

Calm waters and gentle landscapes: a trip to Central Italy

Two days on the tiny Lake Mercatale,
where nobody even knew seaplanes existed

Imagine a very isolated community in the Appennines, in the Marche region, Central Italy. One day a dam is built to serve the agriculture need for water in the plains, and a new lake is created.

Local administrators discover that a lake is an incredible source of wealth, going well beyond their expectations. There is a simple reason for this : people like water.

A camping site is established, bars and small restaurants are built, sports facilities start to attract people from outside. Small boats of various kind start to plough through the wavelets. The summer is full of events, but those same capable administrators are still searching for new ways to make the most of that small "pearl in the Appennines". The local television network belongs to a syndicate that broadcasts a programme on Como seaplanes, things they had seen in a historical documentary, believing they belonged to the past.

They find out that a seaplane base still exists in Como and call us: «Well,

we don't know if you can operate on a lake like ours and we don't even know if you can reach this place from your location, but we would be thrilled to see a real seaplane taking off and landing on our lake.»

As every seaplane pilot knows, there is nothing better than being asked to perform a special operation in a strange place. Needless to say we accepted immediately.

The excursion required a flight across the great Po plain, crossing the whole of Lombardy and Emilia Romagna regions and reaching the Marche region, a wonderful area of small medieval villages, castles and romanesque churches.

The only heights we encounter are the hills on the final part of the trip; a rather easy VFR trip even in marginal weather. But the weather that day was glorious. Small fair-weather cumulus



Lake Renegade N47LA (later I-AQUA).



The priest of Mercatale on board for a ride.



The Lake Renegade in short final. At the bottom of the lake, the dam. Just above, the village of Sassocorvaro. On the shore on the left, the village of Mercatale.

humilis embellished the sky and we enjoy playing with them, just for fun.

The fleet is made up of the newly arrived Lake Renegade, on its first journey after being grounded three years before, and a Piper Super Cub.

As soon as we arrive over Mercatale, the lake appears much smaller than the one we saw in pictures and maps before leaving. At first sight, we are not even sure that we shall be able to take off with three people on board and the gas needed for the return flight.

There is an airport on the Adriatic coast, at Fano, on 15 minutes' flight from Mercatale. The decision is soon taken: we will organize a base at Fano, from which we will depart for the trip back to Como and where we will send all the hardware by car, thus enabling us to make our take off from the lake less heavy.

Having examined the situation and taken the consequent strategic decisions on how to conduct the operation in a couple of 360s, we easily identify the wind direction, view the approach path from different angles to detect possible obstacles and then finally start the descent.

It is always exciting to descend for the first time onto a short lake; not only because of the beautiful landscape but especially because you have to make thorough use of all your experience and skill. The idyllic scenery of an Appennine valley is not something that should distract the pilot during the assessment and the approach, as unknown dangers may appear and suddenly transform a nice excursion into a catastrophe. We had obviously been informed by telephone about obstacles, but you can never really rely on information given by non-pilots and must be extremely careful in situations such as the one described above.

The first moment of relaxation arrives when the aircraft is taxiing down the step. Only then are you able to appreciate the environment.

If we'd come from Mars we probably would have received the same enthusiastic welcome. We stayed two days at Mercatale, during which we could taste many extremely rich and delicious local dishes.

We soon discovered that hundreds of people couldn't wait to fly on the seaplanes.

After a conservative "progressive-



The ancient village of Sassocorvaro, with its castle, some hundreds feet above the waters of the lake.



Cessna and Piper operating on Lake Mercatale.

exposure-to-risk" policy, we agreed that we could safely takeoff with the Renegade filled up with 20-25 gallons and pilot + 2 normal adults (+ a child). No problem with the Piper and her only passenger.

We also took on board for short local flights several old people of the villages of Mercatale and Sassocorvaro, who witnessed an airplane for the first time in their lives. It is difficult to describe the emotion of a 90-year-old lady, dressed in black just like an eighteenth century countrywoman, who sees from above (better still) from an airplane, the place where she lives (and which she has never left for more than 5-10 miles).

Seaplanes are very special means of transport, bringing aviation to people who would never in their lives decide

autonomously to have anything to do with them.

People were so happy that lots of them wished to make a second trip.

We soon understood that it was impossible for us satisfy all of them in only two days. We decided to call Como SPB and obtained two more seaplanes for the next day. The crew took off at 7 in the morning and ferried two 172s to Mercatale. An instructor brought his student along, who had the chance to experience crosscountry flying for the first time.

The younger pilots felt so great (they discovered that local girls really don't disliked pilots...) that they decided to stay one more day and fly back to Como only on Monday.

Mercatale: a place worth a visit.