



GREG BROWN must pack for multiple climates flying diverse Arizona: Flagstaff parka and Tucson shorts for a single 90-minute flight.
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of the rugged Superstition and Mazatzal mountains over lower terrain to minimize bumps and headwinds until approaching high-elevation Flagstaff. As we continued northward, snow showers appeared beyond Sedona, but Flagstaff improved to 9 miles visibility. But when we climbed to 8,500 feet to clear the Coconino Plateau, our groundspeed slowed to a leisurely 74 knots—a 65-knot headwind. Apart from occasional teeth-rattling jolts, however, turbulence was surprisingly light.

Flagstaff's recorded weather updated as we approached, touting clear skies but 28-knot winds gusting to 42 down the runway, with "swirling winds and gusty conditions reported on short final for Runway 3." "It's unlikely we'll land here," I told Jean. We had already prepared emotionally to divert 50 miles east to Winslow, which featured benign 11-knot winds plus lodging and dining at the renowned La Posada Hotel.

Winds aside, the day's surreal beauty proved strangely calming. Flagstaff and the San Francisco Peaks sparkled with new-fallen snow, while sun-sprinkled snow showers lingered beyond. I radioed Flagstaff Tower inbound, announcing our planned Winslow diversion unless the approach proved unexpectedly smooth. With my landing clearance, the controller reported winds down the runway at 28 gusting to 35—still powerful, but slightly less threatening in maximum speed and gust factor.

Turning final, I was surprised to experience a smooth, stabilized approach. Down I flew, carrying partial flaps with knife's-edge readiness to go around because something bad was surely imminent. But other than the illusion of moving pavement from blowing snow, nothing happened. We touched down effortlessly at a crawl, because of the headwind.

"You made that look easy," said the tower controller, adding, "No one wants to go to Winslow."

Having skipped breakfast in the rush, we were suddenly starving. We stowed the *Flying Carpet*, and as our car warmed up I texted my CFI buddy Freddie Gibbs about today's hellacious winds.

"How many of inches of runway did you use for landing?" he asked.

"Two or three," I replied. Then we drove home to savor omelets and a hot pot of coffee. **FT**

INCHES OF RUNWAY

Wind rarely seems as threatening as other weather when flight planning, because you can't see it. But as every pilot learns, wind is real; it can be helpful or hazardous, and often portends changing conditions.

We'd planned to spend Christmas in Tucson, but holiday snow was forecast, urged along by a powerful cold front. Indeed, Christmas dawned snowing and blustery. Surprisingly, Flagstaff's forecast called for midmorning clearing. Sure enough, at precisely 10 a.m. sun warmed our yard, blue sky pierced the clouds, and ceilings rose along our route. So we packed and took off.

Ceilings again lowered as we flew south but so did the terrain, so we cruised comfortably to Tucson for a family holiday dinner. Based on a sunny forecast, we planned to brunch and hike the next day before heading home.

The next morning, however, we were wakened by a smartphone weather alert. Despite yesterday's clear-skies forecast, Flagstaff now expected morning snow flurries, followed by northeasterly 35-knot wind gusts tumbling from the mountains. What's more, 40-knot headwinds would plague our normal 8,500-foot cruising altitude. I suggested staying another night, but Jean wanted to return for the neighborhood holiday party. That meant departing immediately in hopes of beating the winds home.

Canceling the day's plans, we scrambled into clear skies at 8:30 a.m. Ninety minutes away, Flagstaff reported one to three miles visibility in snow showers, but my main concern was beating the wind. Five hours of fuel offered plenty of fair-weather alternates.

Despite a rough ride, by halfway home Flagstaff featured 17-knot winds gusting to 28 knots directly down Runway 3, well within my comfort range. I deviated west