



Tales of two crossings—PC-12

First of two parts

The view on final to Runway 2 at the Reykjavik, Iceland, airport.

Westbound, hammer down

Trucking across the North Atlantic

BY THOMAS A. HORNE

Things like this don't happen every day, the Pilatus folks at their U.S. headquarters at the Jeffco Airport in Broomfield, Colorado, told me. In fact, it's never happened before. The staid Pilatus top honchos in Stans, Switzerland, had agreed to let me, a non-company employee, help to fly a factory-fresh PC-12 from its birthplace near Luzern all the way to Jeffco. That's about 4,700 nautical miles, with almost two-thirds of the trip over water.

■ The Swiss are nothing if not thorough, so a background check of sorts was made. After the usual questions about my certificates, ratings, and hours came the ultimate, make-or-break kicker: Had I done any Atlantic crossings before? ■ The answer to that was a definite "yes." Over the years I'd made some 14 North Atlantic crossings. All but two of them were in piston singles. Two were made in miserably slow—though brand-new—airplanes that were exquisitely ill-suited for the task. So I was accustomed to crossings, all right, but crossings in low and slow airplanes that kept me in the weather and were supremely vulnerable to headwinds and all the nasty complications that they imply. ■ So it was

with great joy that I headed for Stans and a crossing in a large, comfortable turboprop that contrasted favorably in every way to the airplanes I'd ferried before. After meeting with Urs Maienfisch, a Pilatus marketing official, I was introduced to John Rahm, a former Crossair captain and now a Pilatus demonstration pilot. Rahm, who had many a PC-12 crossing under his belt, would be my keeper on this trip.

Our airplane, HB-FQF, was loaded to the gills with 402 gallons of Jet A and some crates of parts and other supplies for the Broomfield office. The interior was unfinished, which is also to say uninsulated, and the cabin was set up in a commuter configuration, with 10 Spartan seats. As for the monster 1,200-shp PT6A-67B, Lord knows that the Pilatus mechanics had thoroughly checked it and every other component aboard for any squawks or potential squawks.

Rahm did the takeoff from Stans. We'd be flying relatively low—12,000 feet—on a westerly course for a very short leg to Bern, Switzerland, where we'd clear customs outbound and recheck the weather for our first big leg of the day, to Prestwick, Scotland (some 715 nm away). We took advantage of the relatively cloudless skies to fly VFR over some of the world's most beautiful mountains.

Lucky for us, the good weather would hold until we crossed the English Channel. For our arrival at Prestwick, however, the weather promised to be 2,000 feet overcast with rain; visibility 10 miles; and strong, gusty surface winds out of the west. Every time I'd flown over or to Scotland, there had been a soggy low hanging around somewhere near. This time would be no different. Some 3.3 hours after taking off from sunny Bern, we were cleared for the ILS approach to Prestwick's Runway 31. We broke out at about 1,800 feet msl and rode the bumps down the glideslope. The ATIS said that the winds were out of the west at 20, gusting to 30 knots. Typical. Not wanting to be responsible for chancing a sloppy landing in a 20-hour-old \$2.7 million airplane, I wisely let Rahm fight the angry crosswinds. After a brief workout on his part, we were safely on the ground, taxiing to parking



At minus 54 degrees Celsius, the PC-12's windshield needed high heat to kill a thick frost. Greenland, visible through the windshield, is a vast, empty, craggy wilderness filled with glaciers.

spot 2 in area B, our home for 30 minutes. On the way, we watched the McDonnell Douglas DC-10 behind us make an equally sporty landing.

Oh, did I forget to mention that it was early March? Well, it was, and that meant that temperatures at the surface and aloft would be a big change from those in balmy Switzerland. To help remind us of the hostile cold we were about to embrace over our next leg of the day—another 740 nm to Reykjavik, Iceland (BIRK)—Rahm and I hustled from the airplane to the terminal building to don our survival suits.

Some pilots call these outfits "poopie suits." I don't know the origin of the term, so you'll just have to use your imagination. Anyway, I'm not exactly fond of my poopie suit. It's big and orange, fits me loosely, is hard to get into, makes me sweat like mad once I've been in it for a while, is uncomfortable in the cockpit, smells like a mixture of rubber and armpit, and makes me look like a crippled Gumby as I shuffle from the terminal back to the airplane (you have to take your shoes off to put the

thing on, and the feet are so huge that you can't get a good feel for walking).

Rahm is behind me, laughing, and all I can do is laugh at myself because that suit really does make me look ridiculous. The joking stops if you have to ditch, though. The poopie suit will keep you dry and conserve your body temperature in the frigid North Atlantic, and you'll even float in it. Go in the drink without a survival suit and you'll be dead in minutes. With the suit and in a raft (which we also have), you can last for days—at least, that's the theory.

Rahm's suit is more stylish. It's Swiss military-issue, and it fits closer to the body. There's no Gumby floppiness, but he looked like a contortionist getting into the thing because it has zip-pers all over the place.

Anyway, I did the takeoff from Prestwick; climbed through a rainy, turbulent layer of clouds; and within 25 minutes or so we were on top, level at our cruising altitude of FL280. With our tanks topped, and eager to end what promises to be a seven-and-one-half-hour flying day, we ran FQF wide open on our way to Aldan intersection, one of the southern IFR gateways to and from Reykjavik. We were indicating 180 knots, truing out at 270 knots, sucking down gas at 391 pph (about 58 gph), and our interturbine temperature was right at the bottom of the yellow arc. We were hauling along pretty good, true airspeed-wise, thanks in part to the minus-48-degree-Celsius OAT. The headwinds up there were killing us, though. Seventy knots of headwind component kept our groundspeed to 200 knots.

Is that me complaining? Ordinarily I'd be plodding along at 7,000 to 10,000 feet, in double-digit groundspeeds, either picking up ice or fighting to stay out of it, and uncomfortably in and out of radio contact with air traffic control. Fly a piston-powered single across the Atlantic, and you'll probably be begging airliners to relay your position reports. Today, there's none of that. I'll go halfway across the pond in the time I'd usually spend fly-

ing just from Scotland to Iceland.

I'm in...what's this? A comfortable chair with arm rests! I can stretch my legs! I'm doing 200 knots in a headwind, way above clouds and ice! Yes, the un-insulated cabin is cold, and I still hate the poopie suit, but this is traveling in style. If you have to cross the Atlantic in a single, then let it be a turboprop single like the PC-12.

A half-hour out of Aldan, two things

For this reason, you fly high approaches to Runways 2, 32, and 25. Rahm presses me on an unofficial company rule: Don't use reverse thrust on a brand-new, undelivered airplane if you can avoid it. This technique for avoiding propeller erosion is a courtesy to owners. But no sweat: Runway 2 is 5,738 feet long, the runway's been plowed free of snow, and stopping with minimal braking is a snap. Besides, the PC-12's approach speed can be about

This is traveling in style. If you have to cross the North Atlantic in a single-engine airplane, then let it be a turboprop like the PC-12.

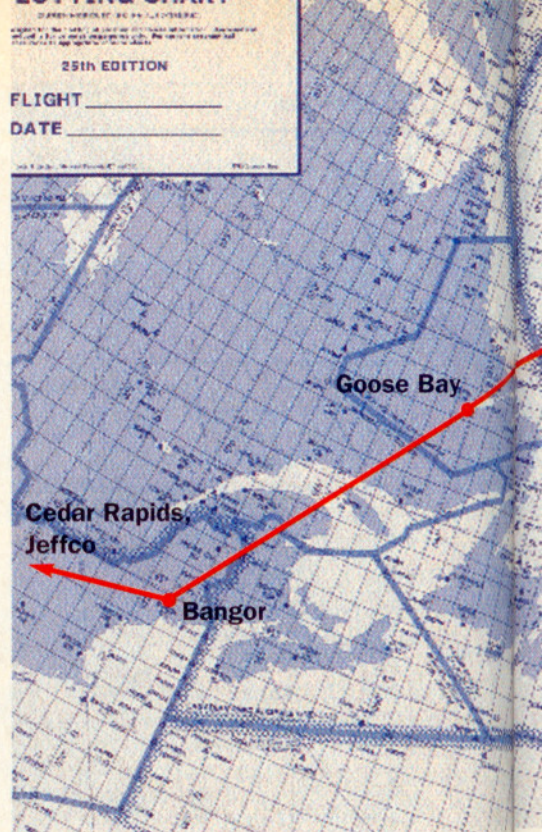
happen: the clouds vanish, and we catch sight of Iceland. Soon we're cleared to descend to the Reykjavik (BIRK) area, and we catch nice views of the Westmann Islands and Iceland's volcano-and-glacier topography.

The weather is calm and clear at BIRK—quite a contrast to Prestwick—and I'm cleared for a visual approach to Runway 2. Like so many airports in the United States, the Reykjavik airport is surrounded by a noise-sensitive zone. It looks as if they built the city around it.

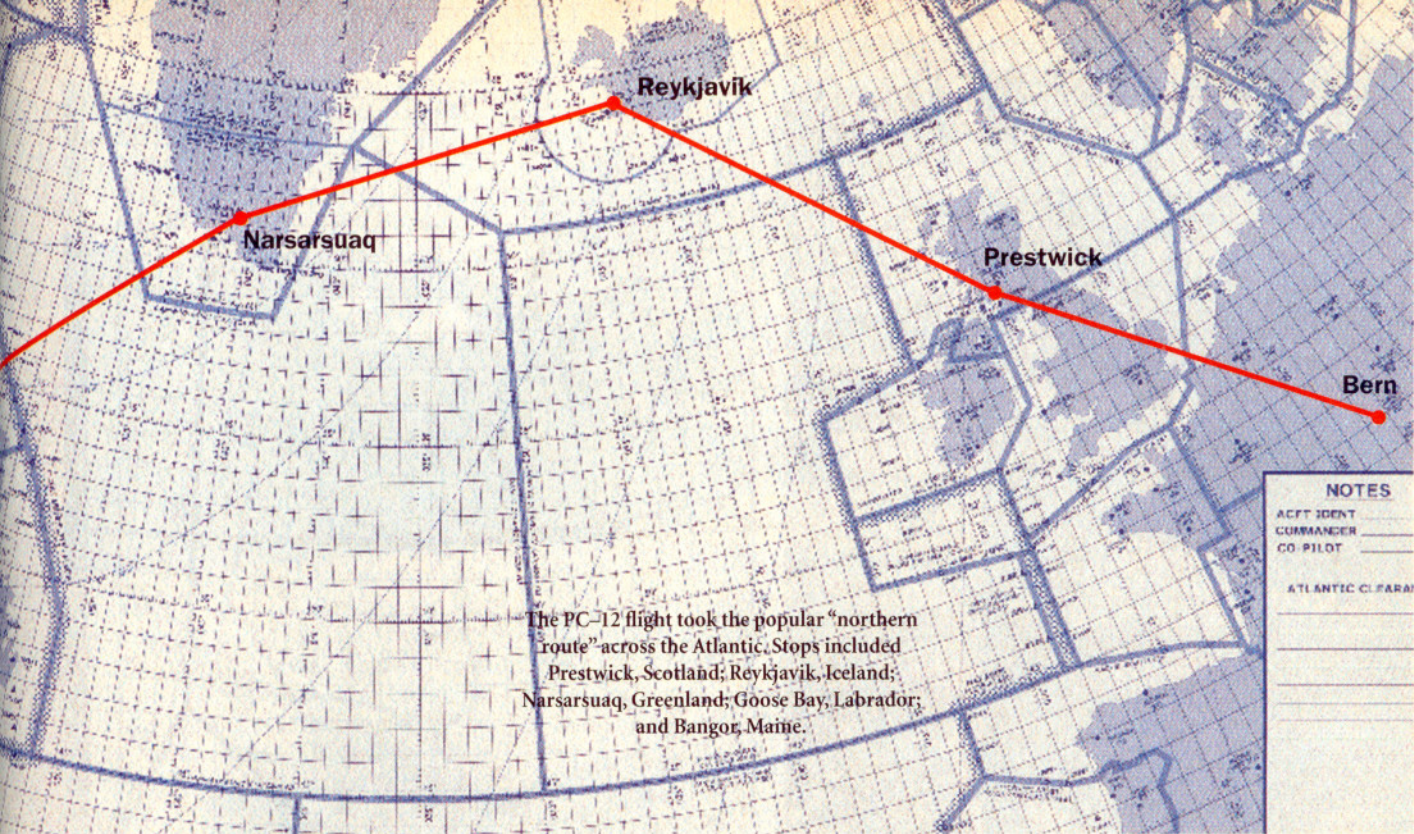
80 knots or less.

The nice thing about the Reykjavik airport is that there's a hotel right on the field. You pull off the runway, park your airplane, walk in to the flight services building, clear customs, walk through the back door, and there's the Loftleidir Hotel. The sun went down on a long flying day as Rahm and I relaxed in the lobby bar.

The next day found us up at the crack of dawn, which poses no jet-lag problems because Iceland's on Zulu time



and Switzerland is only one hour later. Anyway, our luck was holding up extremely well in the weather department. Our next leg, a 550-nm jaunt to Narsarsuaq, Greenland (BGBW), would



be in high pressure conditions all the way. The headwinds at FL280, our cruising altitude once again, would be in the 60-knot range. After fueling up at Narsarsuaq, our next legs of this super-

long flying day would take us to Goose Bay, Labrador (another 600 miles), and then to Bangor, Maine (700 miles more). Yep, today we'd fly 1,500 nm and do it in a total flight time of some eight hours,

30 minutes. The new owner wants his airplane, so the push is on.

Goose Bay was forecasting 1,000 overcast and two miles' visibility in snow, with ceilings and visibilities occa-



sionally 500 overcast and one mile in snow showers. Bangor would have good VFR weather. The good part about a long flying day at these latitudes and time of year? You're flying into the sun, and have daylight for the entire trip.

Rahm had never been to Narsarsuaq before. Usually he filed for Sondestromfjord, some 500 miles north of Narsarsuaq, and far off a direct route to Goose. So I looked forward to showing him the terrain and procedures of this historic—and notorious—airport.

Once the frozen, iceberg-ringed coast of Greenland came into view, I nudged the airplane into a shallow descent. It would be good to get into the comparatively warmer air below. At altitude, the OAT plunged to minus 54 degrees Celsius and the windshield frosted up so badly that we had to turn the windshield heat up to its High setting. This left us with a small square of clear windshield.

By the time the jagged peaks and glaciers of the icecap began to slide beneath us, we'd reached 13,000 feet. The sky was crystal-clear and, as the ice

The Narsarsuaq airport is tucked into a corner of a fjord ringed by mountains. It's a great fuel stop if you can stand the often lousy weather, and pay up to \$8 per gallon for fuel.

fields came closer into view, I remember doing what I always do when fly-

ing this route: staring at the ridges in the glaciers and contemplating the stark solitude all around.

The PC-12's Bendix/King KLN 90B GPS counted down our distance to Narsarsuaq. Now it's 35 miles away, now 30, now 20. We should be seeing it by now, but where was the airport? Sure enough, there it was—dead ahead. I was accustomed to seeing it in the warmer months. The snow on the runway made the airport blend in with the surroundings. The only way I could make out the runway was to spot the brownish stretch of sand that was spread on top of the snow.

Narsarsuaq is surrounded by high terrain, and we were at 7,000 feet by the time we flew over the field. But if you chop the power and put out the gear and flaps, the PC-12 will sink like a stone—an attribute that let us make a nice 180-degree turn on a modified close-in base leg—and still make the touchdown zone in style.

At BGBW it was gas and go in the single-digit (Fahrenheit) temperatures. Four hours later, we were on approach to Goose Bay's Runway 26. There were snow showers, but the ceilings and visibilities were high enough that the localizer back course's minimums weren't factors. It was yet another uneventful landing and yet another quick turn. The best part about landing at Goose? We could take off our survival suits.

Bangor was just 2.5 hours away, and after we landed there, U.S. Customs paid us a visit to look over the airworthiness certificates and export paperwork. Sleep came easily that night in Bangor.

The next day would put another eight hours in my logbook. The first leg was the longest of the whole trip—five hours from Bangor to Cedar Rapids, Iowa (CID), nonstop. It would also be the leg with the strongest headwinds—100 knots on the nose at FL280, which helps to explain the duration of that route segment. After touching down at CID, it was—you guessed it—another quick turn, and off for the final leg to Jeffco.

The weather held up very well, and the headwinds even died down a bit. But it was a race: a snowstorm was moving into the Denver area. Skies turned gray up ahead, but we made it to Jeffco in a respectable 2.9 hours.

There's always a great deal of satisfaction whenever you complete a trip like this. This trip was especially memorable. We accomplished our mission in good time, had no real weather problems, had only one bout with really bad headwinds, and there were no malfunctions. Best of all, the Pilatus cockpit made the journey rather comfortable. That's saying something when you fly from Europe to the Rockies in three days and 23 flying hours.

That night Pilatus Business Aircraft's President and CEO Chris Finnoff and his marketing director wife, Pat, threw a party at a wonderful restaurant in the mountains above Boulder. Outside, the snow was coming down in huge blasts, obscuring the view of the city lights below. The Finnoffs gave Rahm and me each a model of the PC-12, the really nice kind they normally give only to customers. Mine now sits in my living room. Every once in a while I'll look up at it and think of the trip. I'm hoping that I'll get another call. I'm ready to go again. □

In the February issue, Thomas B. Haines will recount a summer Atlantic crossing in a Socata TBM 700. E-mail the author at tom.horne@aopa.org