

From Matthew Scutter FaceBook page, 06/05/2019

We started preparing at 6am, with a gloomy sky around Sisteron, a low in the west of Italy throwing up mid level cloud and lots of low level cloud pushing through the Alps and down the Rhone valley. It was cold on the ground, only 6 degrees at launch (and was -20c for most of the day in flight).

We launched at 7.30am, pessimistic due to the local cloud and climbed as best we could in the turbulent local conditions, and then followed a weak, barely visible line of lift to the west until the edge of the Rhone valley, where the wind gradient and subsequent wave was expected to improve.

It is not unusual to have wave conditions in the French Alps, Pyrenees and in between, but I think it is not often that they are all working well. It was not one of those days though, because the French Alps were forecast on SkySight to not have wave above 3500m, with low level winds up to 70kts, but dropping to 10kts at 5000m. We actually saw rotors spinning *backwards* due to the wind gradient around Sisteron.

Jean-Marie dialed up Marseille and asked for a clearance, as St. Auban had not activated their wave box. In an unimaginable stroke of luck, a friend of his was working ATC that day, and we received a FL195 clearance which we kept for almost the entire day. Many flights were cancelled in the South of France due to excessively strong winds, which no doubt helped keep the skies clear too. The FL195 clearance let us climb up to FL160 over the top of the low cloud near Sisteron and progress west without concern.

We easily climbed to FL195 on the east of the Rhone valley, then cross it, following some lines of good air on SkySight, connecting with the wave on the other side. The wind was starting to swing north west the further west we went, so it was quite confused wave systems, with wavebars clearly aligned both west-east and north-east/south-west intersecting each other. With a predominantly tailwind component for our track to the Pyrenees though, it was not too challenging to jump crosswind towards Cerdanya but it made us nervous for the return. We had to traverse an 80km jump from the last wave to first mountains of the Pyrenees, and then make sure to mark any lift we found for later use on the way back.

The Pyrenees was blue, but working strongly. I see on OLC that some pilots flew over a thousand km in the blue wave. We followed the dark red line on SkySight, at red line for a long distance past our turnpoint, just because. We had identified jumping back from the Pyrenees to the north would be the most difficult part of the flight. We had 100km/h of headwind, and 'only' FL195, to jump 80-130km to the north depending on the wave bars, ideally without falling out of the wave and having to thermal and climb back in. Fortunately the tertiary and quaternary waves stretched far enough south, and we were able to just connect above the cloud tops without falling out of the wave, and keep pushing forwards. We spent quite a bit of time consulting the SkySight maps in flight to judge when to make the next transition north and how high we needed to be to make it.

Continuing north, the wave became more contiguous, and now well upwind of Sisteron, we had plenty of height for final glide from 200km out. The problem would be that from our perspective at least, it appeared the whole of the French alps was now underneath cloud, and visible snowing. We flew at Macready 0 to the edge of the cloud west of Sisteron, where a small foehn gap was being held open by the turbulent wave, which made for an extremely rough but straight forward glide back. We experimented a little in the local area with the unusual wind shear and tried to climb into possibly some upper level wave system (there appeared to be 'alto' rotors above us?), but called it a day with a bit over 1000km under our belts.

The flight would not have been possible without - Jean-Marie (who literally wrote the book on wave soaring, see 'Dancing With the Wind'), a Nimbus 4, very cooperative ATC, and dare I say, SkySight (<https://skysight.io>) which not only helped identify the upcoming good conditions 4 days out, but helped us several times find critical lift, told us how strong it might be ahead and gave us confidence in what we could read from the sky even when it looked obvious.

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