

From Crete, Greece, to Split, Croatia

The weather worsened as I flew north. I got clearance for 12,500 feet, which was the highest the *Sun* had ever gone. Then the Italian air-traffic controllers allowed me to climb another 1000 feet. Because the tailwinds were stronger up there, the higher the *Sun* was, the faster she went. The air was so thin that I had to breathe from an oxygen canister to make sure I didn't lose concentration or black out. My oxygen supply was limited to several cans, but I didn't believe I would need anywhere near that much.

While climbing, the *Sun* passed through the tops of a few wispy clouds. I could still see blue sky above, and at one point became aware of a change in the sound of the flowing air – it was almost like a flapping. I looked out to see if something was loose. Ice from the moisture in the cloud was forming on the forward edge of the wings and the struts that connected the wings to the fuselage. It was possible ice was forming on the stainless-steel edges of the propeller blades too, although they were moving too fast behind me for me to tell.

Ice is extremely dangerous on aircraft. By altering the asymmetrical shape of the wings – which is what gets planes off the ground – it can literally pull them out of the sky. Ice on the propeller ice reduces propulsion, adding to the danger. I had never seen ice on the *Sun* before so I was very surprised. But, then, I had never flown so high before, and I hadn't planned to that day, so I hadn't taken note of the 'freezing level', the altitude at which the temperature, moisture and conditions would likely create ice on metal. I always carefully check the freezing level when flying near mountains, but now that I'd been flying over desert and ocean, I had fallen into the trap of not doing so.

Rather than descend into the cloud, which could have made the problem worse, I climbed towards the blue sky, which was not so far above me. The clear air wouldn't have enough moisture to generate ice, I reasoned. A minute later the *Sun* was in sunshine and the ice melted away.

The incident made me paranoid about going back through cloud again. But I had 13,500 feet to lose on a very cloudy day. Normally, if I had to, I would descend partially through a few clouds to get to the ground. I had been trained to do this. This

time, I looked for a hole in the cloud cover big enough to descend in a tall, continuous spiral.

After I found one, the air-traffic controller in Split gave me permission to descend to 2000 feet. The *Sun* was now out of the cloud but in a rainstorm that made it almost impossible to see what was in front. I still had a good view out sideways. The heavy cloud had made it dark around the airport. The controller, instead of directing my approach, let me find my own way in.

Split airport is right alongside the coast. There is an island close to the shore on the approach route to the runway I was assigned. As I neared the airport, the controller directed me to descend further. I was distracted, trying to follow the directions from my GPS, and I didn't realise the island was there. If I had, I would have known it was coming. Instead, I discovered the island when it was just 500 feet beneath me. I knew that the controller, using his radar, was aware of the *Sun's* altitude above the ground. But the sight of land emerging out of the rain freaked me out. It wasn't exactly a near miss, but not having seen it gave me a big shock. If I'd been flying any lower, the consequences could have been disastrous.

According to my GPS, the runway was two nautical miles away (3.7 kilometres). But I couldn't see it through the rain pelting on the windscreen. VFR pilots like me are used to being able to see where they are going to land from at least 10 kilometres out – it gives them time to prepare for landing. In this case, I felt like I was going in blind.

Suddenly, the airport appeared from the gloom like a welcoming Christmas tree. The control tower had switched the runway lights on so it was now easily visible. I landed safely and thanked the tower. Their reply was telling: 'We're just happy to have you on the ground safely.'