



PLUS View the slideshow.

TENNIS TEAMMATES (left to right) Jean Brown, Jana Perpich, and Jenny Garcia at Albuquerque's Double Eagle II Airport. Old Acoma, "Sky City," a 1,000-year-old mesa-top Native American pueblo (opposite page).

"That storm will probably dissipate before getting here," she offered, "or change speed, or course." Clearly that was wishful thinking. Although now downgraded to a tropical storm, Odile barreled inexorably toward us. Even as it further weakened to a tropical depression, torrential rains were likely.

"But we could fly on instruments, right?" said Jean. That was indeed feasible, providing the freezing level exceeded minimum instrument altitudes of 11,000 to 12,000 feet along the mountainous route. Strong winds also could be hazardous, especially downwind of New Mexico's 11,305-foot Mount Taylor.

Each day the storm advanced closer, without changing course or potency. Two days before our planned departure, my friend Shari Meyer wrote from Northern California.

"Rarely must I cancel a flight due to weather," she said. "Ugh! Stupid Odile has ruined my plans to pick up my husband Ken in Arizona tomorrow." That got even Jean's attention, because Shari and Ken fly a highly capable Eclipse jet. With that, Jean and Jana finally acknowledged the likelihood of driving. Fortunately, we could postpone the final decision until departure morning.

Throughout Wednesday I monitored the weather. To our slight encouragement, the storm appeared to be steering slightly south of the expected track. "We'll be lucky to get an inch of rain," Lee Born announced disappointedly.

TENNISTIME AGAIN

THE POWER OF WISHFUL THINKING

Every aviator knows the pain of stressing about weather before important aerial journeys. It's become tradition for me to fly Jean to tennis regionals when her team wins their conference. Fortunately, the playoffs occur in late spring and early fall when good flying weather generally dominates the Southwest.

Jean's team was particularly strong this year, so with each successive win she'd more enthusiastically ask, "You will fly us to Albuquerque if we qualify, right?" Each time I assured her that nothing in my universe could possibly be more important. Accordingly she solicited fellow players to join us, collected their weights, briefed them on baggage limits, and arranged for driving teammates to accommodate overflow gear. When Jean's team indeed made the cut, we began casually watching the weather.

You may be surprised to learn that hurricanes, or at least their remnants, occasionally visit sunny Arizona. In the past month two of them, Marie and Norbert, had arrived from Mexico's Pacific coast, dropping precipitation, including the largest daily rainfall ever recorded in normally bone-dry Phoenix. Following two such rare occurrences in one season, I never imagined we'd see more.

But a week before Jean's regionals, Hurricane Odile steered our way from Baja California. Jean and I watched in disbelief as local meteorologist Lee Born projected the storm's track northeastward through Arizona and New Mexico. "This could be another major precipitation event," he said, "with a high likelihood we'll benefit by more rain." Jean and I saw a disrupted tennis trip in the colorful weather blob projected to engulf the two states.

By *Flying Carpet*, Albuquerque is an easy two hours from Flagstaff, meaning I could deliver Jean and fellow player Jana Perpich fresh for play Thursday morning. Flying would return them and teammate Jenny Garcia home by midday Sunday, in time to recuperate before starting the workweek. As Jean observed, "The tournament's grueling enough without driving five hours each way!" Besides, I treasure any opportunity to fulfill Jean's personal missions in the airplane she helps support.

But forecasts still showed the storm inundating central New Mexico. On top of it, Jean seemed to be getting the flu. Between concerns about her health and poor flying weather, I was a bundle of nerves.

Still, I preflighted our portable oxygen system, confirmed rental car availability at Gallup—halfway in case we couldn't make Albuquerque—and packed my travel bag in the event I got stuck somewhere. Knowing we almost certainly couldn't fly, I skipped checking weather that evening. Better to face whatever reality Thursday morning than worry all night. I awoke before dawn, and with pounding pulse queried my smartphone.

"I feel much better today," said Jean, sleepily. "How's the weather?" Flagstaff was clear—not too surprising given the storm's last projected course. Winslow was also clear. Heh! Gallup and Grants, New Mexico, featured good visual




conditions under high clouds. And amazingly, so did both Albuquerque airports! Mountain obscurity was possible over northern New Mexico, and Odile's remnants swirled closer than I'd like to the south. But a 15,000-foot freezing level meant we could safely file an instrument flight plan if necessary.

"Call Jana," I said. "We're launching for Albuquerque!" We soon cruised sparkling skies cleansed by Odile's rains, savoring sights of Arizona's Painted Desert and New Mexico's Zuni Mountains. We'd

just circled Old Acoma "Sky City," a 1,000-year-old mesa-top Native American pueblo, when Jana excitedly noted a more relevant landmark.

"Look!" she said, "A tennis court in the middle of nowhere!" Shortly after the girls photographed that curiosity, I dropped them at Albuquerque's Double Eagle II Airport, then steered happily homeward under puffy fair-weather clouds.

Rarely, over decades of piloting, have I seen a dead-on approaching storm system deviate far enough overnight to change a veritable no-go into an easy VFR flight. Maybe wishful thinking works after all! Now, if the weather would just oblige for retrieving the players on Sunday. 🏏

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