

# Propliner

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# THE ICS SYNDROME



## STEVE KINDER sets off for Chisinau, Moldova, on the promise of taking part in a series of training flights aboard the Grixona Ilyushin Il-18s

This year has not been spectacular. Redundancy, three weeks spent in Afghanistan during February and the perilous proximity of one's sixtieth birthday are probably the highlights. But then the magical lure of a return to Moldova to fly on purported training flights of Grixona added rather more spice to an unremarkable year. As always, the tale is weird and diverse, but nothing ventured, nothing gained!

### INITIAL PLANS TO CHARTER AN-12

The original idea was to charter a Ruby Star Airlines Antonov An-12 in Belarus. However, the involvement of a new broker and refusal of ramp tours and photo clearance in Belarus due to the political situation shone a rather different light on the proposal. And so we turned to Alex "Mr Fixit" Marcenco in Moldova for help, and he confirmed that chartering an An-12 for our desired period of time was absolutely "no problem". Having received a favourable quote and a mouth-watering flying plan for the day, coupled with a multitude of guarantees that nothing could possibly go wrong, we accepted in principle the "Moldovan option". Famous An-12 YA-KAD of Kabul Air was planned and promised. In addition, Marcenco obviously got carried away by his organisational talent and confirmed that we would definitely be on board the final ferry flight from Chisinau to Riga, where it is destined for a museum.

Trust is always uppermost in one's mind in these situations, and when the scenario came crashing down over our heads, once again "quelle surprise!" But Marcenco was determined to prove that he was a man of his word, and he now disclosed the distinct possibility of joining an Ilyushin Il-18 training flight in Chisinau during September 2011 at the generous invitation of Mr Grixona, Mr Ghilan himself. Any problems? "Absolutely not, we are in full control of all decisions and not dependent on the mercy of third-party providers." We are told to arrive in Chisinau no later than Wednesday September 7 in order to join the training flights.

Tuesday September 6 dawns particularly early. My wife Sarah is relaxing on a canal boat with three American friends, while I arise at

0430 having not slept for two hours. The first leg is from Manchester to Munich courtesy of a Singapore Airlines Boeing 777 with only 40 passengers aboard. The sight of a Volga Dnepr Ilyushin Il-76 causes a modicum of excitement as we taxi for departure, and I keep a wary eye on a little old lady travelling all the way to Australia who is clearly rather overawed at the wizardry of air travel. With my colleague, Daniel Frohriep, not due to arrive in Munich until later in the day, I take the opportunity to visit the park where L-1049G Super Constellation 'D-ALEM' (c/n 4671, the real F-BHML), Swissair Douglas DC-3 'HB-IRN' (c/n 4828, the real LN-KLV) and Lufthansa Junkers Ju-52/3m D-ANOY are on display.

Daniel arrives from Frankfurt at 1640, and we spend the evening reminiscing over a few beers with Manfred Kühl, a friend of Daniel who works at Munich Airport and who will give us a lift to the airport from our hotel in the morning.

### ARRIVAL IN CHISINAU AND THE WAIT BEGINS

Departure from Munich takes place on the morning of Wednesday September 7, flying to Chisinau aboard a Lufthansa Embraer 195. Passport control is so simple! We are in, so easy and with bags collected we meet up with our really good friends, Captain Vladimir Russu, the Il-18 pilot, and Alex Marcenco. They take us to the Hotel Cosmos, where once again our good friend and the "boss" Anastasia looks up with that knowing glance, "Not these two again!" A room rate of 23 euros per night is agreed, and we can at last relax.

"How long can you stay?" asks Vladimir. Without suspecting a deeper meaning to this seemingly harmless question, we reply, "Until Sunday, September 11, latest", however, for an Il-18 flight we would even "sacrifice our own grandmother", so we could manage to somehow stay until Tuesday, provided we are given accurate and up-to-date information. We are not entirely sure of the everlasting presence of Alex Marcenco and Vitalii, the Embraer system engineer from Air Moldova. Using hands, feet, gestures, mimics and rudimentary Russian, communication seems to work fine, with no misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

But then we have a problem. Vladimir and Alex have the brilliant idea of exchanging Daniel's German SIM card with a Moldovan SIM card. With 24-hour availability being essential, Daniel had borrowed his wife's mobile phone for the trip, and although somewhat reluctant to proceed with the surgery, in an instant the Moldovan SIM card is inserted in the phone, and the German SIM card just seems to vanish. Our two friends then advise that "maybe" there will be no flight the next day, as

**HEADING PHOTOGRAPH:** Resplendent with her red, yellow and blue lower fuselage cheat line, Ilyushin Il-18D ER-ICS at rest on the Grixona ramp at Chisinau International Airport in September.

**LEFT:** On display in Munich, L-1049G Super Constellation F-BHML now masquerades as D-ALEM of Lufthansa. (All photos Steve Kinder)







maintenance work is yet to be completed, but stay tuned and keep the mobile “on”, Hmmm!

It is time to exchange our euros for lei, and we are fortunate that another “old friend”, the exchange lady who has just returned from Italy is here, but the coffers are empty – thankfully, her purse is not. And moments later we set off for the Veranda Bar and Restaurant, a five minute walk. Local beer here is just 20 lei, and with the exchange rate at 16 lei to one euro, that represents excellent value. “Mr Fixit” calls into the hotel lobby that evening for a social call, and then it is off to bed for our first night in Chisinau.

Thursday September 8 begins with a leisurely breakfast of coffee, goat’s cheese, feta cheese and ham. What to do with a girl like Maria springs to mind as one considers what do you do all day in Chisinau? In an attempt to get an update on the Il-18 situation, we call Marcenco at 0830. This was not a good idea. “Mr Fixit” is in the middle of his night, “Danielllll, do you know what time it is right now????” So no new information, and what to do is the big question.

A walk to the railway station provides some relief, and a stroll around the surrounding flea markets soon exposes the poverty prevalent in the city. We slowly get an impression of Moldovan life style, lots of surplus time to kill, no work, no money. And with little else to do, we return to the Veranda Bar for another beer or two. On the way back to the hotel, Daniel suddenly has a bright idea. “Let’s go up to the roof.” Now, I have one golden rule, never do anything after beer consumption. The lift carries us up swiftly to the 24th floor. We quickly find steps up the next two floors, pass the lift machinery and we are then intercepted by what can only be very politely described as a very old and dirty gentleman. But as Daniel can speak rudimentary Russian, we are on the roof of the hotel in seconds. There are no railings, and the view, if somewhat scary, is truly awesome. After an afternoon siesta in our hotel rooms, we return to the Veranda Bar for another beer, and then “Mr Fixit” appears. “Will the flight be tomorrow?” We are promised to be collected at ten o’clock the next morning from the hotel.

#### ELUSIVE MECHANIC LEADS TO FURTHER DELAY

Having checked his morning’s e-mails in Anastasia’s office with a moving message from his daughter back home in Germany, Daniel joins me outside where we find Vladimir and Alex waiting to take us to the airport. After a 15-minute journey, we park at the security entrance and are issued with visitor passes in exchange for our passports. We begin the half mile walk to the waiting Il-18s, only to be intercepted by security and advised of a problem. It could only happen here. The Prime Minister is about to depart on a Learjet, and we need to walk very quickly past the terminal to the Il-18 ramp. Anywhere else in the world and we would be forced to sit and wait until he has gone. Imagine this being England, and David Cameron about to leave – well, so would we? Scurrying past the terminal I notice that the “Chisinau” sign has fallen from the top of the building on to the tarmac below – not the best of adverts for an airport.

We arrive at the Il-18s. Here we find Il-18D ER-ICS (c/n 187009903), which has spent the summer in Male in the Maldives, and our very good friend Il-18D ER-ICB (c/n 188010603), on which we flew in 2010. And not for the last time, our ears are subjected to the increasingly familiar words, “Steve, Daniel, BIG problem!” The “Big” problem for today is that the mechanic who signs off the aeroplane is abroad. In consequence, today, only an engine run can be performed. In the hope of better news tomorrow, we can live with that today. A good hour then passes before the tug appears to take ER-ICS to the test bay. This gives us more than enough time to explore the aircraft internally, and to discover the surprise find of a Morrison’s carrier bag lying on the floor of the cabin. The delay also allows me time to photograph Skylink Arabia An-24RV ER-AZX (c/n 47309804) and to identify the unmarked An-24RV, also of Skylink Arabia, parked behind, namely ER-AZN (c/n 37308801). Former

*Antonov An-24RV ER-AZX carrying Skylink Arabia titling at Chisinau on September 9.*

*Weeds growing through the concrete paving, Air Moldova Antonov An-24RV ER-46885 lies on the Chisinau ramp on September 12.*

Renan Air Antonov An-12 ER-ADD (c/n 2340403) also sits here, more than likely never to fly again. It is almost like being in a time warp, as none of these aircraft have flown in over twelve months.

Ilyushin Il-18 ER-ICS is then towed to the test area, chocks set in place and the engines started. I am advised – or rather warned – against standing in front of the aircraft in case it moves forward. But who cares, what a way to go! One by one, the four 4,015hp Ivchenko turboprops start up, and soon the noise is deafening. The idea of the test is to warm the aircraft up to cruising mode, which takes fifty minutes, by which time all my associates are somewhat bored and have decided to sit in the Grixona vehicle while I experiment with shutter speeds endeavouring to capture the old lady with full-arc exposure of the propellers. We are then treated to “Mr Fixit’s” effort to power himself into the limelight, insisting that he appears in Daniel’s video of the aircraft, positioned between the pilots and chief executive officer of Grixona. But having satisfied the demands of our hosts, the aircraft is towed back to the Grixona apron, and we are invited to Vladimir’s apartment for food and drinks later that evening.



*Grixona Il-18s ER-ICB and ER-ICS on the airline’s ramp at Chisinau during preparations for the engine runs with the latter aircraft.*

*The cockpit of Grixona Ilyushin Il-18D ER-ICS.*



Our first stop is the supermarket to obtain provisions. I think that my wife cooks meals that are too large, but one gets the impression that an army is coming to dine tonight. Having resolved a problem with Vladimir’s car alarm, we then draw up outside a beer shop with a difference. Inside are a myriad of gargoyles, and having chosen your type of beer and handed over the empty bottles, draught beer is delivered via the appropriate gargoyle’s mouth. Certainly different! The next two hours are spent in Vladimir’s apartment eating, drinking and watching DVDs, the same ones we saw last year. Before we leave, we agree a new date for the training flights, and we are told that the missing mechanic will have returned from his trip abroad and that all necessary formalities will have been completed by the weekend. “This is guaranteed, there will be no





more problems, you must learn to trust me, don't ask Vladimir so many questions!" With these reassuring words ringing in our ears, our taxi takes us back to our hotel.

Another visit to the local flea markets helps us pass the time on Saturday September 10, but the weather is glorious and we think what a great day it would have been for flying. A stroll around the block of the hotel highlights the extremes of Chisinau, with superb grand buildings mixed in among the grim poverty of the high-rise flats. Further beer is consumed at the Veranda Bar, "Mr Fixit" makes his now obligatory appearance, but there is no news of any progress with the flying.

#### A DAY OUT TO VADU LUI VODA

Sunday September 11 – a significant day in the aviation calendar – but today we are being taken to the general aviation field at Vadu lui Voda, a thirty-minute drive from the hotel. Here, we quickly arrange that we can both fly separately on An-2TP ER-07863 (c/n 1G170-22) of Tiramavia (with Pioneer titles), whilst it is carrying out parachute drops. The first flight will not be ours, but Daniel will take the second trip, and I will fly on the third. Interestingly enough, another An-2, Yellow 11, which is parked close by is to have its wings replaced so that it too can join in the fun.

Once again the weather is glorious. The aircraft returns from its first drop, and Daniel, complete with video camera, is ensconced in the co-pilot's seat. Occupying the pilot's seat is the owner and no one less than the World Parachuting Champion, Sergey Zinchenko. With each flight lasting about 45 minutes, I estimated that I could fly in Wilga ER-WOA, another first for me, before the An-2 returned. Having placated a local man who thought that all Britains were arrogant having read a piece about Moldova published in the "Daily Express", I arranged a ten-minute flip in the Wilga, and was back on the ground in time to see Daniel land.

It was now my turn to go flying in the An-2TP, but the privilege of occupying the co-pilot's seat was given to my minder, and inside the cabin were seven parachutists and another passenger. The aircraft took off and climbed to an altitude of 2,000 metres, following which the parachutists left the aircraft one by one. Oddly enough, the door would not close, and moments later the An-2 entered a spiral dive, seemingly exerting incredible G forces, which prevented me from even lifting my camera. And so our day finished, and we were treated to Vladimir's dacha, where I was fortunate enough to see my first pair of red squirrels, and even a walk along the river bank. Sitting in the back of Vladimir's car on the trip back to the hotel, I discussed with Vitalii Ambarli the idea of painting an Il-18 in a spectacular livery as part of a sponsorship deal and flying the aircraft to unusual locations on the planet. Today is Day 5 in Moldova with little achieved thus far. "Mr Fixit" promises to call first thing the next morning to make arrangements to meet us at the airport for the Il-18 training flight and for ramp photography of a group of newly arrived An-12s. The plan was now that the training flight was scheduled to depart in the afternoon in superb weather conditions.

#### A DAY AT THE AIRPORT

Having finished breakfast by nine o'clock on the morning of Monday September 12, there is still no call from "Mr Fixit". The time passes, and despite attempts to call him, the only response is from the answerphone. In desperation, Daniel calls Vladimir, and a tired voice on

*The nearest our hapless aviators got to flying was staring in awe at Ilyushin Il-18D ER-ICS running up her four powerful Ivchenko turboprops on the apron at Chisinau International Airport on September 9.*



*Antonov An-2 ER-07863 basking in the Moldovan sunshine on the grass airfield at Vadu Lui Voda on September 11.*

the other end of the line groans, "Daniel, Big Problem! I am sorry. Big Problem!" Mysteriously, immediately after this call, in a fourth attempt, Daniel managed to reach "Mr Fixit", who innocently asks, "So Daniel, what's the news?"

This was not good. I decided to order a taxi and travel to the airport to photograph the newly arrived An-12s. Alex Marcenco was waiting at the security post, and having obtained visitor passes, we were able to leisurely stroll to the top end of the apron where the three An-12s were parked. Even the nineteen Kamov 26s are still here, and so is everything else. Nothing has moved in a year, and it can only be a matter of time before the axe man starts to break up the Tu-134s and ageing An-24s that live here. Of the 'new' An-12s, S9-KHC (c/n 00347306), still wearing faded Aeroflot colours, looks like it will never fly again, but rest assured, it will. Sistership S9-KHD (c/n 01347908), now sporting a revised



*Transliz Aviation Antonov An-12 S9-KHF at Chisinau on September 12 had only recently returned from adventures overseas with two others.*

scheme for Transliz, once lived at Sharjah, but no more. An added bonus was an invitation to go inside the aircraft; not an offer to be turned down. S9-KHF (c/n 00347109) still wears the 'old' Transliz scheme, and carries a faded ER-ADG registration on the tail. There was some activity around Antonov An-26 ER-26406, which gives the impression that this airframe has found some work somewhere. Otherwise, little is happening, and An-26B ER-26204 (c/n 14103), carrying the tail colours of Moshfil Aero, still





stands in the same spot she occupied in 2010 having just returned from lease. The only other change is that An-24RV ER-46885 (c/n 47309710), which did carry Tandem Aero titles, now sports Air Moldova titling. Not a new scheme, just the old titles removed.

Now a word of warning! We have to take a taxi back to the hotel. Do not take a taxi from outside the terminal. If you are foreign, then you will be charged at least 150 lei. The safer solution is to go inside the terminal and book a taxi there, which will cost you about 80 lei. Dining at the London Steakhouse that night, we find that the Caesar salad is enormous, and the steaks can remove fillings from your teeth! Alex "Mr Fixit" Marcenco makes the now customary uninvited visit, and having been appraised of his upbringing and background, we move on to the touchy subject of our flight tomorrow. "We will meet at the airport at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, and do the flight at 0900 prompt; all is confirmed and finalised, and Daniel, refrain from calling Vladimir directly, don't ask any more questions....."

## BIG BIG PROBLEM

Tuesday September 13 sees us still in Moldova, but today really is D-Day. We will have to leave Moldova as Daniel needs to be back at work, but we are also promised a training flight on ER-ICS. Having consumed an early breakfast, we travel by taxi to the security gate at the airport, where these "foreigners" are becoming well known – we do stand out. Alex "Mr Fixit" Marcenco arrives and we then patiently await for Vladimir. One senses when something is not right, and Daniel is now pacing up and down the car park – I can only see his feet, but that tells me enough. Alex stands silently away on my left. All cannot be right, but in this situation one has to remember that achieving anything in the old Soviet bloc is progress.

Finally, Vladimir arrives and once again with a lowered tone in his voice announces that we now have a "Big, big problem – no confirmation has been received by the insurance company." And without insurance, there can be no training flight. Once again, visitor badges are exchanged for passports, and this time Vitalii is present. We never quite understood the role of Vitalii in respect of Grixona's flight operations. Cars draw up to take the party down to the Il-18s. There is a whisper that the insurance has finally been issued and the flight is now ready to depart. Although this problem seems to have been resolved, Vladimir's expression turns darker and darker. His attempt to speak to Mr Grixona fails, Mr Ghilan will not answer the phone. The Moldovan CAA now has serious questions for Grixona. What are two foreigners doing on the ramp, and what is their mission in connection with Grixona training flights?

All persons listed as crew on the GENDEC are covered by proper insurance. Only holders of permanent airport passes with full

security clearance are entitled to be listed on the GENDEC. As we are only holders of temporary day passes, we do not qualify to be listed. The only way to participate is to board the training flight as passengers, and in order to do this, we must fly on a passenger flight. A training flight is not a passenger flight, and in addition a passenger flight can only be performed on board an aircraft licensed for passenger transport. ER-ICS is only licensed to carry crew and cargo, not passengers. The CAA threatens to revoke the AOC of Grixona, and to send over an inspector to join the flight in order to ensure that Daniel and myself remain on the ground. We also learn that the flight will be for cabin crew training – that is a first – cabin crew training on an aircraft with no seats. It is all now getting very messy. Too many people know we are here, and to compound our misery, we are invited on board that grand old lady – ER-ICB – now stripped of seating, and I end up slumped in the captain's seat with the window open.

The weather is still glorious, but I watch the clock knowing that our check-in deadline in the terminal for our flight home is 1215. Time ticks on, and it becomes apparent that we are not going to go flying. So after almost a week of broken promises – we were promised two flights, one on September 8 and the second on September 9 – it is now September 13, and nothing is happening. I am slowly going bankrupt, and Daniel needs to return to both work and his family.

We return to security and retrieve our passports, and we are rather keen to rid ourselves of the company of Vladimir, Vitalii and Alex, as this venture has cost money and precious time. But to no avail. We are accompanied to check-in, and maybe this is their way of ensuring that we are leaving? Fortunately, we are soon relaxing in the comfort of a Lufthansa Embraer 195 jetting westward towards Munich while sipping pink champagne and reflecting upon our failed adventure.

Despite all the promises that were made, we never got to fly. It is pointless blaming anybody, especially Vladimir Russu, who is just a pilot who flies for Grixona. He is the greatest of guys, but is at the mercy of his employers. Alex Marcenco could be held responsible, but given the benefit of the doubt, we are all at the mercy of the Moldovan CAA. It was still a great experience to walk the ramps at Chisinau, an even greater experience to stand in front of one of the world's last airworthy Il-18s performing engine runs, but once again, it is just the experience of being there that counts!

The author would like to thank Daniel Frohriep-Ichihara, and his wife Eriko and daughter Julia, for their tolerance during this period of insanity; also my long-suffering wife Sarah; Vladimir Russu and his wife for their continued support; Alex Cataman and Natalia; and Alex Marcenco, one person with whom we will never do business again!

# PROPLINER

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