



Making a pass – by air and road...

Kerry Skyring reports on the post-pandemic challenge – to drive and fly Austria’s tallest mountain – with a Kitfox and a Morgan...

Readers may recall the tale of Australian Kerry Skyring, resident in Austria, who flew his Kitfox to the 2019 Rally and won the Most Meritorious Flight award (November 2019). So, seeking a challenge in these most of unusual of circumstances, he decided to fly, and drive, Austria’s tallest mountain – the Großglockner. Kerry takes up his story.

A spring of cancelled trips and fly-ins due to COVID-19, led firstly to a bout of frustration, followed by obsessive hiking in the Vienna Woods. As lockdown dragged on towards summer those walks went deeper and deeper into the green hills, but creative inspiration eluded me. Each day I returned without a waltz or even a single tale from those woods. Another COVID-19 escape strategy was needed.

In mid-May Austrian aviators were again allowed to exercise their wings, and at the same time travel by ground-bound vehicles was also given the green light. But HOW to make the most of these freedoms was the conundrum. Around that time my flying buddy, Martin Hirczy, mentioned his failed attempt to fly over the Großglockner. His choice of aeroplane was probably not ideal – the not very powerful Motorfalke. A lack of thrust,

Above The incredible Grossglockner-Hochalpenstrasse toll road that climbs 8,215ft over the Grossglockner.

along with cloud obscuring the pass, forced his retreat from the snowy heights.

Martin has flown many hours with me in the Kitfox including a test flight to establish the service ceiling, so he knew running out of puff before the summit would not be an issue. We agreed to tackle the 'Big Bell' in the Kitfox as soon as work and weather provided the necessary window.

The following week, during a conversation with motoring mates, isolation-busting plan number two was born. Why not drive Austria’s highest Alpine pass as well as fly it? There were four of us, all Morgan owners, whose plans to drive to the Le Mans Classic race meeting in France this summer had been stymied by COVID-19 restrictions.

To drive the route of the historic Grossglockner-Hochalpenstrasse would provide some compensation.

Maps were consulted, cars were serviced, and partners pacified. As with the flying attempt, weather would determine the dates – there’s no point viewing dramatic Alpine scenery from the inside of a cloud. Our first ground assault, scheduled for early July, coincided with poor conditions and so was abandoned, leaving the aerial reconnaissance in pole position.

Making music with Big Bell...

The Grossglockner, literally Big Bell, at 12,461ft (3,798 metres) is Austria's highest mountain. By comparison, Europe's tallest mountain, Mont Blanc in France, is 4,810m. The historic 'high Alpine road' passes to the east of the peak, climbing to 8,215 ft (2,504m) via the Hochtor Pass, linking the provinces of Salzburg and Carinthia. Proposed in the 1920s as a scenic toll road and job creation project, the idea was ridiculed by many. However, completed in 1935 it was an immediate success and traffic, mostly motorcycles at first, began rolling over those cobblestones, which had been laid with such care and toil. Today the road attracts tourists from all over the world who pay a hefty toll to drive its sweeping curves.

Perfect weather window

Sunday 5 July brought perfect flying weather to all of central Europe, so we seized the opportunity and at 0930 the Kitfox lifted off from our base at Stockerau, 30km north-west of Vienna.

With full fuel (100L) we were about 30kg under MTOM with nearly 2.5 hours flying ahead of us to reach the start of the historic Hochalpenstrasse. At about 7,000ft we followed the east-west passes through the main Alpine range, the peaks in this area varying from around 6,000 to 8,000ft. The higher terrain, including the Grossglockner, lies further to the west so we delayed our climb to 10,000ft until approaching Zell am Zee. Some of you will be familiar with this lakeside tourist town and its popular airfield.

The original plan had been to land at Zell, drink coffee, breathe deeply of the mountain air, then we would take off, climbing in the valley to attain 10,000ft before heading south into the pass, which would take us past the peak.

However, approaching Zell we were already at 10,000ft, and quite comfortable, and could see no point in throwing away 7,500ft only to scale those heights again. A call to Wien Information advised them we were changing the flight plan and would now land at Lienz-Nickelsdorf (LOKL) on the southern side of the Alps, about 20km from the Italian border. This was accepted as a diversion and we began to focus on finding the correct valley to enter. It was important to get this right as there are two north-south routes across the Alps in this area, a modern one to the west of the Grossglockner peak and the historic route, the one we wanted to follow, to the east. There are also several valleys which, like the sirens of Greek mythology, will lure aviators into their beautiful interiors but fail to provide an exit.

Martin was an aircraft accident investigator in a previous life and reckoned that Greek sailors could blame



Above – Kerry (right) and Martin set out on their aerial adventure across the Alps from Stockerau, near Vienna, to Lienz-Nickelsdorf.



Above High in the Alps on a perfect mountain flying day. You need to treat such flights with great care and respect.

their shipwrecks on sirens. However this excuse would not read well for us if we became an 'accident report'. After a little probing we found the siren-free valley, stoked the Rotax fire, and began a steady climb towards the peak.

The weather was as suitable as it could be, little wind, quite warm on the ground but pleasant at altitude, with downy clouds draped across the higher peaks. Bliss. But as the altimeter edged past 12,000ft the atmosphere in the cockpit lacked not just oxygen but composure as well. There were several reasons. About 15 minutes earlier, before turning south, the Rotax had given a little cough. Not a dry, virus-style cough,

more like a polite little attention grabbing 'ahem'. Martin raised an eyebrow. I raised my best *sangroid*. A few minutes later there was another little clearing of the Rotax throat. I explained to Martin that the motor had done this on a previous trip to the mountains and this was 'just a little ice' being swallowed... We talked about it. The 912 ULS installation in the Kitfox keeps the motor nice and cool in the summer but just a little too cool in winter. The carburetors at the rear of the motor rely on warm air gathering there to keep ice at bay – there is no separate carburetor heat system. In winter, I partially cover the oil cooler and coolant radiator with aluminium tape, raising

Adventure flying

the under-cowl temps sufficiently for carb ice not to have been a problem in 300 hours of flying. But on this summer day at 10,000ft, with clouds forming over the peaks, we experienced excellent icing conditions while providing insufficient heat under the cowls. The solution was to climb harder using lower airspeeds and a higher power setting to generate sufficient heat to melt the ice. Obviously, this has its limitations as sooner or later one has to descend, but it solved the problem on this flight. A better solution is being investigated...

Also introducing edginess into the cockpit was the confined route we were forced to fly. Austria created a special bird sanctuary (within the High Tauern National Park) around the peak in 1986 and, although we had wings, the Kitfox does not appear on any list of protected species. Only in a narrow corridor of airspace above the winding 1930s-built road could we mix it with bearded vultures and golden eagles.

But where was the road? Raising the nose and power levels to keep temperatures elevated meant limiting

forward visibility. Can you see it? You must be able to see it! Of course, it was right there directly under us and some gentle turns revealed those looping curves, like a draper's carefully folded cloth, a legacy left by men from our great-grandfathers' era who, with picks and shovels and sticks of dynamite, laboured through searing summers and withering winters. It took them five years to build Europe's highest alpine road and, when they were done, well, they weren't! In the winter of 1935, the first after the opening of the road, 350 men picked up their shovels and tossed aside 350,000 cubic metres of snow to keep one lane open. Talk about bleeding blisters.

Last year around 900,000 people crossed the Alps via this employment project of the depression era.

Nature's grand cathedral

Meanwhile, back in the Kitfox, euphoria replaced edginess. Who could fly through nature's grand cathedral and not experience some sort of tingling? Hang on, could we be confusing religious ecstasy with hypoxia? Actually, we were both quite

cool – and not just because the Kitfox has no heater. As best as we could judge, we'd not experienced any oxygen deficiency symptoms. We'd been at 10,000ft for about 30 minutes, climbed to a maximum altitude of 12,216ft for an unrecorded number of minutes – maybe five – and then begun our descent into the valley of the Drau on the southern side of the Grossglockner, enjoying the long gradual descending turns between steep valley walls to achieve a circuit height of 2,000ft. I plonked the aeroplane down without finesse (OK, I bounced) on Lienz' short tarmac strip and we broke out the stale sandwiches and warm 'iced' coffee. After filling the tanks and taking a short rest, we were off again, debating, and finally agreeing, on the best alpine passes to take us home to Stockerau. At the end of the day our flying time was had logged at 5.5 hours, but our living and learning time was immeasurable.

Ten days later, four old Morgans drove the Hochalpenstrasse over the Grossglockner. Starting in Vienna, the trip took three days and covered 1,000 non-autobahn km. But that's another story!



Above Ten days after the flight it was round two as Kerry drove the Hochalpenstrasse with fellow Morgan owning friends.

Crash landing

The first to flight over the Alps took place on 28 September 1910 by French-Peruvian pilot Jorge Chávez Dartnell, who launched his Bleriot from

Brig in Switzerland and crash landed at Dormodossola in Italy, 51 minutes later.

He collected the large cash prize, for which he was competing, but sadly died

four days later from injuries suffered in the crash.

It's reported his last words were 'higher, ever higher'...