ISRAEL / GEORGIA Fly-In Summer 2010

By Yoram Avtaby - AOPA Israel, Safety Committee Chairman.

Very early, just before Sunrise, the alarm clock wakes us, to one of the longest flying days ever. One can barely open eyes with the help of cup of coffee, while a beautiful sunrise, on the eastern horizon, shows the Mountains of Samaria. All was packed and ready for the trip.
A short drive to Herzeliya Airport, (LLHZ), at 6am, for checklist of the Cessna 172 (4X-CEU). While others do the same with the Cirrus SR22 (4X-CWG) at Rosh-Pina Airport, (LLRP) at northern Israel, and another SR22 Cirrus, (4X-CWW) at Herzeliya.
The Cessna C414, (4X-CMS twin engine) at Megiddo Airport, (LLMG).

Nataxtary Georgia Airfield:

Destination is UGSB, The city of Batumi at eastern side of Black see. The International gateway to Georgia.
We are at about 1,000NM from arrival airport, and we must get there before sunset.
Just before sunset, after 12 hours, the last airplane, a Cessna 172, Landed at Batumi, with the red of the sun going down, on the Black Sea horizon.
It could be like many other fly-Ins or casual flying for many pilots, doing day to day stuff, but this is the first time a group of General aviation Airplanes has to get to Georgia and participate at an unusual event, in such a lovely and beautiful country. With the great mountains of the Caucasus in the north and mountains in the south.
It all started a year ago, when an Israeli businessman, Aaron, visited Georgia. As a GA freak, with a free day from meetings, he grabbed a taxi and asked the driver to take him to a General Aviation Club, where he could meet some GA people and maybe fly over the regain. It is very common for GA pilots visiting foreign countries to ask to fly with locals. We always welcome visitors to fly with us, and show them the Holyland, from above.
The taxi driver took him to the International Airport of Tbilisi first.
As Aaron speaks Russian, it made things a bit easier. He explained that he was looking for GA (Small Airplanes), not large commercial aircraft.
The taxi driver at first could not remember if there was any Airfield or GA Club at all in Georgia. But after some time, he remembered about something, near the city of Nataxtary, northwest of Tbilisi.
The taxi driver said that this will be long drive and he was not sure that he will find it. But, Israelis don't give up so easily.
After a long drive and with the help of some local residents, they arrived at a small Airfield. However, they were met with a closed gate. They could see two hangars, with what appeared like airplanes inside.
No one was there, and with disappointment, they left. Aaron thought to himself maybe on his next visit, he will try to come again, and hopefully, with more luck.
As they were about to leave, they found one of the floor, a brochure with all the contact details of the Air club of Georgia. He had to return home to Israel next day and so everything was forgotten.

After some time, there was a meeting of AOPA Israel, where we get ideas from members, of where to fly next summer, for Fly-Ins. They should be unique locations. Many of our Pilots fly to the Greek Islands as we can only fly West.
Aaron remembered his visit to Georgia, and volunteered to try contact the Georgian Air Club, and maybe arrange a Fly-In there.
After a few phone calls and Emails, we found very unique, friendly and welcoming people at the Air club of Georgia. They promised to do their best to welcome us, and any others who would like to come. Within the first days, 27 Airplanes registered, with about 70 people! We had to close the list, as it was very difficult to manage that kind of operation for such a large number of participants.
We never had such a large number of requests to participate in a fly-in before.

Aaron and myself were invited by the Georgian Aero club to come and plan the fly-in.
We found the Georgian people very warm and hospitable. It was a two day journey and we visited most locations with the help of the Vanilla Sky tour Co.
We knew it was going to be unique and very special trip, such as we had never experienced before. Planning all routs, including refueling and handling, with hotel accommodations, was full time job.

The major issue was planning the route, Getting to Georgia from Israel.
The only way reaching Georgia, is by going through Cyprus and Turkish Airspace.
After endless phone calls and Emails to the Cyprus and Turkish authorities, and with the help of handling companies, we did it, but it wasn't easy at all!
Considering the refueling needs of most of the airplanes. Some needed to land at Cyprus. But then they couldn't cross the Turkish airspace and definitely not land there. (A political issue witch is sometime very painful). Therefore, all Airplanes with low endurance, had to be subtracted from the list.Also, the other alternative, to land in Turkey for Refueling. But Where?
Long discussions, lead us to land at Ankara, witch is about 500-550 NM from Haifa and Tel-Aviv. So only those who have this endurance can participate. Then from Ankara to Batumi, Georgia, is an additional 450 nm.
For the Cessna 172 with loaded weight at speed of 90kt is about 6 hours flight, for the first Leg and an additional 5 hours to Batumi. To calculate 1 Hour for Refueling and another 11 hours flying time.
For the SR22 Cirrus is much easier. With a speed of 140Kt (on average).
Only the C414 has the privilege of non-stop flying. Also, they have a shorter distance to fly.
They could leave from the airport ot Haifa (LLHA), with Passport control there. Haifa is an international departure and arrival point. So they could take-off and fly direct to Batumi. And with a speed of 180kts! All the others had to land for refueling, in Ankara, Turkey.

As the Fly-In was planed with a take-off, on July 1st, and the political situation with Turkey was very fragile, the permits for those airplanes to Land or cross Turkish Airspace, was not certified until just 12 hours before the scheduled take-off!.
Many of participants had canceled or chose alternative destinations.
With the permits granted, we were racing against the clock! Of those who were left (4 Airplanes) they decided to get Georgia any way. And we must thank those participants for waiting in an unknown situation, and be ready at the last minute, for Takeoff.

Finally, we took-off on July 1st as planned!

Day 1: Flying from Israel to Georgia, Awe were given a great welcome by Mr. Amiran, the Manager of the Georgian Aero Club. With Miss Maia, Manageress of the Vanilla Sky Co. and all the team that helped with the refueling, we had dinner at a restaurant, with a great view of Black Sea.
This was indeed a "Long Final" to UGSB, Batumi, Georgia International Airport.

Refueling:

Day 2: After a traditional breakfast and a city tour of Batumi and the Black Sea shore, the pilots from the Georgian Aero club gave us a briefing for the flight over Georgia. We took-off from Batumi, UGSB, to Tbilisi International, UGTS, about 160nm. There were spectacular views of mountains, rivers and valleys!
The first place we should land, was at the Aero Club airfield at Nataxtary. But, as the runway was grass, Mr Amiran had decided reconstruct the runway and cover it with new Asphalt.
It had been done, but the surface was still wet and needed one more layer, so the decision was to go to Tbilisi Int.

4X's at Tbilisi International:

Following the cross-country flight, on Friday afternoon, all was ready for the weekend, and Shabbat. Our hotel, which was in central Tbilisi, was within walking distance of the Synagogue, and after getting into the weekend Atmosphere, we walked to a very special restaurant, which looked like a wine cellar in a basement.
At the dinner, we were honored by the presence of the Israeli Ambassador to Georgia, and the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce helped this evening event.
The evening was success, with great local wine and endless traditional food, which took more then three hours, with local Georgian songs and dances.

Day 3: All day we were in the Tbilisi region. Sight-seeing and touring. Walking and climbing towers and hills with unique views. Some like in Europe some like in Asia. The Old City of Tbilisi, was like no other.

Day 4: they took us on a long tour to the North, to the Caucasus Mountains, lakes, and amazing views. We used a Military Highway. Actually, it is not really a highway. It is very narrow. There are many miles of dusty roads. To climb up the mountains, we needed a 4x4 jeep! Finally we got to the Georgian – Russian boarder. And it was worth every moment! The round trip takes 14 hours!

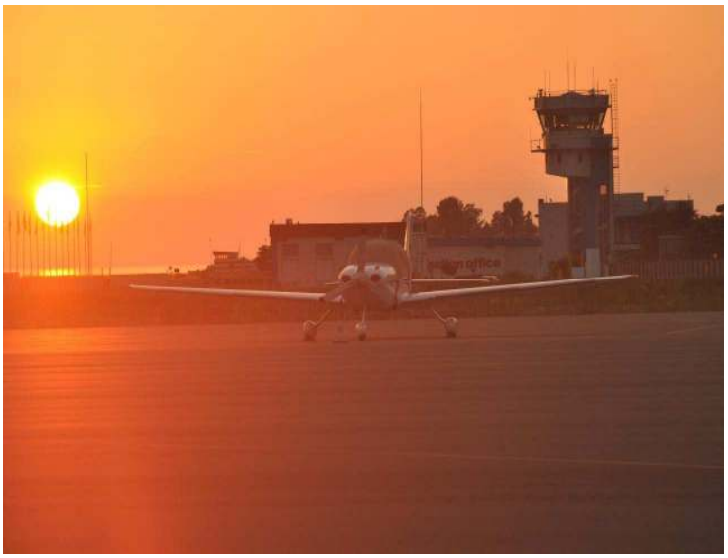
Day 5: US Air force 3 was due to arrive. The US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, was about to visit Tbilisi, to celebrate solidarity with the Georgian People on July 4th. The Airport would be closed to any activity, as mentioned in a NOTAM, from 09:00 till afternoon. So, we have to wakeup very early and get ready to fly away, before 09:00 and leave the Tbilisi CTR. All was ready for the flying over Grand Canyons, great Lakes and valleys. Welcome to city of Tel-Avi. (It is not Tel-Aviv in Israel, it is in Georgia). There was a landing strip and parking for the Fly-in, and together with the Georgian Aero Club, we all joined together, for a lovely tour and over-night stay at the Lake, with swimming, barbeque and local village singers.

Day 6: We spent the day, flying back to Batumi on the East side of Black Sea, getting familiar with the views. After the last plane landed, refueling was done, so that all would be ready for the long journey back, the next day.
There was time to have some fun in the city, on the Sea shore of Georgia. Restaurants and night clubs were full of activity.

Low fly over the Lakes:

The evening dinner was successful. With all the hosts and participants "closing" the full week of traveling touring and flying all around the country of Georgia. West from the Black Sea to the, East, near by the Border. North to the Russian border and to the South, almost to the Armenian border. Climbing to 11,000 ft, to cross high mountains, flying over Lakes and rivers, without any restrictions, it is haven for any Pilot, seeking freedom and places to fly.

The SR22 with Sunset at Batumi



Day 7: Very early wake-up again, to catch the slot for take-off at sunrise, to get home on time, with a 1,000nm journey!

By 19:30, I was waiting at Moonair FBO, for the last Cessna to land. They made a very smooth touchdown. The two pilots, with the only lady passenger in the Fly-In, safely landed at Home base, Herzeliya Airport LLHZ.
They looked so tired. They hardly stand. But they looked so happy, with wide smiles on their faces, while the sunset slowly on the horizon, and this time, on the Mediterranean.
We spent hours sitting there, in no rush, and sharing the experiences, until late.
No doubt, it was on of the best Fly-Ins, and a once in a life-time experience.

We should thanks first, those who attended. For, despite all the difficulties, they made it, and even more enjoyed it! We did about 2,500nm in 7 Days!

Many thanks are due to the huge efforts by the Mr. Amiran and Georgian Aero Club, who arranged AVGAS fuel at Batumi and Nataxtary, There is no AVGAS usually in Georgia, as they don't have airplanes using this type of fuel. So, therefore it was a very special delivery, with a huge cost, only for this Fly-In.
Also, Thanks to all ground crews at each location we went to. Mr. Amiran used his airplanes to fly and arrange with the authorities, all the necessary certifications and applications for us.
Mr. Amiran's Pilots, Technician and stuff, were with us to help and give any assistance we needed.
We also owe many thanks to Maia and the Vanilla Sky team, who arranged all VIP ground and Air tour. All was planed by the best, and the final positive comments made by the attended, could only show how good and amazing it was.
We discovered a very special country. With Spectacular views everywhere. In the Air and on the Ground. With no flying restrictions.
But, more than everything was the warmth and great welcome of the people of Georgia.

All the attended on the view ramp Caucasus Mountains: