



January 2008

Commentary

Flying Carpet

New Friends

Like being in heaven

Jean is wrapping up her tennis tournament in El Paso, and it's time for me to retrieve her. A month of precious rain has inundated the normally sunny Southwest — cause for worry on my second round trip from Flagstaff in a week. Each morning, clouds and isolated showers have blossomed into widespread afternoon thunderstorms, then diminished toward sunset. Despite my attempted policy of ignoring the weather until departure time, I foolishly checked radar returns yesterday and worried about it half the night.



This morning, however, I take flight into crisp and glorious skies. Immediately it's clear that I'm in for a treat. High clouds cool the cockpit and smooth my ride. Until recently the parched landscape has been frighteningly browned with drought-stressed trees and a dearth of green plants. But today misty wisps adorn pondlets on Mormon Lake's cracked-mud floor, and the air hangs heavy with hazy moisture. For three hours I entertain myself observing the rare sparkle of engorged streams threading lush jade valleys and luminous lime mountain meadows. Compared to my previous trip, when despite good forecasts I had unexpectedly encountered low clouds and rain, this morning's journey is heaven. The only question is whether afternoon thunderstorms might postpone our return until tomorrow morning.

I approach isolated Doña Ana County Airport expecting an hour of boredom, perhaps spiced by stress while tracking the afternoon's developing storms. After all, Jean's final tennis game will soon be over, and it makes little sense to rush there by cab and arrive in the final moments. But unlike my last visit, the traffic pattern swarms with airplanes. I shoehorn my way into the landing queue. As I shut down the engine, an enthusiastic young man greets me with hand outstretched. "Hi, my name is Luis. What's yours?"

I assume that Luis works here at Doña Ana's Blue Feather Aero, but I soon learn he's just another enthusiastic aviator welcoming me back to *terra firma*. After inquiring about my flight, Luis boasts of his freshly earned instrument rating. "Meet my brother Jose, who is also learning to fly," he offers. Before I know it Luis has presented his business partners Jorge and Ramiro, also student pilots, and showed off the newly acquired Cherokee Six they are restoring.

Next Luis introduces me to Blue Feather's dynamic owners, Dick and Suzie Azar. Dick flew B-24s during World War II and helped to develop nearby El Paso International Airport, while Suzie is among the busiest instructors at the booming flight school. The ramp buzzes with activity. Above the office, Suzie shows off a penthouse party room and patio. This place is fun! Blue Feather airplanes sport names painted on their sides: *Smurf* is named for its powder-blue paint, and *Chantal Fiona* for Suzie's granddaughter.

Luis and Jose are preparing to fly Blue Feather's diesel Cessna 172, one of the first to be retrofitted with a German-made Thielert engine. The airplane boasts a single power lever, quiet cockpit, turbocharged performance, and fuel consumption nearly half that of a conventional 172. Glancing under the familiar cowl I find nothing recognizable. Taxiing out, the airplane sounds like a cross between a radio-controlled model and a turboprop. "You should see the linemen's faces when you land somewhere new, and request the 'Jet A' truck to refuel your 172!" chuckles pilot Mike Bruening.

"Come join us in El Paso for some great Mexican food," Suzie offers. That pleasure must wait until my next visit, as Jean and her teammate Eileen have just arrived. Earlier, Luis promised dinner at his favorite restaurant across the Mexican border in Juarez, so our new friends offer mouth-watering reasons to return.

"Did you win the tennis sectionals?" I ask Jean and Eileen.

"No!" they laugh simultaneously, "but we had a blast!" Checking weather, I discover that rain and isolated thunderstorms are indeed developing across our route home. At this time of afternoon they could well intensify, but the picture is far better than what worried me on yesterday's radar, and decidedly flyable.

It's hot by now, and the airport's automated weather system reports a density altitude of 6,100 feet. Fortunately this is flat country, so our slow climb over ancient lava flows into sapphire skies is hardly troubling. Not until the Arizona border do friendly cumulus puffs billow into scattered showers and the occasional thunderstorm. Noting monster cells over Mount Baldy, our helpful Albuquerque Center controller aims us toward a 150-miles-distant intersection "to avoid everything."

It's great advice, and not until turning northwest at the appointed intersection must we deviate for rain.

Scud materializes ahead, so I file an instrument flight plan and climb to 10,000 feet. Silvery cloud towers now escort us, their rifts revealing rain-sparkled emerald mountains and the occasional gargantuan crimson strip mine garnished by aqua tailing ponds. I've all but forgotten our sleepy passenger when Eileen blurts over the intercom, startling me, "This is like being in heaven!"

Flagstaff peeks coyly from between rain showers when we arrive. We can see the city but not the airport, so our controller cannot approve a visual approach. As we consider instrument approach options the runway reveals itself, and we plummet from 10,000 feet, clogging everyone's ears. Soft rain pelts our windshield as we touch down, and our chests swell from the thrill of arriving home safely. While unpacking I suddenly realize how we could have precluded the dive-bomber descent. "Since we had the ground in sight I should have asked for a 'contact approach,'" I say to Jean. "Then we could have descended earlier."

"Who's complaining?" she replies. "After a full morning of tennis in El Paso, here we are back home at 4 o'clock. Think of the new friends you've made, and the incredible sights we've just seen. Plugged ears seem a small price to pay for such a memorable passage."

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By Greg Brown

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Mist peppers pondlets on the cracked-mud floor of Mormon Lake, Arizona.