

A FLIGHT FROM NEW ORLEANS TO SAN DIEGO &
BACK
BY
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In February of 2008, my wife, Marilyn, her sister, Maureen, and I took a trip to visit our niece who is Maureen's #1 daughter, in our Cessna 182R. Before we left, a friend of mine, who is not a pilot, but who holds a Ph.D. degree in oceanography, asked why we proposed to travel in a little single-engine, four-seat airplane in the middle of the winter. According to him, all we were in for was one weather front after another. That didn't make sense to him.

Another question he might have brought up was why would anyone want to bounce around in a little Cessna for two days each way and pay more than two thousand dollars for the privilege? We could easily go online and find an airline fare for just a few hundred dollars. We'd be airborne for only a few hours each way, way up in the stratosphere where we couldn't even tell they were moving. Then we'd be able to spend at least 2 extra days in sunny California, for about 1/4 of the cost.

I think this may be a little bit like asking why anyone would buy an expensive sailboat and sail across Lake Ponchartrain to have dinner in Mandeville. After dinner, why would those folks spend the night on the boat, bereft of air conditioning and soft mattresses, not to mention any

privacy or standard bathroom amenities? Then why would they sail back to New Orleans, probably beating against the wind on at least one of the lake crossings, spending a minimum of a full day to make the trip, risking being becalmed out in the middle of nowhere, getting sunburned, seasick, and mosquito bitten? Why would anyone do that, when they could hop into an air conditioned car, drive over in a matter of minutes, have dinner, and get back in time for the late news on T.V?

As Kermit the Frog once said, “Getting there is half the fun – Come share it with me.” So here are the stats, along with a few comments on our journey to the West Coast, doing it the hard way.

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February 11, 2008: our planned departure date. I got up at 5:00 A.M. leaving a warm wife and the comfort of our bed get a weather briefing. The prognosis had not looked good the night before, but we had spent the afternoon packing, hoping for a change in the weather. We went to bed pretty much ready to head for the airport the next morning, hoping for an 8:00 departure. The plan was to fly on the first day to El Paso, Texas, a distance of about 880 nautical miles, which to you landlubbers is a tad over a thousand statute miles. We’d be crossing the width of 2 states, which is no big deal in an airplane, unless one of the states is Texas. Also, we were proposing to cross it from Beaumont to El Paso, about as far as you can travel in a straight line without departing the Lone Star State. At a putative

cruising speed of 130 knots, the airplane could theoretically make the trip in a little under 7 hours, not counting rest stops. It was not to be.

The briefer gave a bleak picture. Although the weather was forecast to be dandy for the Louisiana portion of the flight, a big, mean front was moving in from the west and would meet us somewhere between Beaumont and Lake Charles. We could bust out of here, land in Lake Charles, and wait for the weather to pass us by, if we wanted to. But Lake Charles is not much more than an hour's flight from home base, and we thought it might be cheaper and more comfortable to sit out a weather delay at home, rather than cooling our heels in a Lake Charles motel. Wife stayed in bed, and sister-in-law, bless her heart, thanked me for not taking her flying in questionable conditions. Thus passed day one of the journey.

To make a long story short, day two was pretty much like day one, except that the horrible weather was in New Orleans on day two; but it was forecast to be east of us by day three, leaving us reasonably good flying conditions in the lee of the squall lines.

TIME TO SPARE? GO BY AIR.

Day three, Wednesday, the 13th of February, dawned clear with visibility unlimited. This is what pilots and their seasoned passengers call a "CAVU" day. Only trouble was that there were headwinds forecast for the entire day, getting worse as we worked our way westward. We set out

at 9:05 A.M, climbing to 8,500 feet for a leisurely cruise to San Antonio for our first rest stop.

Departing Lakefront Airport, I engaged the GPS navigator, which told the autopilot where to go. I had told the GPS computer that I wanted to go directly to RQR, the designation of the first navigational fix of my trip. As we leveled off at 8500 feet, I mashed the little “altitude hold” button, and the autopilot took over the job of vertical, as well as horizontal, control. A little messing with trim and mixture controls, then closing the cowl flaps, set us up for the cruise segment of the flight. As we approached RQR, about 20 minutes after our departure from Lakefront airport, all systems were “go.” The airplane was slipping through the air at 130 knots and the west wind was retarding our progress over the ground to the tune of about 13 knots. The trip to San Antonio took almost 4 hours, and our backsides were ready for some standing up and moving around as we disembarked and put in our fuel order.

Leg 1: NEW – SAT 445 nautical miles 3 hrs. 54
minutes 48 gallons of gas

Average ground speed: 117 knots Average fuel
consumption: 12.3 gallons/hr.

NEW direct RQR V20 HUB V198 SAT

We rose from the runway at San Antonio at 1:46 in the afternoon and made our way to El Paso, keeping our altitude at 8,500 feet until some unstable air started jiggling

us around. We climbed to 10,500 feet and got a smoother ride in exchange for a little more headwind.

West of Fort Stockton, the really hilly western part of Texas starts, a treat for us flatlanders to view from our lofty perch. We arrived at El Paso at 5:46, 4 hours after our departure from San Antonio. We were ready for a delicious Mexican dinner and a soft Texas bed.

Leg 2: SAT - ELP 435 nautical miles 4 hrs. 00 minutes 47.2 gallons of gas

Average ground speed: 109 knots Average fuel consumption: 11.8 gallons/hr.

SAT V198 ELP

Why, I hear you asking, does the average fuel consumption not always come out to the same figure? The answers are many and varied; but essentially, we have to burn extra gas taxiing out and climbing to our cruising altitude. The longer we remain at that altitude, the lower the percentage of the whole is represented by this extra gas we use in getting from our parking place to our cruising altitude. There is also a minor issue of air temperature, which affects air density, producing a nugatory effect on fuel consumption.

Day 2 (or day 4, if you want to count the 2-day delay getting away from New Orleans) dawned clear and beautiful, except for more of the same in the winds aloft

forecast. The forecaster said we'd have a pretty bumpy ride on the way to Phoenix, our next stop. Coming out of El Paso it was pretty smooth at 8500 feet, and stayed that way for the first 150 miles. I made the mistake of calling the weatherman and reporting that the ride was "smooth as a baby's backside," a sure way to put the gris gris on a smooth ride. Soon after I made that report, a place called San Simon passed under our wings and the bumpy air gods got busy. For the next 150 miles we got tossed around like the proverbial frog in a blender.

But aside from that (Aside from that, how did you enjoy the play, Mrs. Lincoln?), it was a very beautiful passage over mountain, desert, and salt flats. I knew the difference between a hill and a mountain from a geology course I took in college. If there's any question about it, it's a hill.

Comparing our passage through the air to our velocity over the ground revealed that we were making good a little less than 80 knots, as a 50+ knot headwind impeded our progress. As we flew parallel to an interstate highway, we could see the 18-wheel rig drivers looking up at us and laughing, as they left us in the west Texas dust.

Eventually we made it to a place called Phoenix-Gateway airport, just south of Phoenix, in a place called Mesa. This used to be the site of an Air Force training base called Williams, or "Willie," that had been converted to civilian use about 20 years ago. We landed at 12:44, Central Standard Time. For convenience, I keep our chronometers set to the same time zone as we travel east

and west. It avoids confusion, and all time references are converted to something called “Zulu” time during contacts with controllers, briefers, and other minions of the Federal Aviation Administration.

Leg 3: ELP – IWA 309 nautical miles 3 hrs. 4 minutes 34 gallons of gas

Average ground speed: 101 knots Average fuel consumption: 11 gallons/hr.

ELP V94 TOTEC intersection DIRECT IWA

Yes, I know this was a short leg and we burned less gas per hour. The air was so bumpy that I had to slow down, several times, to what we call the “maneuvering speed” of the airplane. At the lower speed, the bird takes the bumps a little easier, the air presents less resistance to our passage, and the whole enterprise becomes more fuel-efficient. If we were just trying to save fuel, we’d fly at something called the best L/D, or “lift over drag” speed, which is about 80 knots. If we *really* wanted to save gas, we’d take a Greyhound bus.

The Phoenix briefer reported that the weather was getting ever worse ahead of us. We decided to put the bird to bed for the day and consider ourselves to be stranded in Mesa, Arizona. We rented a car, found some food and a motel, and got settled. With an afternoon to spend, we

found some museums and furthered our education about the natural history of the area.

The next morning, February 15, dawned murky and miserable. You know the old saying: “Beware the ides of February!” So we put some gas into the car and took off for the desert, driving through some spectacular scenery, featuring giant cacti, and other interesting flora and fauna. We found a community that was fixed up to look like the old west. We had lunch there, then did some more driving in chilly drizzle and fog. I’m always thankful when I cancel a day of flying and the weather really does turn bad.

The three of us travel well together, and we all enjoyed the day.

The next day, February 16th, brought much better flying conditions, and we got off the ground at 10:24 in the morning, flying across the Imperial Valley, just a little north of Yuma, finally passing over the tops of the coastal mountains, which were covered with snow from yesterday’s storm. We ran an ILS (instrument landing system) approach into Montgomery airport in San Diego and pulled up to our destination gas pump 14.4 flying hours, three and a half days after our departure from New Orleans.

Leg 4: IWA – MYF 286 nautical miles 2 hrs. 21 minutes 31.3 gallons of gas

Average ground speed: 122 knots Average fuel consumption: 13.6 gallons/hr.

IWA direct GBN V66 MZB direct MYF

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Time passed. We enjoyed our visit to southern California, although we did experience quite a variety of weather. Among our many adventures, we toured the aircraft carrier MIDWAY. We also drove 2 hours into the mountains and saw the 200-inch Palomar telescope. Then it was time to come home. If you're interested in reading about other things we did during our stay, see Marilyn's travelogue.

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Saturday, February 23, dawned bright and shiny – conditions we'd been led to expect over the desert. We departed Montgomery field at 9:18 A.M. mountain time, and proceeded toward our first planned stop, the aforementioned Gateway airport in Phoenix. When we got up and running, however, we discovered that we had a nice tailwind at 9,500 feet and air that really was as smooth as a baby's backside. So we decided it didn't make sense to waste time landing when the computers told us that we could make it nonstop to El Paso in about three and a half hours. The airplane was carrying seven hours of fuel when we departed, and we were equipped with a gadget called a "human element range extender (HERE), so there was no urgent need to drop in at Phoenix.

3 hours and 38 minutes after lifting off from San Diego, the airplane's tires kissed the pavement of El Paso's

runway 26L. The wind was blowing at 15 knots, gusting to 37. That's a big gust factor, so I flew her on, hoping that some extra speed and a no-flap approach would give me the control response I might need, to deal with low-level turbulence. We lucked out and arrived during a relatively steady-wind interlude, resulting in the smoothest touchdown of the trip. It happens sometimes.

We had another spectacular Mexican meal in El Paso and a good night's sleep. The folks at Cutter Aviation, one of the establishments that provide services for general aviation airplanes, gave us their usual prompt, courteous, and efficient service. On a previous trip, in a smaller airplane, we stopped there for the night, buying only a tiny amount of aviation gasoline, compared to what the jets and corporate planes consume. When we got home, we found a card in the mail, thanking us for our custom. Do you think I'll ever patronize any other establishment, any time I stop at El Paso? I always say nice things to other pilots about Cutter, and my undying brand loyalty cost them only the price of a stamp. And they do give very good service.

Leg 5: MYF – ELP 592 nautical miles 3 hrs. 38
minutes 42.3 gallons of gas

Average ground speed: 164 knots Average fuel
consumption: 12 gallons/hr.

MYF direct HAILE intersection V66 GBN V94 ELP

Our final day of travel was the 24th of February, a day that held the promise of smooth sailing and tailwinds all the way. Once again, we sought to traverse the states of Texas and Louisiana in one day. We made it off the ground in El Paso at 8:18 A.M. and flew to San Antonio without incident. The winds were as forecast and all systems were running at maximum efficiency. We cruised at 9,500 feet and, without the turbulence we had experienced on the westward trip, we enjoyed a view of the desert and the mountains without our attention being distracted by uncommanded pitches, rolls, and yaws.

Leg 7: ELP – SAT 435 nautical miles 3 hrs. 2 minutes 35 gallons of gas

Average ground speed: 145 knots Average fuel consumption: 11.6 gallons/hr.

ELP V198 SAT

Following a brief fuel/bathroom/cookie stop in San Antonio, we embarked on our last leg of the journey at 1:15 Central Time, climbing once again to 9,500 feet. As had been our custom, we coordinated our flight with air traffic control, a practice known as “VFR flight following.” We got traffic advisories from successive controllers and enjoyed the security of knowing that, if we developed some kind of a problem leading to an unscheduled landing, there was someone on the ground who would immediately send

somebody to fetch us home. I can't say enough about the professionalism, courtesy, and dedication of the air traffic controllers who monitored our flight, taking this task on as an extra duty, in addition to their primary task of controlling airplanes conducting instrument flights, including airliners at high altitude.

The controller at Houston Approach Control proved an exception to the rule. Throughout the years, I have experienced a mind set at Houston that little transient aircraft are too much of a bother to us big-city folks. If you little bug smashers want to fly over *our* city, you'll just have to do it without our participation. On the westward part of our trip the local controller at Houston had acted just like the other, non-Houstonian guys, treating us like normal taxpayers, working us through their airspace without any fuss.

On the way home, however, the center controller who had been monitoring our flight through central Texas told us that Houston Approach Control had not accepted our handoff, and that we'd have to call them and make our own deal. We thanked the center guy and switched to the assigned Houston frequency. I made 7 calls and got ignored. This, to me, was typical Houston behavior. The sky was clear and the traffic did not seem particularly dense. It was certainly not rush hour; and the guy could at least have answered my call and refused to work with me, as they often do.

My map indicated that his little control fiefdom extended upward only to 10,000 feet. I was already flying

at 9,500 feet, so I decided to go up to 11,500 feet and keep right on truckin'. The tailwinds were equally favorable up there, and the engine was, for certain thermodynamic reasons, running at about 50% power, the maximum available at that altitude. So we were burning less gas and going just as fast. I stayed up there and made contact with the Center controller when I got east of Houston's little playground. They promptly picked me up and worked our flight all the way back to New Orleans.

Since we were so high and fast (with the tailwind), we had to start our descent about half way between Lafayette and New Orleans. We came screaming down from 2-miles-up as New Orleans Approach Control welcomed us home. We touched down at 4:15, an easy 3-hour leg, and put the plane to bed.

Leg 8: SAT - NEW 445 nautical miles 3 hrs. 02
minutes ? gallons of gas

Average ground speed: 148 knots Average fuel
consumption: ? gallons/hr.

SAT V198 HUB V20 LFT direct NEW

Sorry about that – we put the plane away without filling the tanks. I expect the fuel numbers were about the same as the next-to-last leg, or maybe a little less, since we were sipping fuel at a more economical rate at the higher altitude necessitated by Houston Approach Control's reticence.

Total time coming home: 10.4 hours, 2 days. That's the way it's supposed to happen, but in the middle of the winter, as my friend says, you often get one front after another. Unless you're willing to wait out marginal-to-bad weather, you should find some other mode of travel. I'll bet the folks in the sailboat would stay an extra day or two in Mandeville if the weather got scary. We spent a total of 3 1/2 days waiting for undesirable weather to move away, but what the hey? We were on vacation.