18 as rumours surface that the crew have decided to carry out a take-off and low-level flypast for the benefit of the punters. Time seems to pass slowly, and there is an opportunity to carry out a photo shoot of Vladimir Russu, the Il-18 captain, and First Officer Sergei Ianovich. After what

Stripped of her four engines and many other vital components on the ramp at Chisinau, Il-22 ER-75929 is also owned by Tandem Aero, but would seem unlikely to take to the air again.



Tandem Aero's Ilyushin Il-18B ER-ICB performs a truly impressive low flypast along the runway at Balti Airport for the benefit of the party.

appears to be an eternity, the undoubted highlight of the day commences. With some prior 'secret' negotiations, the Il-18 was to depart for two low-level passes across the airfield, thereby giving everyone a chance of catching this historic airliner in the air. I will take credit for this opportunity, but my thanks go to the Moldovans for agreeing to the idea. As the steps are removed from the side of the aircraft in another entirely humorous affair, Captain Russu begins the start-up sequence for the four engines - a moment to be truly cherished by the fortunate gathering of enthusiasts.

Brakes are released, and the Il-18 taxis to the end of the runway, turns around and lines up with the centreline. Bearing in mind that the group is no more than thirty yards from the edge of the runway, this could be spectacular. With the sun behind her, the Il-18's engines are brought up to full power, the resulting clouds of blackened smoke billowing into the sky, the nose-wheel light is illuminated, and suddenly the lightly-laden airliner begins racing along the runway. Vladimir has judged it perfectly, the Il-18 positively soars into the air right in front of his awestricken audience. A moment from a bygone era, this was a magical vision for everyone to behold. With no payload to worry about, Vladimir and his crew could relish every moment of the next few minutes as the Il-18 cavorted around the sky. She is like a new toy, and having executed a turn to the left, the aircraft is brought back along the runway at a height of no more than fifty feet. The operation is repeated with a starboard roll, and once again this sprightly lady sprints down the runway at tree height. All too soon our private air display is over, and with gear extended the Il-18 touches down on the Balti runway and returns to her appointed parking spot. Those legendary steps are brought back into action and placed alongside the aircraft, and it is time to board the Il-18 for the return flight to Chisinau - flight TQ1411. Our visit to Balti had certainly been both worthwhile and memorable.

Taking off at 12.40, this flight lasts rather longer than the earlier sector to Balti as it is interspersed with some interesting low flying over a couple of airfields at Marculesti and Vadul Lui Voda, with some spirited low passes at the latter general aviation field. It all ends with touchdown at Chisinau at 13.23 to conclude another magnificent flight aboard one of Russia's greatest airliners. We disembark into glorious sunshine, before being whisked away in the airport bus to the terminal building. Lunch was next on the agenda, and amidst a number of grumbles the group moved outside to an airport canteen. However, there appears to have been some form of miscalculation, as Alex reappears to advise that the canteen has no food! Unfortunately, the planned ramp tour is not scheduled to begin until four o'clock, and with temperatures nearing frying point, we have a tedious few hours to fill.

RAMP TOUR OF CHISINAU AIRPORT

For obvious reasons, ramp tours should be conducted with the greatest discipline, and this one certainly has none. It is not long before poor Alex becomes fractious at the lack of adherence to his instructions. Thankfully, from my own personal point of view, for once this behaviour is not my problem. What is of greater significance is the chance to photograph some real beauties, comprising three An-24s of Air Moldova, comprising ER-46417 (c/n 87304102), ER-46508 (c/n 37308404) and ER-46599 (c/n 97305109), one An-24RV of Tandem Aero, namely ER-46685 (c/n 47309710), and ER-AZX (c/n 47309804) an An-24 of Skylink Arabia, alongside another anonymous example. There is also an Antonov An-32B in the shape of ST-NSP (c/n 2109) of El Magal Aviation undergoing overhaul. Another rarity is An-12 YA-KAD of Kabul Air, which is

normally found at Fujairah. Whilst it looks somewhat the worse for wear, Alex goes to great lengths to point out to us that it is still airworthy.

Now for the real tricky bit. It is a quarter of a mile to the other end of the ramp, and by now the patience of Alex is near to breaking point as he attempts to shepherd the group across the apron. Sanity is maintained, and the objective is achieved. We find here that ER-ICB, our cherished Il-18, has been returned to her normal home on the Chisinau ramp, and alongside her we find two sisterships. The immaculate Il-18D ER-ICS (c/n 187009903) of Tandem Aero has lost her passenger certificate, and can only now carry cargo. Next to her in a somewhat ravaged state is ER-75929 (c/n 187010505), an Il-22 which has been converted to an Il-18D. The chances of this lady avoiding the breaker's yard seem remote. She still sports the faded titling of Acvila Romania Carrier, a reminder of the time when she was used to carry refugees from Kosovo to Germany. And so the tour finishes shortly before six o'clock, and the bar at the Hotel Kosmos beckons, with the prospect of an overdue cold beer.

Within seconds of sipping a refreshing glass of beer, a phone call summons me to a meeting with Alex and my "secret" German colleague. The next forty minutes seem somewhat surreal as I am ushered into a small green car, whilst Alex seeks the third member of our party. Whilst waiting in the car, the three official organisers of the trip walk round the corner, and I dive behind the seat to hide. This is more like the secret service than I had ever wished. The driver's phone rings and, as instructed, the vehicle is moved across the street. Finally, Alex and our German friend appear, and we move on to a local restaurant to discuss business. An hour of deep negotiations pass concerning the charter of the Il-18 for a five-day tour of seven countries in May 2010. We also conclude an agreement for a weekend tour in the Ukraine by An-24, so things are proceeding as we planned.

Next, we are invited to Vladimir Russu's apartment, where we are made most welcome. Mrs Russu had very kindly put on a magnificent spread, and on two large televisions Captain Russu played videos from the mid-nineties when he flew the Il-18 in Angola. It is not often I am spell-bound, but these films were fascinating. The evening flies by, and I have to plead to be released shortly before midnight as I have to rise the next morning at the ungodly hour of three o'clock.

Rendezvousing with Messrs Campbell and Joules at 03.30 the next morning, the lads thoughtfully bought me a coffee before departing to Budapest. Meanwhile, I tried to keep warm in the airport terminal until

A pair of Antonov An-24RV aircraft with Skylink Arabia titling were in store at Chisinau, comprising an anonymous example and ER-AZX.





Kabul Air Antonov An-12 YA-KAD was surrounded by various items of ground equipment and was missing many parts at Chisinau early in April.

the check-in desk opened at 07.15. It was with a great sense of relief that I settled into my seat aboard the Air Moldova Airbus for the flight to Frankfurt. Once again, it departs spot on time, a further relief as I only have 90 minutes to make the onward connection to Manchester. Time evaporates rapidly at Frankfurt as the aircraft parks just about as far away from the terminal as possible. With valuable time ticking away I go straight to the transfer desk, and by the time I arrive at the gate there are only 20 minutes remaining. At security, I am politely requested to stand to one side, where my bag is tested for drugs – oh, the joy of having long hair! Boarding complete, the A319 leaves on time, and completes what has been a truly remarkable weekend. And it all went like clockwork!

Tandem Aero Antonov An-24RV ER-46685 parked at Chisinau on April 4 was once used on passenger services to Kiev in neighbouring Ukraine.



A rather smarter example, An-12BK ER-ADP was parked on the ramp at Balti Airport during the visit of the Il-18 early in April.



The crew and Moldovan organisers of the Il-18 flight pose for the camera on the ground at Balti Airport. First Officer Sergei Ivanovich stands second left, with Captain Vladimir Russu on the right of the picture. The gentlemen standing in between are Vitali Ambarli and Alex Marceno.

The author would like to extend his sincere thanks to Alex Marceno, Vladimir Russu, Paul Joules, Duncan Campbell, Teemu Tuuri and Vitali Ambarli for all their assistance, companionship, free beers and taxi ride. And a final huge thanks to the 'secret' German, Daniel Frohriep, without whose priceless assistance, none of the above could have taken place. Roll on the Stans Tour by Il-18 in May 2010 by Ian Allan Aviation Tours.