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"EASY IFR" over West Texas (left). Wall mural at San Antonio's Mi Tierra restaurant (below).



EASY IFR

FLYING LOW CEILINGS AND RAIN

We awoke in San Antonio, Texas, to low ceilings and steady rain. At bedtime last night, a massive stalled cold front curved eastward from El Paso in a great northerly arc to Canada. Today's forecast called for inches of regional rain, thunderstorms, and flooding.

Following a week touring Texas, Jean and I were eager to return home to Arizona; instead, it appeared we'd be stuck here for days. Futilely, we'd hoped the front would accelerate past during the night, leaving clear skies and tailwinds behind it. Now, resisting the urge to roll over and sleep, I fumbled through a weather briefing. Considering the gloom outside, the news was surprisingly good.

Yes, the front remained stationary as forecast, but thunderstorms no longer threatened. And while a few stations along our route reported ceilings below 500 feet, most were "easy IFR" at 800 to 1,500 feet. Finally, the freezing level was high enough to relegate any icing threat above our planned altitudes. While it meant battling 500 miles of clouds and rain, it was entirely feasible to fly to El Paso on instruments. Beyond there, New Mexico was forecast to clear by afternoon. If so, we'd proceed visually through the mountains

to Flagstaff. If not, a long westerly detour would circumvent them IFR. Either way, we had an instrument ticket home!

Where I live in sunny Arizona, pilots spend far more time practicing instruments than cloud flying, all to prepare for occasions like this. Instrument sorties earlier this trip had confirmed my skills and equipment were up to snuff. Providing the weather remained near forecast, we should make El Paso without difficulty.

In cold rain at San Antonio's Stinson Municipal Airport, we fueled the *Flying Carpet*, stowed our drenched cockpit cover, and loaded our soaked bags. My one concern about facing hours of rain was that the *Flying Carpet* had once sustained window leaks. The windshield had long ago been replaced and the rear window resealed, but following years in bone-dry Arizona, new leaks seemed entirely possible in a continuous downpour. Any thought of water dripping on radios while

in the clouds was unsettling, at best. Cowering under a dripping wing, I phoned for one last weather update.

"The heavier precip ends just west of San Antonio," said the briefer to my relief. Even so, Jean and I cached rags within reach, draped a blanket and plastic under the rear window, and pledged to land at any sign of leaks. Then we launched into clouds and headwinds for El Paso. Sure enough, within minutes after takeoff we exited the rain, and soon found ourselves skimming cloud tops in and out of sunshine at 6,000 feet. Flying instruments rarely requires endless hours in solid clouds; more often you transit to warm sun on top, coast between layers, or glimpse the ground through stunning cloudscapes.

When rain rematerialized on our data-link weather display, I compared notes with Flight Watch radar and, collaborating with air traffic control, detoured south toward Del Rio to avoid it. That put us back "in the soup" for a while, but with a smooth and uneventful ride.

"What's that whining noise?" asked Jean. I laughed. There's nothing like the whistle of wet Cessna wing struts to renew your relationship with clouds. No longer threatened by weather or leaks, I found myself tremendously enjoying this extended instrument journey—I rarely


employ such skills anymore beyond piercing shallow coastal California marine layers. Moreover, Jean and I could now relax and talk. Upon arriving in San Antonio two days ago, we'd enjoyed a pleasant few hours sightseeing the Alamo and historic San Fernando Cathedral. Yesterday during Jean's meetings, I'd toured La Villita, San Antonio's original Spanish settlement, and the renowned River Walk.

But most memorable for both of us was dining at 73-year-old Mi Tierra Tex-Mex restaurant with *compadres* Joe and Gloria Llanes. Along with great company and cuisine, the decor was unforgettable. Tinsel and foil *piñatas* shimmered colorfully from the ceilings. *Toreador* costumes decorated the walls. *Mariachis* serenaded diners, and patrons queued for treats in the bakery. Best of all were fabulous wall murals populated by famous Spaniards, Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans through history. Just as our previous destination of Fort Worth reveres cowboys, San Antonio celebrates its Hispanic heritage. That's delightfully apparent at Mi Tierra.

We'd now journeyed halfway to El Paso at 6,000 feet, but continuing westward toward the mountains necessitated carefully monitoring our charts and eventually climbing to clear rising terrain. From here we'd need 10,000 feet to proceed direct. To avoid ascending unnecessarily into increasing headwinds, I investigated minimum en route altitudes along nearby airways. Sure enough, a worthy alternative paralleled our route. I negotiated direct Fort Stockton, then Victor 222 to El Paso, at 8,000 feet.

Nearly four hours after takeoff, we descended through clearing skies on an instrument approach to El Paso International Airport. We'd hardly landed when Jean noted lingering mountaintop clouds to the west. But by the time we had topped our fuel tanks and coffee thermos, they'd dissipated. Three long flight hours remained, but from here the way was clear to Flagstaff and home. 🌀

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