



**THE ICONIC "TAJ MAHAL,"** Randolph Air Force Base Building 100, in San Antonio, Texas.

# MAKE WAY FOR GRANDPARENTS

## FLYING MILES AND MILES OF TEXAS

**J**ean and I were still in bed when the phone rang Sunday morning. “Dad! Mom! Desi’s in labor—we’re at the hospital! Hop in the airplane whenever you’re ready, and fly over to San Antonio!” Not expecting our grandson for several more days, I hadn’t yet planned the flight. And thunder rumbled outside our window.

“Let’s try to get out this afternoon!” said Jean, excited. “I’ll pack a meal while you check weather.” It turned out that Arizona’s storms were dissipating; southern New Mexico was clear, as was our route across Texas. However, Tropical Storm Ernesto barreled ominously across the Gulf of Mexico toward San Antonio.

While we could safely navigate most of our route, our destination was in question. Add southeasterly headwinds and we faced a fuel stop plus a possible overnight. Normally those wouldn’t be problems, but departing midday across two time zones meant any landings would be after 6 p.m. Imagine flying the distance from New York

to Tampa, and crossing only one major town. Along this entire sparsely populated route, only El Paso International Airport would be attended on a Sunday evening.

“Come see us!” said the attendant when I phoned El Paso’s Cutter Aviation. “We’ll drive you into town for dinner if you like, or get you a deal on a hotel room. And we offer a weekend avgas discount for transient pilots.” We’d refuel at El Paso, and depending on circumstances, remain overnight or continue on to San Antonio.

“We’re off at 2020Z for KELP,” I texted Austin before departing Flagstaff. An hour later we skimmed 10,000-foot peaks along the Arizona-New Mexico border.

With little radio traffic over this remote area, I solicited weather updates. Happily, Ernesto had stalled, clearing our way to San Antonio.

Three hours from Flagstaff, mountains yielded to desert. Funneling us between restricted airspace and Mexico’s border, El Paso Approach vectored us around the Franklin Mountains to land. I was paying our fuel bill when Austin’s text message arrived: “A healthy baby boy!”

“Our first grandchild!” I blurted joyfully to the girl behind the counter.

“Shall we continue on tonight, Jean? Or stay over?” I asked. Jean voted to continue. That still left concerns about weather, fatigue, or mechanical problems requiring us to land at some unattended airport over the remaining 450 nm to San Antonio, much of which would be flown at night. I wanted at least one predictable haven offering fuel, food, and lodging.

After several fruitless calls, I reached a friendly fellow at Fort Stockton-Pecos County Airport regarding after-hours access to town. “No problem!” he offered. “I’ll leave you the courtesy-car keys.” Similar concerns marked our rural destination.

“Can we hitch a ride from New Braunfels Airport at 2300 local?” I texted Austin.

“Desi’s parents will pick you up,” he replied. Our bases now covered, we launched eastward from El Paso.

“I saw miles and miles of Texas...” beamed the satellite radio when Jean turned it on to pass the time. “Ever noticed how every other country song refers to Texas?” she observed. “Seems fitting, with more than half our trip over it!”

### TRAVEL LOG: NEW BRAUNFELS REGIONAL AIRPORT (BAZ)

**Runways:** 13/31, 5,352 by 100 feet; 17/35, 5,364 by 100 feet

**Elevation:** 651 feet  
**Tower:** 7 a.m.-7 p.m. daily

**Location:** four miles east of New Braunfels

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Below us were endless empty barrens. “How do the cattle get there to make those tracks?” we wondered. Seven hours over wilderness with radios largely silent reassure you that the world’s not entirely overcrowded—yet. Following a stunning Lone Star sunset, we were swallowed by a sobering blanket of black, black night.

“Do you find this darkness eerie?” Jean asked as I navigated by instruments.

“Sure do,” I replied, cycling the landing light to ensure we hadn’t entered a cloud. “This is why I keep night current—you never know when you’ll need it.” Our datalink weather display suggested precipitation ahead, but both ATC and Flight Watch reported only clear skies. A shrinking temperature/dew-point spread at New Braunfels now raised the specter of fog. Fortunately, San Antonio International remained a favorable alternate.

Even San Antonio’s welcoming glow four hours after takeoff didn’t end our adventure—psychedelic mists filled our lights approaching New Braunfels Airport. After taxiing blindly seeking tiedowns in the inky blackness, we secured the *Flying Carpet* by flashlight, and waited under a solitary bulb until our ride could find us.

Nothing could top the following days celebrating our new grandson, but an additional kick remained. I’ve always revered Desi’s hometown of San Antonio, both for its vibrant history and proud Mexican flavor—and because I myself was born there.

“Care to join me running errands at Randolph [Air Force Base]?” asked Austin. Four generations of family and flying trod the grounds where my father was stationed when I was born, just a few miles from the latest baby Brown’s birthplace.

For the return flight we launched early and, urged along by tailwinds, made it home nonstop. The only weather proved to be a solitary thunderstorm atop Flagstaff. “Don’t worry,” said the tower when I radioed apprehensively 20 miles out. “The cell has drifted off the airport.” Clearly, it was making way for grandparents! 🍷

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

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