

Propliner

No.124

£5.50



The international review of
classic piston-engined and
turboprop transport aircraft



BEA
VIKING CLASS
RMA LORD KEYES

FLY BE

BY ILYUSHIN IL-18 TO ZHULYANY



STEVE KINDER describes how three enthusiasts fulfilled the dream of a lifetime, chartering an Ilyushin Il-18 for what may well be the type's last ever passenger flight

This was to be the last opportunity for enthusiasts to travel aboard Ilyushin's greatest 'propliner', in this case Il-18 ER-ICB of Tandem Aero. Some men only dream of these types of adventures, but others are driven to turn their fantasy into reality. Such was the case of German colleague Daniel Frohriep who first turned to Swiss travel agent Michael Reich before also enlisting my help to organise this momentous event.

I first heard from Daniel in February 2010 about the possibility of chartering the Il-18 for an enthusiast passenger flight. As a team, we were more than aware of the hazards involved, and as the months panned out, our frustrations became evident, but our perseverance was to be rewarded. Obviously, the cost of the venture was a primary concern, while spreading the word of our proposed flight was not particularly easy as we were three very ordinary people with no trading title. It was gratifying to receive so many positive responses from like-minded enthusiasts.

Our next hurdle was to arrange a genuine flight, not just a local round-the-circuit pleasure flight, and this is where the headaches really began. Flying around in Moldavian airspace is one thing, but transiting

into international airspace is something completely different. To compound our problems, our contact was to leave to start flying lessons in the United States, while Daniel spent time in Japan and I was absent for almost a month in the Ukraine, United States and Dutch Antilles. However, very slowly a deal came together, and once we had the confidence of our 24 passengers, we had reached the point of no return and despite being nicknamed "Master of Disaster", I knew that we had the determination to carry this project through to a successful conclusion. So let the Ivchenkos start turning!

MUNICH TO CHISINAU AT 39,000 FEET!

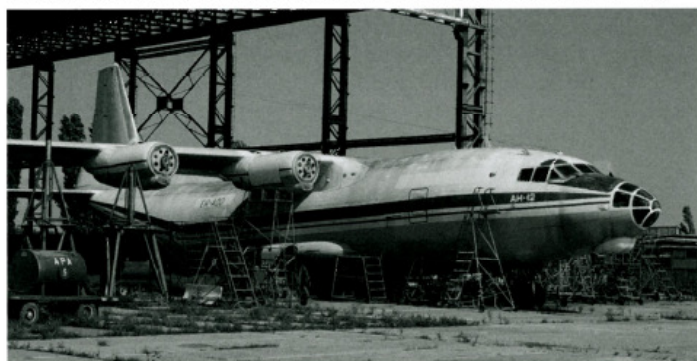
Having flown from Manchester to Munich in the luxury of a Singapore Airlines Boeing 777 on Wednesday September 15, a night-stop at the Gasthof Nagerl Hotel follows, and here I rendezvous with Daniel. Over a glass or two of best Bavarian beer we make our arrangements for the adventure ahead, neatly separating copious amounts of US dollars into brown envelopes for onward shipment into Moldova. Transactions there are subject to twenty per cent commission, which considerably inflates all the prices, and the only solution is to settle all accounts in cash.

On the following day it is an early start, and Daniel has booked the two of us on a Lufthansa CRJ900 at a very competitive rate for the flight to Chisinau. I find that I have a whole seat row to myself when we board the flight, and Michael Reich also joins us at this stage. Daniel takes his seat, together with one of our Il-18 enthusiast party, the renowned Dutch photographer Chris Mak. Our flight crew today is led by Captain Erik Strohschneider, who is accompanied in the cockpit by First Officer Christina Gabel, and our cruising altitude of 39,000 feet is impressive - what a way to fly!

Entry into Chisinau is exceptionally easy even with your pockets filled with bundles of dollars, and most gratifying is the sight of the old suitcase making its way around the luggage carousel in the arrivals hall. Then there is that moment of pure magic when one catches sight of your best contacts in the universe - Vladimir Rusu, captain of a certain Il-18, and Alexander Marencu, the "Mister Fixit" of the entire operation. How good it feels to be back among true friends! Vladimir takes my case to his BMW, which he sadly prangs on the kerb by the car park exit - I have no doubt that his flying ability far exceeds his motoring skills!

During the afternoon Daniel requires an inspection of the Il-18 in order to ensure that the windows are clear - or indeed cleaned - and that the aircraft is ready for the forthcoming enthusiast excursion. This gives us the opportunity to stroll airside at leisure, where we can inspect the aircraft, together with two rather plain Skylink Arabia Antonov An-24s parked adjacent to the Il-18 in the form of ER-AZX (c/n 47309804) and ER-AZN (c/n 37308801).

HEADING PHOTOGRAPH: The party of international enthusiasts assemble for a group photograph at Chisinau in front of the Tandem Aero Ilyushin Il-18D ER-ICB. (All photographs Steve Kinder unless stated)



Stored Antonov An-12 ER-ADD at Chisinau on September 16.

Also present at Chisinau on September 16 was Antonov An-24RV ER-AZN carrying Skylink Arabia titling on her rear fuselage.



We arrive at the Hotel Kosmos to discover that pandemonium has exploded as Daniel has left his wallet in the taxi. Vladimir kindly offers Daniel 100 euros to tide him over, while efforts are made to retrieve the item. Thankfully, I had taken care of the wallet containing the 'dosh' for the trip, and in just over an hour the driver returned with the missing wallet. The taxi fare was 100 lei, the price of the said leather purse 300 lei, and we then discover that the driver had helped himself to 50 euros. Just imagine the same driver finding \$5,000 in cash - we would never have seen him again.

Ten hours of discussions now ensue deciding upon the route to be flown, likely weather conditions and Plans B and C. The 'bottom line' is that once an international flight plan of this nature is filed, there is no going back, whatever the prevailing weather conditions. I had every confidence in the people organising our flight simply because cash is the master, and here cash is a must.

FLOATPLANE AN-2 PROVIDES EARLY TREAT

Friday September 17 was intended to be a day of leisure, but I soon changed all that. As some of our clients had already arrived the day before, our very quiet venture out to the sports field of Vadu lui Voda had now expanded to the hire of a mini-bus. Another friend, Alex, asked on departure from the hotel whether we were going to see the Antonov An-2 on floats. Well, there could only be one answer. But as always with all Soviet aircraft, there is the 24 hours a day guide - No pictures! No pictures! or even Get Out! Finally agreement was reached, and here was the only An-2 on floats left in the world, ER-AIR of Moldaeroservice. Recently overhauled and given a VIP interior, it is out of time on its operating licence, and even more bizarre, the owner has turned down a bid from a Swiss group to buy this aircraft for 220,000 euros.

We continue northwards to the sports airfield of Vadu lui Voda, where we find the gates firmly locked. However, within five minutes an estate car arrives, beckoning the mini-bus to follow. There are a few frowns among the party as we can see no aeroplanes. Then, our good friend Alex points down the hill, where at the bottom of what can only be described as a somewhat steep incline, two An-2s can be seen. One represents the mandatory all-green wingless former Moldovan Air Force Yellow 10 and wholly unairworthy, but the other is a real gem - ER-07863 (c/n 1G170-22) still wearing Tiramavia titles and with a large "Pioneer" emblazoned across the fuselage.

And so our mini-tour is concluded and we return to the hotel. We have a meeting with the sales manager, Anastasia, who also happens to be Vladimir's niece, and then at six o'clock that evening we have arranged a briefing to ensure that all the party members are aware of the arrangements for the Il-18 flight. Daniel has approached the venture most professionally, printing a named boarding card for each passenger and producing an information pack. With clients originating from twelve countries, this is of particular value, and tomorrow the Il-18 will welcome on board passengers from the UK, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Malta, United Arab Emirates, Finland, Australia, Russia, Moldova and the Ukraine. I keep the briefing to about 15 minutes in order not to bore the passengers, and I notice that there is one absentee, the elusive Simon Brooke.

BY TANDEM AERO IL-18 TO ZHULYANY

As you might expect with a tight schedule, there is a queue for breakfast at 06.30 the next morning. Both mini-buses arrive on time twenty minutes later to take us on the short 15 minute journey to Chisinau International Airport. Our desk opens and we check-in for flight number TDM1410 to Zhulyany Airport, Kiev, Ukraine. We are still missing one member of the party, Simon Brooke, and as we proceed through passport control a text message arrives, "Simon Brooke nicht kommen".

A coach conveys the remainder of the party to our waiting Il-18, with fifteen minutes then being allowed for some airside photography prior to boarding. The flight crew for today's historic flight comprises Transil Aviation Antonov An-12 S9-KHD undergoing engine maintenance in the open air at Chisinau on September 19.



Aeroportul International Marculesti Antonov An-26B ER-AZU at Marculesti on September 18.

Also present at Marculesti was crudely-camouflaged Moldovan Air Force Antonov An-30 ER-AWZ.



Captain Vladimir Rusu, First Officer Vladimir Matenko, Flight Engineer Sergey Sapojkov, and Navigator Oleg Drebutan. Raisa Ostapenko and Valentina Eriomova are acting as cabin crew, and also aboard we have ground engineers Valeri Iurcu and Alexandru Gordeev. All too soon we are beckoned aboard and take our seats - the culmination of many months of planning and intense heartache.

The prototype Ilyushin Il-18 first flew in June 1957 and was powered by Kuznetsov NK-4 turboprops. Ivchenko AI-20 turboprops rated at 4,015hp soon replaced the earlier engines, and the type went on to serve with Aeroflot, Tarom, Malev, LOT, CAAC, Interflug, Cubana and a host of smaller carriers. Our aircraft today, Il-18D ER-ICB (c/n 188010603) was built in 1968 and originally flew with Aeroflot as CCCP-74296. One by one the mighty Ivchenko turboprops come to life, and with all four turning smoothly we taxi out to the holding point for runway 26. Proudly sat in the jump seat admiring sixties Soviet technology is like a dream come true, and while Daniel busies himself with the video camera, I relax as Vladimir opens up the engines at the end of the runway, and the Il-18 begins its take-off run. For this international sector to Kiev, we climb to 21,000 feet, and soar along as if in paradise. The flight takes just 56 minutes, and as we pass over the fence at Zhulyany on approach to runway 26, it is amazing to see Ukrainian enthusiasts standing alongside the runway photographing our arrival.



The author in 'high viz' jacket alongside (l-r) Captain Vladimir Rusu, First Officer Vladimir Matenko and Flight Engineer Sergey Sapojkov.

Vacating the runway, we taxi slowly to our parking stand, stopping in front of each parked aircraft and saluting each and every one of them with a full crescendo of four vibrating Ivchenko AI-20 turboprops. Eventually we draw on to our stand, and the engines are shut down. As we are on an international flight, it is a requirement that we should pass through passport control, but the sight of Motorsich An-24RV UR-MSI (c/n 27307608) with engines running directly opposite our party made it extremely difficult to coerce the 'herd' on to the waiting airport bus. Thankfully, the situation is eased when the Antonov departs, no doubt to its home at Zaporozhye.



Tandem Aero Il-18D ER-ICB on a rather wet Marculesti apron on September 18, with evidence of her former Grixona titles on the forward fuselage.

We had arranged for two buses to take the party to the local museum, but the one bus that was supplied would certainly have failed an audition for Stagecoach. All the passengers and crew elected to join this excursion with the exception of Daniel, who decided to remain with his beloved Il-18. His decision proved most beneficial for him, as the group of Ukrainian enthusiasts previously noted lining the runway edge had now acquired a de-icing vehicle, which was driven on to the ramp with the Il-18, and from which they were able to take photographs. Clearly, this knowledgeable group were well aware that this was probably the last ever passenger flight to Kiev by an Ilyushin Il-18. As Daniel was invited to climb aboard this vehicle to take his own shots, there was not a single moment of regret in turning down the museum tour. Meanwhile, the remainder of the party were whisked off to the museum, where they found that there were new additions in the form of a Tu-95 Bear of the Ukrainian Air Force and a Beriev Be-5 of the Ukrainian Navy. It was also pleasing to see Ilyushin Il-14P CCCP-52036 now fully restored and painted in Aeroflot Polar livery.



A busy moment on a crowded flight deck as the Il-18 turns towards final approach under the expert guidance of Captain Vladimir Rusu.

(Michael S Prophet)

ONWARDS TO MARCULESTI

At 12.20 we return to our coach and make the journey back to the airport, and to board the Il-18 for the next stage of our adventure. Some two weeks prior to our visit, I had done some research on where we should fly on to next. It seemed fairly pointless to go to a deserted Balti, but the name of Marculesti had come up. This was the home of the Moldavian Air Force, and as we had calculated the stop to be well within our budget, there would be no extra cost to our passengers. Also, it was apparent that no one had been there before. The only stumbling block appeared to be the minor irritation of providing some steps for disembarkation. We were not allowed to use the aircraft's own stairs as this would have invalidated our insurance cover on health and safety grounds.

Once again, all four engines soon roared into life, and we taxied out to runway 26 tailing the "Follow Me" vehicle at a discrete distance. Seated in the cockpit once more, I was greatly amused to watch Captain Vladimir videoing the taxiing of the aircraft, before passing the

camera to the co-pilot, who would now capture the awesome departure. The 357 kilometre flight to Marculesti took 53 minutes and was flown at 16,000 feet. By the time that the Il-18 touched down, it had begun to rain, but the weather could not dampen what was to follow.

A large number of official looking gentlemen with large hats has congregated at the bottom of the steps, collecting the passports of everyone as they disembark. It is at moments like these that one wonders quite what will happen next. Two mini-buses arrive to transport the excited congregation on a tour to see two Antonov An-26s and An-30 ER-AWZ (c/n 1103) of the Moldavian Air Force, while alongside can be seen the remnants of the Mig-29 Fulcrums once flown by the Air Force, but now abandoned having not flown in years. A real sign of the times. Nearby is the fuselage of 5022, an An-24RT of the Romanian Air Force, which has been stripped of its wings, but has a tailplane lodged on the top of the rear of the aircraft. And finally, there are the two remaining An-2s of the Moldavian Air Force, namely White 05 and White 11. There is a suggestion of a return visit one day to put both An-2s up for some air-to-air photography.

Can it get any better than this? We are then ushered into a building where we are treated to the most fabulous banquet complete with brandy chasers. Amazing! Having partaken of this most lavish of feasts, the satisfied party trundle back to the aircraft in the rain, and having been given back our passports with yet another stamp in them, we board the Il-18 for the last part of our journey, back to Chisinau.

For the last time today, Vladimir winds up the four Ivchenko engines, and following a routine departure, we climb to 15,000 feet for the thirty minute long flight to Chisinau. Our arrival is anything but routine, though, with Vladimir storing up one special treat for everyone - a low pass along the length of the Chisinau runway at a height of only fifteen feet - wow! We thunder along the runway, before breaking off and joining for a normal approach and landing on runway 26. Thoroughly elated by the experience, the party disembark from the aircraft and wander across the apron into the terminal building.

Well, we did it! Three ordinary people, from three different countries, who all shared the same dream. We created history. But the tale does not end here. Having ensured that all the passengers are safely on

The Il-18 sharing the Zhulyany ramp with some expensive sleek jet hardware on September 18.

(Michael S Prophet)





Motor Sich Antonov An-24RV UR-MSI taxiing at Zhuliany Airport, Kiev, on September 18.

their way back to the hotel aboard two mini-buses, Vladimir invites the three 'musketeers' back to his apartment, where we are treated to several beers and vodka chasers while watching over and over again the Il-18 departure from Zhuliani. A truly amazing experience.

RAMP TOUR OF CHISINAU

Sunday September 19 dawns as the day of our promised ramp tour of Chisinau Airport. In an instant we are taken out onto the apron, and since my last visit here the biggest change is that today I am in charge, so airside discipline is paramount. A converted Il-22M and currently engineless, Il-18 ER-75925 would seem destined for the scrapman, while An-24RV ER-AZP (c/n 17307002) of Skylink Arabia is a new arrival. Two new and unexpected residents are Antonov An-12s S9-KHC (c/n 00347306) and S9-KHD (c/n 01347908) of Transluz, once familiar at Sharjah, and now present here for maintenance after work in Libreville. Another new occupant is an older registered Antonov An-26B ER-26046 (c/n 10807), an interesting aircraft, once flown by Air Moldova, but now reputed to be on the Antonov blacklist. Another aircraft with an air of mystery is An-26B ER-26204 (c/n 14103), which has just returned from a lengthy lease to Royal Airlines Cargo, and still wears their colours.

As we meander in a most disciplined fashion past the cargo handling building and terminal, the locals must wonder what on earth we are doing. Near to our Il-18 ER-ICB we find another legendary Chisinau hulk, Antonov An-12 ER-ADD (c/n 2340403) of Renan Air. First flown on April 29 1962, this is another blacklisted Antonov - now there is a surprise! One final bonus of our ramp stroll is a well orchestrated march down to the Valans ICC ramp, where we are treated to the sight of Antonov An-26s ER-AVA (c/n 11409) and ER-AVB (c/n 57303204). The party makes its way back to the terminal, and our walk airside officially brings the tour to a close.

But Kinder-led tours always end on a high note, and I have one more trick up my sleeve. Daniel and Michael have gone to Tiraspol and Odessa for the day, and as a final bonus I offer each and every member of the party the opportunity of a visit to the 'old' airport at Balti. The response is sufficient to retain the services of both mini-buses, and two and a half hours later we arrive at an airport renowned for its Antonov An-2 population. I had researched the prospect of a visit to this airport, and was confident that we would be suitably rewarded. And it did not disappoint, with eleven An-2s present in various states of disrepair, although Tiramavia Antonov An-2 ER-07863 at the sport airfield of Vadu lui Voda on September 17.

(Michael S Prophet)



most still carried Air Moldova titles, and one proved a real star - ER-07351 (c/n 1G149-55) complete with Moldaeroservice titles - is not this where we started? For the record, the other An-2s present comprised ER-33646 (c/n 1G233-36), ER-33643 (c/n 1G233-33), ER-07206 (c/n 1G146-35), ER-02499, ER-33648 (c/n 1G233-38), CCCP-01762 (c/n 1G107-09), CCCP-32274 (c/n 1G96-36), CCCP-32424 (c/n 1G105-05), and CCCP-35531 (c/n 1G114-43). There is also one other very special An-2, which had been discovered in a field, no doubt drug smuggling, but whatever the reason UR-32633 (c/n 1G219-32) proved to be another coup for the Antonov spotting fraternity.

The journey back to Chisinau was mainly spent in slumber, but this was the conclusion of a fantastic weekend and well worth all the efforts expended by the three organisers. Following a final night relaxing in the Hotel Kosmos, the party enjoys a very sedate breakfast at around nine o'clock, before a parting of the ways. My homeward itinerary takes in Munich and Brussels, before arriving at Manchester aboard a Brussels Airlines RJ85. Another memorable adventure for the record book.

The author would like to thank everyone who participated in the trip, to all the passengers for entrusting the organisers with their hard-earned money and their faith in our ambitious itinerary, and specifically to Daniel Frohriep (Dan the Cam), Michael Reich (The Minister of Finance), Alex Marcenco (Mr Fix it), and Vladimir Rusu, our exuberant captain, without whose enthusiasm, endeavours and unique flying skills, this flight would not have taken place.



Valan International Cargo Charter An-26B ER-AVB at Chisinau.

Moldaeroservice Antonov An-2 ER-07351 at Balti on September 19.

(Michael S Prophet)



