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May Newsletter

Shorts in the North Pole

We departed Brisbane late February 06 destined for Edinburgh (Scotland), and I'd have to admit that we were a little apprehensive about heading into the cold Atlantic Sea on the tail end of a reasonably dreary winter.

Those brave souls who ferry through the Atlantic all year round tell you that it's very safe because everything is already frozen, but of course if the conditions are right you'll find ice and lots of it.



Narsarsuaq Greenland - Refueling

Our project was to move a Shorts 360-300 Series from Edinburgh to North America. This aircraft had been operated by UK based BAC, and was registered G-VBAC.

The route would take us north towards Reykjavik Iceland, Narsarsuaq Greenland and then down into Canada, along the east coast of Canada into North America.

The ferry system was a single tank that would hold an additional three hours of fuel, which was ample as our longest leg was only four hours.

After a 20 hour flight from Brisbane we arrived at the hangar, the Shorts had been occupying the corner position for several days and had not flown for a few years, so there's a lot of work to be done before we can depart.

Our only request as they neared completion was that all the anti-ice equipment was tested and made to function correctly, we didn't fancy going over the polar region in an aircraft that couldn't shed some ice.



These peaks were at 13,000ft, with glaciers flowing between them

As you'd expect all this work had taken time and after a few days in Edinburgh we'd managed a midday departure, so we made a b-line for Stornoway, situated on the northern portion of Scotland.

It was Sunday and the runway was only opened late in the afternoon, something to do with the religious beliefs in the region. The weather required a precision approach in heavy snow, almost to the minima, and I now know why the high intensity lighting is so important.

The weather was forecast to improve the following day, so we put the Shorts to bed and headed into town, Stornoway is a very small coastal community where the inhabitants are seasoned to winter extremes.

We're airborne prior to 7:00am Monday morning heading for Reykavik in Iceland, luckily there'd been very little snow during the night and we'd managed to get away reasonably early.



We wanted to maintain VHF contact so we tracked north along the coast before turning out over the Atlantic towards Reykavik.

The journey over obviously freezing cold Atlantic waters takes 3.5 hours and as we descend towards the runway we encounter some moderate turbulence, with the wind direction swinging up to 180 degrees every few minutes.

To our surprise the ATIS says the temperature on the ground is a very pleasant 4 degrees C, but the wind direction is changing drastically and it's extremely gusty. There are three runways so every wind direction has a solution.

Despite the conditions we ease the Shorts onto the ground and taxi into the assigned area.

We're ushered inside and the stamp in our passport reveals that we'd been processed by 007, the official 007.

Refueling only took 30 minutes and it wasn't long before we're airborne again, heading for Greenland.



Glaciers in Greenland

We'd flown most of this leg at 13,000ft, however the lowest safe altitude as we approached Greenland required a climb to 14.

Halfway across Greenland we're visual and this areas rare exposure to sunlight reveals a picturesque frozen countryside. Cameras were blazing as we discovered pure clear ice glaciers that towered to 13,000ft, numerous mammoth valleys of frozen water headed uncompromisingly towards the sea, now only 60 miles away.

On short final there are huge ice burls floating beneath us and we can see several heading through the gorge towards the sea.

This flight had taken a little over 3 hours and the temperature on the ground was a very pleasant 10 degrees C, very unusual in this part of the world.

After another relatively short refueling stop we're airborne and headed for Goose Bay in Canada.

Through here, even the Shorts keeps up with the sun as it rotates above the earth.



Just arrived in Goose Bay Canada

All our navigation is done with a GPS and the compass is constantly spinning 60 to 80 degrees for no apparent reason, we're too close to the north-pole for it to be of any use. Navigation through here would have been very interesting for aviation pioneers.

Three hours later we're approaching Goose Bay, Canada, it's still daylight and the ATIS describes a dreary day, with low cloud, poor visibility and heavy snow.

The news was hard to believe, we'd been sitting in the sun all day and despite the outside air temperature gauge telling us that it was minus 30 degrees Celsius, the day seemed perfect.

Our arrival required an ILS approach to the minimum altitude, and again the high intensity lighting is a welcome sight. Apparently maximum intensity is the only setting used on this runway, nobody requests anything different.

As we taxied in a mutual decision was made without either of us uttering a word, we'd gone as far as we dare today.

The next morning we came back to the aircraft to discover that it had been encapsulated in ice, heavy snow had melted and then frozen again.

Before we could go anywhere we would have to have the aircraft sprayed with a de-icing agent.

This process took 40 minutes and cost a whopping \$1,800, for safety sake there was no other choice though.

Shortly after 8:00 am we're heading for Sept-Iles (many islands) where we refuelled for the last time, the locals struggle with English, this part of the world was colonized by the French.

The Shorts batteries had still not recovered from the previous nights sub-zero temperatures, so we were delayed for 30 minutes while we waited for the ground power unit. While ever the temperatures on the ground we're below zero, nothing was going to thaw.

It's midday on day two and our Shorts was parked inside its new owners hangar, luckily we'd slipped through as the arctic region had experienced a heat wave.



Mig Jet Adventures Rockhampton Qld Ph: +617 4921 1525 www.migjet.com

Mid Pacific Beatle Cruncher

On a recent trip from Singapore to the USA we encountered an interesting little briefing office, which was also the control tower.

What made this overnight on a picturesque little island in the middle of the Pacific special was our encounter with the tower controller the next morning.

I'd attended the briefing office to check the weather, and get airways clearance. The controller was a reasonably intelligent middle-aged woman.

As we casually discussed our departure from the island she was tipping lime into what I believe was a beetle nut, this is a fruit that is grown locally throughout the Pacific area, and although I've never tried it, I believe it causes some sort of mind alteration, a buzz or high you might say.

They are small enough to be placed into the mouth hole, and I'm not sure why they put lime in them. Anyway, during our conversation she promptly inserted it into her mouth and began chewing on it, I continued to ask questions which seemed to annoy her, she couldn't chew her prize and talk to me at the same time, maybe the locals knew when to shut up and I obviously didn't.

She spat the delicacy into the bin and gave me a dirty look.

The question is now, how effected was she going to be by the drugs, there were other large aircraft inbound and my trust for her decision making skills was destroyed.

As we departed the tower she was busy preparing another, so beware of the towers instruction in the Pacific Islands, you might be miss guided by a controller that was under the influence of beetle nut, I haven't tried it, but I think it impairs your ability to make quick and sound judgment.



Aero Shell Stunt team decide to go water skiing

www.australianairferry.com

Australian Air-Ferry
Kempsey NSW Australia

Darren Gibson

PO Box 495

Kempsey NSW 2440

Ph: +61 2 6563 1406 BH

Ph: +61 2 6562 1861 AH

Fax: +61 2 6562 3064

Mobile: 0417 446 521

dgibson@australianairferry.com

Australian Air-Ferry
Brisbane, Qld Australia

Garry Mitchell

Ph: 61 7 55477692

Fax: 61 2 6562 3064

Mobile: 0412 457727

US Cell: + 1 562 8815919

gmitchell@australianairferry.com