



MCCARRAN International Airport provides a front-row seat to the Las Vegas Strip.

VIVA LAS VEGAS INTERNATIONAL!

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED AT AIRLINE AIRPORTS

You're cleared to land Runway 1 Left, reference the Airbus approaching the parallel runway," said the Las Vegas Tower controller. "Caution, wake turbulence." Eyebrows raised, Jean noted the altimeter. We'd just passed the numbers on downwind to McCarran International Airport, still at our last assigned altitude of 7,000 feet. That meant descending a vertical mile over the remainder of downwind, base, and final approach.

"Slow to minimum approach speed," added the controller. That was a relief since it's hard to keep pace with airline traffic on final. Slowing to the white airspeed arc, I dumped flaps and kicked rudder to enter an aggressive slip. We soon descended nearly 2,000 feet per minute. "Kinda fun to see those old glider-flying skills in action," said Jean. "But I'm glad neither of us has a cold!"

"A 360-degree turn on final is approved if you need it to lose altitude," offered the tower, too late for us to benefit by it. Instead I requested a long landing. We

met pavement a third of the way down the nearly two-mile-long runway.

"First time I've seen anyone slip 4,000 vertical feet in the traffic pattern," said Jean. "Nice job!" Along with that "attaboy," my dive-bomber approach was rewarded with a "view tiedown," mere yards from the Las Vegas Strip.

Lightplane pilots typically avoid airline airports like McCarran. They're usually wildly busy, complex to navigate, and expensive to visit. What's more, our speed disparity with the majority jet traffic can make us unwelcome visitors. Yet such air-

ports can be highly convenient for specific missions. In this case, Jean was speaking at a Las Vegas conference. Normally, I'd drop her at Henderson Executive Airport, easily accessed outside of Bravo airspace. But that's a half-hour drive from the Strip, and today I had an additional mission.

Joining Jean at the conference would be my sister Denise. Although we're close, she lives out East so I rarely see her. With Denise arriving midday by airline, it was a no-brainer convening at McCarran for lunch before I launched homeward.

This wouldn't be my first visit to an airline hub. I often do business and pick up airline passengers at Phoenix Sky Harbor. I treasure the memory of landing a Cessna 172 at Chicago's O'Hare during prime time. But I don't tackle such places without thorough homework. To prepare I reviewed wake turbulence avoidance procedures; studied McCarran's runway layout including "hot spots"; and noted my field destination so as to request a nearby runway and avoid miles of taxiing.

When possible, I file instrument flight plans to such places, especially inbound. An IFR traffic slot minimizes delays and eliminates stressful monitoring of Class B airspace boundaries. Still, my airline-airport motto is "expect the unexpected." On a previous McCarran visit I was assigned a published instrument departure—rare for light airplanes—and found myself scrambling to decipher it. So before embarking this time I studied likely departure procedures. I also allotted extra pretakeoff briefing time to accommodate the customary long list of big-airport notams (notices to airmen).

Inbound, Jean would help me read charts, tune frequencies, double-check

TRAVEL LOG: MCCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (LAS)		
Runways: 1L/19R, 8,985 X 150 feet; 1R/19L, 9,775 X 150 feet; 7L/25R, 14,510 by 150 feet; 7R/25L, 10,526 X 150 feet	Elevation: 2,181 feet Tower: 24 hours	Location: Five miles south of Las Vegas

clearances and compliance, scout for traffic, and navigate taxiways. (Outbound, unfortunately, I'd be on my own.)

It's wise to investigate major-airport fees in advance. Phoning ahead to Atlantic Aviation, I learned that our *Flying Carpet* day-visit would require either a \$60 ramp fee, or buying 15 gallons of fuel at \$2 over the going rate plus a \$15 "airport security fee." Either way, seeing my sister would cost \$50 to \$60 more than normal flight expenses, fairly typical for a major airport. Then again, Atlantic would retrieve Denise from the airline terminal and chauffeur the girls to their hotel for no additional charge (tips are appreciated). They also offered a crew car to drive to lunch.

Once aloft on the one-and-a-half hour flight from Flagstaff, I dialed up McCarran ATIS early and arranged my charts accordingly. Along with referencing multiple tower and ground frequencies, a detailed airport diagram is imperative for navigating complex taxi clearances in a place where busy controllers can rarely offer "progressive taxi" instructions. (I use a GPS tablet computer app that geolocates my field position on the chart.)

We experienced numerous frequency changes inbound to Las Vegas, and vectors over the airport to the other side. But thanks to careful planning my only surprise was the plummet to landing.

When it was time to leave, I radioed clearance for departure instructions before calling ground control for taxi. (No instrument departure procedure was assigned after all—just heading, altitude, and departure frequency.) En route to the runway I was advised to "monitor tower for takeoff clearance," long before getting there.

Four days later I retrieved Jean from Henderson. Despite similar distance and weather, my round-trip flight time was 35 minutes shorter than to McCarran. On the other hand, Jean got stiffed \$74 for the normally \$42 cab ride. Everything in Vegas is a gamble—so do your homework regardless of transportation mode. 🚗

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year. Visit his website (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com).
