

Caribbean Challenge

Having experienced St Barth's fabled approach as a passenger, one pilot returns over and again in pursuit of flying it solo

Words & photos *Lyndon Griffith*

Saint Barthélemy, commonly called St Barth's, is probably well known to all aviators due to the approach to the island's Runway 10. Perhaps even better known – thanks to YouTube – are the misfortunes of the pilot of a Piper Aztec, videoed landing long and ending up on the white sandy beach at the far end.

It captured my imagination back in 2003, when I first holidayed on the

neighboring island of Sint Maarten/ St Martin. I have been a keen aviation photographer for many years and, having seen all the images of 747s and A340s crossing low over Maho Beach, I just had to go and witness the action for myself.

Princess Juliana Airport (SXM/TNCM) is the second busiest in terms of movements in the Caribbean. Whilst large jets make up a proportion of the movements, they are joined by a number of much smaller

types, including B-N Islanders, Cessna Caravans, Twin Otters, Jetstreams and other commuter aircraft. It was on my second visit to SXM during 2005 that I decided on an excursion to St Barth's. I booked with Air Caraïbes on a Grand Caravan and my luck was in; front right-hand seat. It was unforgettable. I spent a number of hours on the island, including a walk down to the beach to see if it really did link up with the runway,



with no security fencing. There is a lovely café/bar in the terminal, so keeping refreshed was not a problem and it is beautifully air conditioned. The terminal also boasts probably the nicest public conveniences you will find in any international airport! There are a number of shops on the opposite side of the road including a well-stocked supermarket and frankly, despite being thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean from France, it is

almost akin to popping over to Le Touquet or Deauville. It feels more 'French' than being in France.

The flight back to SXM was also in the front right-hand seat, and the takeoff from Runway 10 totally exhilarating, with an early left-hand turn, passing low over the beach. I was now hooked and felt the need to fly myself into this exotic island surrounded by the azure waters of the Caribbean.

I returned later that same year and booked another return day trip with Air Caraïbes. The pilot on this flight was fantastic and with only one other passenger – a nervous looking young lady who seemed intent on keeping her eyes closed for the duration – I got to fly the Caravan. What a great thrill as we rolled down Runway 09 (as it was) at SXM. Time seemed to race by, and all too soon I had to hand back control as we passed Le Pain de Sucre (Sugar Loaf) ➡



On base leg for St Barth's R28, Lyndon's GoPro image shows the infinity pool on the left, the Eden Rock Hotel on the nose and the runway, top right



Hills close by funnel wind and narrow the go-around options

Island) to land on Runway 10. Once clear of the immigration formalities I went over to the area where the home-based light aircraft are parked, adjacent to a small maintenance hangar. I located a shed that belonged to a flying instructor, but it was obvious from a sign in the window that he did not frequent the establishment unless pre-booked. There was a contact number, however this is where a further difficulty lies, until you know better. Unknown to me at the time, the international dialing code for St Barth's and that of the French side of St Martin is actually the Guadeloupe code!

It was not until a visit in December 2009 that I managed to book a flight in a PA-28 to Grand Case (TFFG) from L'Esperance Airport on the French side of the island. Being somewhat dubious, I drove over and found out that no instructor would be available, so it would be a right-hand seat

Runway 10, over the Pain de Sucre, and then he took over. The girls in the back knew nothing of St Barth's other than the fact that the approach was a little different to most of the major airports that they flew into.

When the approach is flown correctly, the runway designator paint is not visible because it remains behind the rising ground until you cross the roundabout on the hillside in the undershoot. So you aim for the touchdown zone (TDZ) approximately a third of the way along the 646m length of concrete. Lose sight of it and you are too low, see more of the runway and you are

our pilot conducted the takeoff and, once established in the climb, I completed the rest of the flight.

At this point, I should perhaps mention the French AIP that covers St Barth's and Grand Case because they are regulated by the French West Indies. An approved instructor must deem you proficient to operate into St Barth's and there are very few who are 'approved'. Needless to say, reading and printing out a copy of this AIP is very desirable.

An approved instructor must deem you proficient to operate into St Barth's

ride for me yet again, with an aspiring Air France pilot in the left seat. On this occasion a friend of mine, who is a 737 first officer with Continental (now United), had come down for the weekend on the jump seat with a female friend of hers, so I invited them along. Our pilot in command let me do the takeoff from Grand Case and fly until positioning the aircraft on final for

too high. Many single-engine pilots seem to have the ethos of approaching above a traditional approach slope in case of an engine failure. This will not work on either end at TFFJ. Whilst our would-be airline pilot concentrated and made a good approach, the professionals in the back were hollering and whoopin' very loudly! After some refreshments in the terminal,

Back for another attempt

Fortunately, with age I have learned to be a little more patient and I finally located Aeroclub Saint-Martin and Yves Blanchet. I first arranged to meet Yves, who is the only instructor on St Martin qualified to authorise solo flight into TFFJ, at 1100 on 3 November 2012. I went with an open mind. I had taken neither my licence nor logbook as previous experiences had left me deflated. By 11.15 the adrenaline

build-up was subsiding. A very kind lady at the airport called one of the numbers as advertised on the plaque next to the clubhouse door, and a gentleman informed her that Yves was not flying today.

I consoled myself with a cup of coffee but, lo and behold: a few minutes later Yves turned up, apologising profusely. He had had to go by boat to St Barth's to collect the Cessna 172, which had 'gone tech' over there and needed some attention. What a relief!

Yves and I chatted so that he could assess my experience and establish what I wanted to do. Leaving St Martin for St Barth's requires both a flight plan and GAR to be filed. You are also required to take a passport. The airspace covering this short sector is delegated to Juliana. A southbound corridor is flown at 1,500ft and an offset reciprocal northerly one at 1,000ft. Calls are made to the Flight Information Services at Grand Case and St Barth's. The club aircraft is on the French Overseas (F.O) register and may be flown on either a JAA or EASA licence. It is a fuel-injected Cessna 172 Skyhawk SP. (Yves has also recently acquired a Piper Tomahawk, which appears to be in excellent condition.)

We climbed onboard and I noticed a checklist in the side pocket. As I reached for it, Yves informed me that it was all in French. "Well," I thought, "it's not a retractable complex single, so help me through the engine start and give me the speeds and power settings and all should be well." It was.

The first call to St Barth's is made advising minutes to run to the island of Fourchue, P o B, and stating "In the Corridor". I was fully anticipating landing

C172 'Juliet Charlie' has been Lyndon's regular mount for the St Barth's challenge



on Runway 10. Much to my surprise, the wind dictated the use of R28 for the landing. So, instead of proceeding to the Pain de Sucre, we flew towards the small uninhabited island of Fregate and descended to cross it at 1,000ft.

From there, you aim for a beach on the main island descending to 600ft followed by a right turn adjacent to the coastline continuing the descent. Once past a road and close to a beautiful residence with a large infinity swimming pool – which by now should be at the same level as you – a sharp right

turn is made on to final approach at about 200ft. It's 'make up your mind time' pretty swiftly: The Eden Rock hotel is now on your left, after which it is too late to carry out a missed approach and you are committed to landing. If aborting, it is a sharp climbing right-hand turn whilst still over the water (any later and the ground rises at a great and unavoidable rate). So you now have to land and →





Architectural style and detail collide at the Aéroclub Saint-Martin's clubhouse

there is invariably a light tailwind, as easterlies prevail in this part of the world.

We vacated the runway and Yves directed me to the R10 holding point for departure. Takeoff from R28 is forbidden. What would I like to do now? An approach to R10, please. Okay, but it will have to be a missed approach today.

We lined up on Runway 10, wasting as little of the concrete as possible. The temperature was more than 30°C and *flap 10* was selected with 2,000rpm on the brakes before release. We were airborne with room to spare: however it can be bumpy on the climb-out and performance was sluggish. We orbited the island around to the Pain de Sucre and reported final on Runway 10.

The onshore wind is funneled down this strip of land... you can 'expect the unexpected'

Full flap was selected and the throttle closed. I had to maintain 70kt. We were a little high – *sideslip* – now the TDZs were visible above the roundabout. Getting a little low – *Apply some power*.

We needed to traverse the road level with 'the cross' (this commemorates the crash of a Twin Otter on the hillside). However, as we crossed the island and approached the road my hand never left the throttle, as any sink can be very rapid and has to be countered quickly. Over the roundabout: Do not lower the nose, but rather ease back and let the speed bleed off to 60kt and descend, hoping to touch down on the TDZs.

We were going to make it, so now power was applied and we went around with the flaps raised in stages. Passing the end of the runway and over the beach a sharpish left turn was made initially to track 060 and

then towards Fregate, climbing back to 1,000ft to be in the corridor.

The track was 330 to the Ile de Tintamarre (to the east of Grand Case), which would normally have been visible by now. However on this particular day, the cloud base was around 1,000 ft. Then it began to drizzle and we were virtually IMC! Showers are common in this part of the world, but they come and pass quite quickly.

Dodging masts at Grand Case

After approaches at St Barth's you would be forgiven for thinking that life is going to be a lot easier on the homeward leg. Grand Case airport lies partly on reclaimed land and it sits with high ground on either side of it, almost for its entire length and

beyond. The onshore easterly wind is funneled down this strip of land and you can 'expect the unexpected' as you descend on final for Runway 12, passing over the bars and restaurants as you cross the coast. You may even have to dodge the mast of a large yacht moored in the bay. This brought to a close an exhilarating forty minutes

and I arranged a further lesson later that week.

This time we started with a more formal briefing and I offered the student Yves had just flown with the opportunity to accompany us in one the back seats, which he duly accepted. Yves was keen to know what information I had absorbed from the first flight. He then briefed me on the left-hand approach to Runway 28 as well as recapping on Runway 10.

Basically, you aim the aircraft towards a ridge to the east of Gustavia, the island's main town, and commence descent aiming specifically for a house with a red roof. On passing this, you continue descent to 600ft looking for a house with a grey roof. By this time you are looking *up* at the local granite and rock formations. Now, you make a left turn on what is effectively the base leg, descending to cross a property with a green roof at 400ft. In the event, I mistook this for another building, but Yves kept me going in the right direction. By this stage the turbulence and downdraughts were noticeable and the airspeed was dropping off, close to the stall. More power! Keep descending and heading towards the bay and once over the water, turn final.

To this day, I question the sanity of this approach, especially as you can actually avoid having to do it, even when approaching the island from the south. What's a few more track miles...?

However, the airport is



served by commercial operators and they no doubt like to save time where possible. The owners of these three aforementioned properties are forbidden by law to alter the colour of their roofs.

We followed the landing up with my first actual, and thankfully relatively easy, approach and landing on Runway 10.

One might say it was interesting, but definitely not a day for trying it solo

After descending through the high ground on the previous approach, anything was going to feel less stressful! My holiday was coming to an end, so I wished Yves farewell and asked if he would be around in May as I would be back for more.

Returning to try it solo

I had visited St Maarten in May on previous occasions and the weather had been excellent, so I was sure we could crack the St Barth's approaches and manage it solo. I emailed Yves on arrival on Friday and said I was looking forward to seeing him on Monday. His reply came on Sunday: Had I come in my own aircraft? As much as I would love to fly my Aviat Husky in the Caribbean, no; I had arrived courtesy of a KLM 747. At this point it could be said that I smelled a rat. Anyway, we agreed to meet.

F.OIJC was 'tech' with a cracked spinner. Yves had access to another unused 172, so I suggested we change the spinners, which we did and he ran the engine and all seemed great. One problem; it was a public holiday and his mechanic was not available to sign off the paperwork. I cursed. It was a glorious day for flying.

The aircraft was due for a fifty-hour check on Tuesday, so Wednesday it would have to be.

By this time, I had bought a couple of GoPro cameras and, having done some homework, thought it might be possible to attach one to the under-wing tie down. Yves kindly provided a couple of large washers and we managed to attach one of the brackets and made one or two minor adjustments with some rubber to prevent vibration. It looked as though it would stay *in situ*.

It was breezy on Wednesday morning and not especially bright. Nobody had been over to St Barth's by the time my afternoon booking came around. R10 would definitely be the preferred runway today. I duly recited all the procedures that

I had written down and learned from my December visit and Yves said he was happy to depart.

On first contact with St Barth's, you always get the wind and QNH. I have a very clear memory of what came back on 118.45, in a very French accent: "The wind is 060/19, gusting 29 knots". I forget

the altimeter setting – it seemed a little irrelevant in the gale and the margin between the two islands is fairly negligible.

On the first approach with the wind from 060, Yves advised that we had to track in from a southerly direction and aim at some green-coloured properties on the left-hand side of the runway. The TDZs would not be visible until we were a lot closer. We landed and Yves hands were never far from the controls.

We landed twice more with the wind at 070/19 gusting 29kt. There are windsocks on both hills, left and right as you approach the roundabout. They were not agreeing with each other as the wind swirled around the land mass!

One might say it was interesting, but definitely not a day for trying it solo. It was not much easier back at Grand Case, but still a sense of achievement – or was it survival – prevailed.

I had two more slots during the vacation. Three days later I was booked to try again with Thomas Dubern, Yves' assistant instructor. It was still blowing a gale on St Barth's, so we flew around Anguilla, making a missed approach at C J Lloyd (formerly Wallblake) airport on the British Overseas Territory. I would recommend this to anyone as the island is unusually flat for this part of the world and the beaches are stunning.

One last chance came a few days later, however my logbook testifies to a flight to St Kitts and back.

Another club member came over to the aircraft showing a lot of interest in my GoPro. He said they had used one mounted on the roof to film their last flight to St Kitts. It had apparently been excellent over half the distance, but had then fallen off into the Caribbean! I jumped out and added some more masking tape to the bracket.

It was nice to see another island and find out where 'Bratcha' – as it was pronounced by the Juliana Controllers – actually was: Robert L Bradshaw International Airport. This was not my

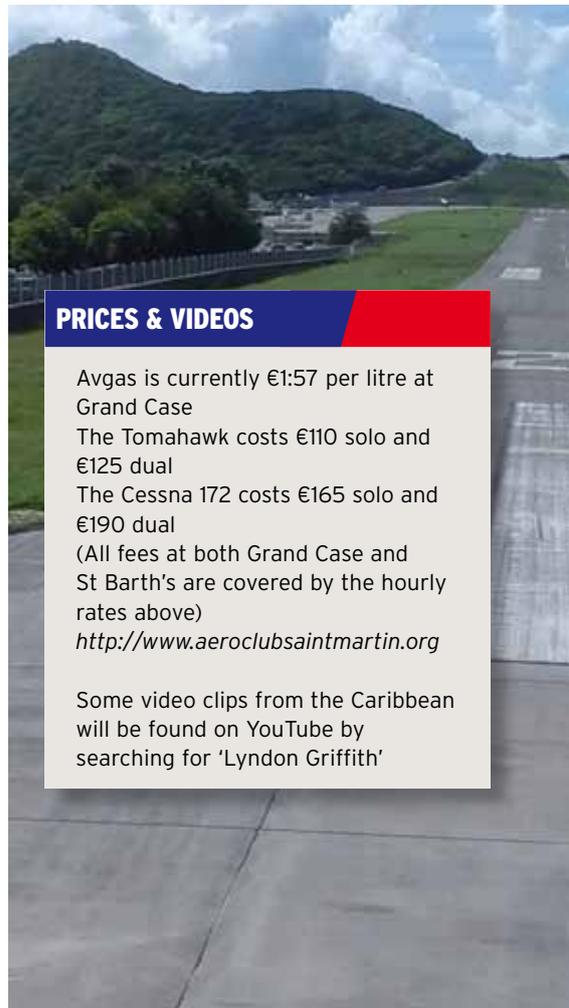
original intention but it's always nice to get airborne.

It was now going to be a long six months before my next visit. Still, the summer of 2013 spoiled us aviators back home in the UK and some memorable days were enjoyed.

Six months later...

I enjoy SXM around late November, after the hurricane season has passed. Unfortunately my preferred accommodation was full towards the end of the month, so I had to leave the UK in late October. The sun didn't appear for over two days. On the Friday evening, the Air France flight to Paris was cancelled due to one heck of a thunderstorm. Great timing! My first flight with Yves was booked on 1 November. He fully appreciated my desire to try and crack St Barth's, however it was another breezy day. We made the scenic tour around Anguilla. He has students and club members who live on St Barth's and later in the week he had two sessions booked with them, so there was an opportunity to fly over and spend a couple of hours there and fly the return leg.

On first contact, the wind was 040, varying 080 at about five knots. So, Runway 28 it was yet again. After taxiing in, I was introduced to Steven, who was about to fly and had kindly agreed to share



PRICES & VIDEOS

Avgas is currently €1:57 per litre at Grand Case

The Tomahawk costs €110 solo and €125 dual

The Cessna 172 costs €165 solo and €190 dual

(All fees at both Grand Case and St Barth's are covered by the hourly rates above)

<http://www.aeroclubsaintmartin.org>

Some video clips from the Caribbean will be found on YouTube by searching for 'Lyndon Griffith'

costs the following day on a trip to Antigua. Then I left Yves to his students and went for a walk with the camera. Stephen was soon airborne on his own and it was a good opportunity to photograph 'JC in the local circuit.

It was an early start the next morning from Grand Case, with Thomas to hold my hand. The plan was to pick Steven up from St Barth's and he would fly the leg to Antigua VC Bird and – after a short turnaround and hopefully another coffee to wake me – I would fly back. It was a stunning day and it was not long after takeoff with Steven and Thomas in front that we could see Saba, St Eustatius and St Kitts. Antigua came into view from about sixty miles away and then, soon afterwards, Barbuda to the north of our track.

The view coming in over the capital, St John's was excellent from the back seat as we passed over three cruise liners and just south of the famous cricket stadium. We landed on Runway 07 which has one of the longest displaced thresholds I have seen, with a series of about seven lead-in arrows. We taxied in and parked opposite a large terminal extension.

Thomas had warned that bureaucracy was rife and that going in and out of the terminal could be quite an affair. We entered via the main arrival hall and a plentiful number of Immigration officials were in evidence to meet the three of us. It

was around 10.30 and the BA and Virgin flights do not arrive until the afternoon. Next stop Customs and a copy of the General Declaration. We would have to return prior to departure. Then it was up to the admin offices to pay the landing fee and Nav charges – a reasonable fee of US \$25. The coffee was very nice and had some local cane sugar thrown in to boost the energy levels.

Back to customs and it was 11.10 by the lady's watch. Thomas had put 11.00 on the form much earlier in the day, so he had to change it in triplicate. We moved onward to the departure lounge and security. This lady placed her gleaming phone in front of us and 11.09 came up on its screen. "Please amend your departure time..."

Finally back out on the ramp in the warm 30°C, I climbed into the left-hand seat, noted the ATIS and called for start. ATC was wonderful – no delay. We departed on Runway 07 and the sight that greeted me as we climbed out was stunning. There is a beautiful, flat island just off the coast. We were soon in a climbing left turn direct to St Barth's, climbing to Flight Level 65. Barring the odd cloud, the view seemed limitless and it was flat calm.

The aircraft has an old GPS and twin nav/comm boxes, but no DME. I had asked Yves if he had contemplated a Garmin GPS, however he said there was

nobody within reasonable reach that could repair anything so sophisticated.

St Barth's came into view a long way out and we were on track, initially heading towards Coco Island, just off the southern shore. The wind was much the same as when we had left, so R28 it would be yet again. Would this be on a left base through the high ground, looking for coloured roof tops? Or could we go around the eastern side and approach entirely over water? Luckily, Thomas favoured the second. I was getting used to the latter part of this approach, but was certainly not over-confident. After shutting down, we said our farewells to Steven, and I thanked him for joining us and making the day possible, and we set off back to Grand Case.

'JC was due for a further fifty-hour check with an extension to a tired high-time engine, as well as a few running repairs. Yves said that it would be on the ground until the following week, prior to which I would be homeward bound. So another visit and still no opportunity to solo at St Barth's.

I have a feeling that Yves knows I will be back! I still have a goal. He is great to fly with, very calm and I would certainly recommend that anyone holidaying in St Martin contact him if they are wanting to make this short flight with family or friends instead of going by a commercial operator. It is way more fun! 🍷

