

Soaring, Czech Style

by Kempton Izuno 2002



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As soaring pilots, we often measure our soaring in terms of distance flown, contests won or speed achieved. But another rich dimension is in visiting soaring operations in other countries. This past summer, after my visit to the CNVV in France, I managed a few more soaring-related experiences in the Czech Republic (part of the former Czechoslovakia).

I met up with my family in the Czech capital of Prague where we vacationed for four weeks starting in mid-June 2002. We enjoyed ourselves immensely as resident tourists in this fabulously historic and beautiful city. But as a soaring nut, I had to check out (no pun intended) what the Czech Republic might offer in the way of soaring. As it turns out, quite a lot.

Until the early 1990s, Germany had the predominant mindshare when it came to glider design and manufacture. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, we've seen the appearance of a number of Eastern European designed and produced gliders such as the LAK series (Lithuania), Apis (Slovenia), PW-5/Diana (Poland), Russia (Russia), and in the Czech Republic, the Lambada motorglider and the HPH 304 series. This is no accident as there is a strong history of aviation in East European countries, along with a high level of craftsmanship. Combine this with low labor costs and a drive to build exports, and you have a whole new set of manufacturers.

HpH Factory Tour

One of our side trips from Prague was to the historic town of Kutna Hora which also happens to be home to the HpH factory. Jaroslav Potmesil, HpH MD, greeted us and gave us a tour.

Jaroslav's business card reads "aircraft models scale 1:1 to 1:250". Although HpH builds the 304 series, this is a relatively new line of business as they started with museum-quality models. The models are built using fiberglass, and it's quite apparent that the same fine craftsmanship goes into the 304 fit and finish. The model builders are on one side of the building with the 304 molds and finishing on the other. The building itself is modest in size, perhaps 15,000 sq. feet, much smaller than other German factories. Ah, I love that fiberglass and epoxy aroma!

Izuno Family inspects a 304C fuselage



Jaroslav points out control details



Ondine Izuno with some models "in progress"



Ondine with a highly detailed P-51 model



An HpH modeler at work



An 8-pack of An-2 models for a National parachuting team



Zbraslavice



Zbraslavice Main Hangar
2001 Ing. Martin <http://sweb.cz/lkzb/foto2001.htm>

Jaroslav's club field at Zbraslavice is a big (1 mile long x half mile wide) grass airport about an hour south of Prague in low rolling hills. Typical of many European clubs, there is a pool and restaurant on the field.

Gliders share the field with ultralights and some power planes. Jaroslav had invited me out to see the field and perhaps to get a checkout with Mr. Hoden, the chief flight instructor. I was late and saw the club was very busy taking up a number of rides. No problem, I thought, I'll just watch.

A few minutes later, Jaroslav drives up to the flight line with a 304C (no flaps) in tow and introduces me to a couple of Swiss gentlemen, Andy and Uli, who are considering whether to become the Swiss HpH distributors. Without hesitation, Jaroslav declares that all three of us are to fly the 304C, and I was nominated to go first! "It's like a Libelle, only easier," he says, "so you should have no problem." Quick cockpit and control check, then Jaroslav is off to fly his personal 304CZ on a 500K task.

In short order, I'm bouncing down the grass field behind a Zlin 226 towplane on what is, at best, a 100-foot tow rope. No problem if the rope breaks, there are plenty of fields surrounding the airport. The 45-degree thermaling while on tow, however, is a bit aggressive for me.....

Off tow, and it's a quick climb to 5,500 feet in a beautiful cu-filled sky.

The 304C is certainly a well behaved and quiet ship (but then, I've always been a Glasflugel guy.....). It's a short 90- minute flight, but I managed to go 50km upwind to the Tabor Gliding club (site of this year's Czech Nationals) and have a fast final glide home. The clouds have 3-5 knots and there are always one or two gliders in sight all the time. Much later, Jaroslav lands back at the field having cut short his task by only 40km.



Zlin 226 towplane at Zbraslavice
2001 © Ing. Martin <http://sweb.cz/lkzb/foto2001.htm>

Back on the ground, there's time to check out the ships I've not seen before. Besides 5 Blaniks and an L-33, there are three VSO-10s, a mixed glass/metal ship like a Standard Jantar. There's an all-wood Lunak, which was in its time (1950s), a state-of-the-art aerobatic ship.



Lunak
2001 © Ing. Martin <http://sweb.cz/lkzb/foto2001.htm>

Another vintage Czech glider is the VSM-40 Demant, built in the late 50s. It's all wood, with Fowler flaps and retractable gear.



Demant (foreground) and Lunak (rear)

2001 © Ing. Martin <http://sweb.cz/lkzb/foto2001.htm>

Finally, I must note a couple of novel Czech power planes. The all metal L-40 Meta Sokol is a Czech design from the mid-Fifties with a unique retractable mid-body wheel right below the rear of the passenger cabin. It's a very fast plane, apparently.



L-40 MetaSokol

The other Czech plane of interest is the L-60/L-160 "Brigadir" a mid-50s STOL observation plane similar in design to the WWII German Storch.

I observed the L-160 pictured circling at less than 200 feet over the nearby town. Later I learned that the plane was tossing out the starting ball at a soccer game!



L-60/L-160 "Brigadir"

Other Notes

Did you know that the country with the highest per capita beer consumption (160L/year) is the Czech Republic? That explains the funding for such advertising like this:



We need more of this in the US!

Overall costs were much lower here than the low costs in southern France:

- * In Prague, drinks, meals and tip for four adults & two children cost less than \$25 total.
- * I bought a plastic kit model of a Blanik for \$2.
- * A book set of the history of Czech airplanes was \$3. Hey, the pictures are great!
- * Although I spoke no Czech, language was, by and large, not a problem. Most restaurants had English menus and in Prague, many people spoke English.

While absent the spectacular scenery of the Alps, the central Czech Republic is not to be missed for the low cost of living, friendly people and great aviation history. For more information, see:

HPH <http://www.hph.cz/>

Zbraslavice Club <http://home.tiscali.cz:8080/~cz274492/eng/index.htm>

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