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A FIRST GLIMPSE of holiday sun illuminates Roosevelt Lake, viewed over Arizona's Mazatzal Mountains.

nearby peaks, or irregular—suggesting ridges dangerously hidden by clouds. Such calculations are tricky in the mountains, because you must integrate airport elevations with above-ground-level ceiling reports to determine above-mean-sea-level cloud bases. Flagstaff, elevation 7,000 feet, reported 2,400 overcast. Sedona, Prescott, and Payson, all around 5,000-feet elevation, reported 5,000 broken. And 1,500-foot Scottsdale showed 7,500 broken.

Adding each airport's elevation to its agl cloud height suggested a relatively uniform 9,000- to 10,000-feet-msl ceiling throughout the area. That's above the intervening terrain, so I reasoned I should have no difficulty flying to Tucson, which was still clear.

However, there was enough doubt about returning home that afternoon to cause worry, especially given Jean's medical mission the following morning. That led to a harried conversation about whether to take off and risk missing my mother-in-law's hospital release, or stay home and forgo the family Christmas.

Jean suggested we head for Tucson and not attempt to return home that day. Our host identified some hotel vacancies, so we booked a room and hurriedly packed. If blue skies prevailed the next day as forecast, I'd drop Jean in Phoenix on my way home; if the weather proved unflyable, she'd rent a car and drive there from Tucson. This solution may sound obvious, but in the stress of the moment and not being what we'd planned, it required a mental adjustment. When you really want to fly somewhere, plan one leg at a time, and worry about the return trip later.

By the time we preflighted, clouds were darkening over Flagstaff and snowflakes

TUCSON FOR CHRISTMAS

SEEKING HOLIDAY SUNSHINE

Most Christmases my former sister-in-law Lesley hosts a gathering at her Tucson vacation home. Jean and I always try to attend, although December is a month in which Arizona weather sometimes raises an ugly head. Factor in short winter days, a dearth of Tucson hotel rooms during “snowbird” season, and the alternative of an eight-hour round-trip drive, and sometimes it's just not feasible to go. Weather permitting, however, it makes a great aerial day trip. The 90-minute flight allows us to arrive mid-morning, enjoy family company, and return home around sunset.

This year we were particularly eager to go because all my Chicago nieces and nephews would be coming, several with spouses and girlfriends—and two in their first year of college. It would be a rare treat to see them.

We also faced an unrelated mission the day after Christmas. Following a debilitating fall, Jean's mother was to be released from a Phoenix hospital. After returning from Tucson Christmas night, I was to drop Jean at Glendale Municipal Airport the next morning to assist with her mom's transition home.

On Christmas Eve we learned that a Central Rockies winter storm system was to brush Northern Arizona on Christmas Day. Despite a chance of snow flurries, I wasn't concerned. Stationary high

pressure generally deflects such storms north, accounting for Arizona's typically benign winter weather. Ceilings usually remain high in these cases, and just south of Flagstaff the terrain drops into normally clear warm-weather country. Sure enough, all stations from Sedona to Tucson forecast blue skies.

We awoke Christmas morning, however, to a lower-than-expected overcast shrouding northern Arizona, raising concerns of mountain obscuration by ice-filled clouds. Accumulating snow was now forecast for Flagstaff, with precipitation to spread southward throughout the state.

The first question was whether we could safely fly to Tucson. I surveyed area weather stations to determine if ceilings were uniformly flyable above

sprinkled the *Flying Carpet*. Given the great distances between weather stations in the Southwest, we prepared ourselves to return in case of surprises. Once aloft, however, we found ourselves under a leaden but uniform cloud blanket, with scattered snowshowers but no obscuration.

"We're on our way," said Jean, taking a celebratory sip of coffee. But that enthusiasm proved premature. Southbound, we were surprised by lowering ceilings. Normally Arizona's central and southern deserts feature far better weather than its northern mountains; if you can safely depart Flagstaff, there usually are sparkling skies just 20 miles south. This morning, however, that was reversed. Nearing Phoenix, we descended beneath ice-laden clouds. There was no danger, but the downward trend reinforced our decision not to return home that afternoon.

What's more, wicked winds aloft far exceeded the forecast. A straight-line course would take us downwind of the Mazatzal Mountains over Roosevelt Lake. But flying the lee of 7,500-foot peaks in strong winds invited discomfort, if not dangerous turbulence. While skirting them on the upwind side, our spirits leapt at the first glimpse of holiday sunshine.

"What a relief that we booked a room," said Jean when we finally emerged into still-fair skies southeast of Phoenix. "Now we can enjoy our visit worry-free." Sure enough, despite gathering clouds we spent a pleasurable Christmas Day hiking and dining with family, and lounged that night in the hotel hot tub.

The next morning dawned clear, and we launched for Glendale Municipal buoyed by meeting our schedule and sightseeing a new route. My first approach to Glendale, around Phoenix Class B from the south, offered new planning challenges—but I dropped Jean and returned home to Flagstaff uneventfully. Yes, there'd been a bit of stress beforehand, but what fun, celebrating Christmas in Tucson! ☺

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