

Up, up, and away

On a trip to France, **Richard Barr** experiences some of the joys of modern travel – and the perks of having a pilot for a son



Richard Barr is a consultant at Scott-Moncrieff & Associates @scottmoncrieff www.scomo.com

'OK, come for the weekend. I will pop over and give you a lift,' was my son's response to my prevarication. He and his girlfriend have been living in France for nearly two years and I had yet to be organised enough to pay them a visit.

'Be at Gatwick by 6pm on Friday and I will pick you up from there,' he continued. Obediently, I presented myself at check in and, after being body scanned, having my shoes checked for untied laces, and my belt removed (somehow I managed not to let my trousers fall down to my ankles), I headed for the plane – or rather I set out on a mini marathon towards the gate. It is clearly airport policy to ensure that holidaymakers arrive at their destinations in peak condition. Why otherwise would we be made to walk the length of a runway, just to get on board?

'There he is,' said Lucie, who was in charge of the cabin crew

(she later said I looked just like my son), and I was welcomed onto the plane like a VIP. Nick, my son, was peering out of the flight deck.

'Come in and sit down,' he said, pointing to the first officer's seat. I looked bemusedly at the array of dials, knobs, buttons, and a joy stick – just like the ones children use in computer games but costing, I gathered, several orders of magnitude more.

To the relief of all, I did not don my goggles and leather helmet or shout 'chocks away' but meekly returned to the seat that had been reserved for me at the front of the plane. Even trustworthy solicitors are not allowed to ride the jump seat during a flight.

I have not always been so relaxed about planes. I am descended from parents who had an extreme terror of flying. Because of American family connections we crossed the Atlantic as children on giant ocean liners, followed by an interminable journey on bright yellow Union Pacific trains to the family farm in Nebraska.

Apart from a small incident when, as a baby, I vomited into my mother's hat (those were the days when women wore hats even to fly) on a rough flight in a propeller-driven aircraft, I did not knowingly board a plane till I had stopped being a teenager.

I will not say that I am a totally calm flyer even now. In my early years as a solicitor I represented a family who had lost their son in a horrendous plane crash outside Paris. I learned then too much

about aircraft design to believe that nothing will ever go wrong again.

Nonetheless, Nick effortlessly lifted 60 tons of Airbus into the evening sky and soon we were speeding smoothly towards France.

In just over an hour we slid down into Lyon airport. After Nick had put on the handbrake and turned off the ignition and lights, I joined the rest of the crew at the front of the queue for passport control.

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'Murmur murmur murmur,' said the other passengers as they waited to taste France's slow bureaucracy and watched me queue-jump.

Brexit or no Brexit, I love France with its whimsical blend of dedicated bureaucracy, its quirky inefficiency, and – occasionally – public services that put ours to shame. Lyon is a typically French city with ornate – if slightly crumbling – buildings enclosing narrow cobbled streets which host numerous outdoor cafes, pubs, and shops.

It is on the confluence of two rivers, the Rhône and the Saône, and you are never far from water. Even the huge court building not only faces onto the river Saône but also has in front of it a modern water feature which creates a constant mist that is refreshing on hot days but is no doubt intended to reflect that the law is generally in a state of fog.

Lyon is a challenge to the cardiovascular system. To get anywhere on foot you have to climb steep hills or mount long tiers of steps. Used to Norfolk's gentle inclines, I found myself gasping and groaning as I toured the town. Then, to cap it all, it was not over when we got back to Nick's flat: it was 102 steps up to his front door on the sixth floor.

But the view was spectacular, a constantly changing landscape overlooking the Rhône and a backdrop of Mont Blanc, with added entertainment provided by French drivers. 'Just wait five minutes,' said Nick, 'and you will see two French motorists collide with each other.' I did, and they did, with a much arm waving and unfamiliar expletives.

Two days later it was over. Nick was not rostered to fly back to Gatwick again, so I once again became a normal passenger, squeezed up against the window next to a man with bad breath and doomed to wait in line to get on and off the plane. I was even shouted at by an impatient passenger for being too slow. Ah, the joys of modern travel! **SJ**

