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MASSIVE THUNDERSTORMS crown the Sacramento Mountains northeast of Alamogordo, New Mexico (note malpais volcanic flows in foreground).

Additional thunderstorms now began forming west of Albuquerque, but fortunately remained north of our route.

By the time we turned south toward Alamogordo, however, rainshowers over the Sacramento Mountains had intensified into a gargantuan windshield-filling anvil. Our weather display depicted the evil-looking red and yellow cluster growing rapidly just east of our route. If only we could pass before they blossomed or moved into our path.

Also on the display, I noted opposite-direction traffic approaching head on through the corridor at our altitude of 9,500 feet. Our courses appeared perfectly aligned, suggesting that like us, the pilot was navigating direct between Alamogordo and JUPTR. Having been dropped from flight following at JUPTR by Albuquerque Center, and as yet unable to contact Holloman Approach, I tried radioing the approaching airplane's depicted N-number on Holloman's frequency. Sure enough, the pilot answered—he flew another Skylane and was most gracious.

"We plan to climb to 11,500 feet, so why don't I do that right now?" he offered. It was no close call, but without our traffic display it might have been. This raises a little-discussed downside to GPS's amazing accuracy. Previous aerial navigation methods were inaccurate enough that even airplanes passing on the same route and altitude were unlikely to run into each other. But given GPS's accuracy of mere feet, conflicting aircraft are more likely to collide. In fact, jet captains on non-radar transoceanic routes now can select a randomized right-side course offset called SLOP (strategic lateral offset procedure) to reduce collision exposure if one aircraft is

TIGHT QUARTERS

ATTENDING A PIRATE POOL PARTY

Atending a child's fourth birthday party might sound unimportant, but Jean and I felt high emotional stakes in flying to Alamogordo, New Mexico, for the occasion. Our son and daughter-in-law, Austin and Desi, and their children had recently moved there from overseas. That made our grandson's "pirate pool party" our first family celebration together in six years.

Alamogordo is a nine-hour drive from Flagstaff, but less than three hours by *Flying Carpet*. Perusing the charts, I was pleased to find manageable terrain en route. However, a 140-mile thicket of restricted airspace encompasses nearby White Sands Missile Range and Holloman Air Force Base, blocking general aviation access from the west. High mountains and additional military airspace also limit access from the east.

That leaves two flying routes from Arizona, neither direct. Shortest is to fly east beyond Socorro to the JUPTR waypoint, then steer 90 miles south between military airspace and the Sacramento Mountains. The longer alternative is to fly southeast to El Paso over high and remote terrain, then thread a narrow 60-mile corridor northward between restricted

areas. Both routes are comfortably flyable in good weather, but given such tight quarters, each can be blocked over many miles by a single thunderstorm.

Sure enough, thunderstorms were forecast on travel day, so we launched into the sunrise hoping to beat them. We'd hardly leveled out of Flagstaff when I noted rainshowers already forming in the corridor north of Alamogordo.

Jean and I discussed altering course via El Paso, but changed our minds when we heard ATC issuing airline holds because of unforecast mega-storms in central Arizona. Clearly, continuing on our northern route was safest. The terrain is lower in that direction, there are more places to land—and with the party not until the next day, we could easily overnight somewhere if necessary.

at the wrong altitude or climbing through another's. We, too, are wise to fly slightly off-altitude, or offset right of course when prudent, to reduce collision exposure on heavily traveled point-to-point routes. This is especially true in nonradar environments where neither ATC nor cockpit displays can fully monitor traffic.

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That thunderstorm complex we'd worried about for hours remained dramatically but safely to our left as we passed. Then Holloman Air Force Base appeared ahead, and beyond it, New Mexico's renowned White Sands National Monument. Holloman and Alamogordo feature similarly oriented runways only


six miles apart, so pilots must be careful not to land at the wrong airport. We soon touched down at Alamogordo-White Sands Regional Airport—which, despite some rundown buildings and derelict patrol aircraft, featured comfortable, modern Exile Aviation, where the good folks stowed our *Flying Carpet* in the hangar.

By noon we cuddled our grandkids around Desi and Austin's pool, and ogled F-16s and gliders on tow circling to the backdrop of that seemingly ever-present distant thunderstorm. Alamogordo turns out to be a friendly desert town with lots to see and do nearby. There's also an inescapable military presence; U.S. High-

way 70 to Las Cruces closes for hours at a time when the missile range is active.

At the pool party, Jean thrilled in helping Desi decorate our grandson's birthday cake with pirate paraphernalia, while I distributed squirt guns and inflatable swords to the squealing guests. Among many reasons to fly, visiting people you love ranks high on the list.

We easily bypassed another cell topping the Sacramento Mountains when departing Sunday morning. Thunderstorms turn out to be regular features of Alamogordo's summer skyline that only occasionally drift off their resident mountains to clobber the town. Armed with that local knowledge, we look forward to often repeating this journey in the future. 🐉

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