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Commentary

Flying Carpet

By: Greg Brown

Homeward bound: Battling weather through Glorieta Pass

We awoke to a golden sunrise outside our hotel window, over the great treeless land of Dalhart, Texas. Jean and I were returning to Flagstaff on the final leg of a two-week journey east, and yesterday's headwinds had been brutal.

"Actually, we really lucked out with the weather on such an extensive trip," said my wife, pouring coffee. "Although we missed Santa Fe last night because of headwinds, we made every other appointment in six states."

"Yup, and the hard part's over," I said, anticipating blue skies as usual over the desert Southwest. But I spoke too soon.

"There are showers across the Texas panhandle," said the weather briefer when I phoned, "and precipitation covers all of New Mexico from the northern mountains to the Mexican border. Expect widespread thunderstorms by mid-morning."

There are only two conduits for most light aircraft penetrating the front range of New Mexico's mountains: southeast of Albuquerque, and our desired route through Glorieta Pass. Beyond them we could possibly circumnavigate thunderstorms. But could we clear the passes?

"It's hard to imagine bad weather after this morning's glowing sunrise," said Jean when I broke the news over breakfast. But outside, dark clouds newly shrouded the rising sun, and light rain had begun to fall. Our only encouragement came from traveling west at this early hour of the day. With takeoff at 8 a.m. Central Time and Arizona effectively on Pacific Time, we'd gain two early-morning flight hours—and hopefully be home before the rain blossomed into thunderstorms.

Eyeing a patchwork of sun, sprinkles, and high clouds, Jean and I drove to the Dalhart airport. There, a lone songbird greeted us from atop the hangar. "Hopefully he's a good omen," said Jean. We packed the airplane and took flight into a paradise of showers, deep shadows pierced by vivid sunlight, and rainbows.

"This is gorgeous!" said Jean, but I was too apprehensive about what lay ahead to fully appreciate it.

"Are you aware of the weather across your planned route?" asked Albuquerque Center as we steered toward ominous skies ahead. Guided by our datalink weather display, we threaded rain showers toward Las Vegas, New Mexico. The rain ended 50 miles from Las Vegas, but more clouds shrouded the Sangre de Cristo Mountains beyond it.

"Is an instrument clearance available if we need it?" I asked the controller.

"It certainly is, providing you can climb to 12,500 feet between Las Vegas and Santa Fe."

"That'll work," I said. We carried oxygen and could drop back down to 11,000 feet beyond Santa Fe. Our datalink radar depicted just light rain ahead with a few moderate showers,

and the only lightning showed far to the south. After a hopeful start of 130 knots, however, our groundspeed sagged to the mid-80s nearing Las Vegas. As we climbed toward 12,500 feet approaching the pass, it dropped to a measly 57 knots.

"These winds are worse than yesterday's!" said Jean, referring to the gales that had grounded us the night before.

"Our speed should increase again beyond the pass," I replied, noting the acceleration of strong winds funneling through it. Just before reaching the clouds, we heard an aircraft report approaching Las Vegas.

"Say your flight conditions through Glorieta Pass," I asked.

"Just some light turbulence at 13,000 feet," came the answer. "The temperature was 1 degree C, and we got a trace of ice." Huh? Ice was possible at 12,500 feet? That changed everything. I informed Center that we'd remain clear of the clouds and descend to 8,500 to see if the pass was flyable visually underneath.

"If it isn't," offered the helpful controller, "I can take you on instruments around the south side of Sandia Peak at 10,000 feet; at that altitude the temperature should be well above freezing." Armed with that backup, I chopped power and spiraled downward between scattered clouds. With instrument charts at the ready, we trailed Interstate 25 into the pass.

"It's much better down here than it looked from above," said Jean. We easily cleared the pass to higher ceilings on the other side. But south of Santa Fe a new wall of clouds extended to the ground.

"Can we get our instrument flight clearance now?" I asked.

"You can shortly, after a jet departs Santa Fe," said the controller. While we awaited our clearance, he queried other aircraft to confirm above-freezing temperatures for our climb to 11,000 feet.

"Cleared to Flagstaff via direct Santa Fe, Victor-62 Gallup, Victor-291..." came the welcome news. Here among mountains one rarely files GPS direct—Victor airways guarantee terrain separation, radio communications, and the possibility of radar coverage.

"Yippee!" exclaimed Jean. "We're through the pass and headed for home!" Elated, I thanked the controller for his valuable assistance. After mostly clear sailing through the often cloud-shrouded East and Midwest, we next battled rain clouds over the normally sunny Southwest. Twenty minutes later, however, we burst unexpectedly from dark clouds into a sun-shimmered paradise of cottony cumulus, freshly flowing streams, and rain-sparkled rock.

"Talk about a *grand finale!*" said Jean. Excitedly, we swapped our camera back and forth. Over Gallup we encountered more broken clouds and light rain, but beneath us sunbeams crowned red-rock spires with golden haloes. We finally escaped the clouds for good over Arizona's Painted Desert, its enchanted terrain sprinkled with towering stone hoodoos and capped with a cobalt sky.

"Check out our groundspeed!" I said. For the first time in two days, a tailwind now urged us homeward. Humphreys Peak soon materialized on the horizon, and then in its shadow, our forested destination.

"Good ol' Flagstaff," said Jean, as we maneuvered for landing. "Today's flight was possibly the most spectacular we've ever made—but I'm ready to be home!"

Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His books include Flying Carpet, The Savvy Flight Instructor, The Turbine Pilot's Flight Manual, Job Hunting for Pilots, and You Can Fly! [Visit his Web site.](#)