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**APPROACH TO RUNWAY 9**, Telluride Airport, with ski slopes visible at right. The town lies in the canyon beyond.

# SKITELLURIDE!

## MOUNTAIN FLYING ADVENTURE

**F**inally, we were on our way. With skis, boots, and homemade chili shoehorned behind us, we soared over the ancient Hopi mesas, isolated Navajo Nation ranches with their eight-sided hogans, Black Mesa’s snow-frosted forests, and the red barrens of Southeastern Utah. Just days earlier, Steve and Molly Palley had invited us for a ski weekend at their Telluride condo. Their car would be full for the five-hour drive from Flagstaff, but if we cared to fly...

Telluride! The name quickens the hearts of skiers and pilots alike. Renowned for superb skiing and funky festivals, Telluride also hosts the nation’s highest commercial airport, perched at 9,070 feet in a dead-end canyon ringed by rugged “fourteeners.”

A diehard skier, Jean jumped at the Palleys’ invitation. But I dared agree only conditionally—homework and perfect weather would be required to tackle this notoriously challenging airport.

Pilots must be well-versed in mountain-flying techniques before attempting such destinations: Lean the fuel mixture before takeoff; accelerate to climb speed in ground effect; “fly the numbers,” as there’s

little horizon reference; cross ridges at an angle; and, especially, assess wind flow over terrain to predict and avoid dangerous downdrafts and turbulence.

Our nonturbocharged *Flying Carpet* needed to be well below maximum weight to safely take off and climb out of Telluride Regional Airport. That meant packing light and loading no more fuel than necessary. Fortunately, the precipitous dropoff from Runway 27 ruled out takeoff obstacles. To ensure adequate performance, I’d flight test the airplane’s climb rate above 9,000 feet before departing home.

Next, I phoned a seasoned Colorado flight instructor for airport-specific advice. Hearing my home airport is

7,000-foot-elevation Flagstaff, he said, “You’ll be fine flying into Telluride. It’s the uninitiated flatland pilots who worry me. As usual you should scout the nontowered airport before landing—both for traffic and to identify lower-terrain outs in case of go around, traffic avoidance, or poor after-takeoff climb. You know your groundspeed will be faster than usual at that altitude, right? Remember to maintain airspeed on approach.”

“Do you land on Runway 27 when there’s a westerly wind?” I asked after confirming the canyon was wide enough for circling the airport.

“Not if I can help it. I tried it once, but didn’t enjoy it,” he said. Pilots prefer to land east toward the mountains and depart west away from them, even if it means a slight tailwind.

I also confirmed parking availability. Given single-digit nighttime temperatures, I was pleased to learn that Telluride offers engine preheats, tie-down electrical outlets, and hangar availability.

Finally today, we were aloft. Off our left wing, Monument Valley’s spires pierced the horizon, while majestic Shiprock sailed New Mexico’s high desert to our right.

“Colorado!” said Jean, pointing to the 14,000-foot snow-capped San Juan Mountains towering ahead. We climbed to 11,500 feet nearing the Cones VOR. That name seemed senseless until we rubbed elbows with two 12,000-foot peaks: Lone Cone and Little Cone. From there we steered up the San Miguel River Canyon toward Telluride, verifying our navigation with GPS terrain mapping to avoid flying up the wrong canyon.

Thanks to light winds at Telluride, our landing proved exciting but relatively

### TRAVEL LOG: TELLURIDE REGIONAL (TEX)

**Runways:** 9/27; 7,011 by 100 feet  
**Elevation:** 9,070 feet  
**Phone:** 970-728-8600

**Location:** Five miles west of Telluride  
**Note:** Rising terrain all quad-

rants; airport on 1,000-foot mesa; strong vertical turbulence in area of mesa edge.

JEAN BROWN

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routine. The bigger issue turned out to be air traffic. After we entered the canyon, a Cessna Citation jet reported inbound 10 miles behind us. Behind it followed a turboprop regional airliner.

“You’re on our traffic display,” said the Citation pilot. “Continue inbound and we’ll scoot past you.” We’d stabilized on final when he reported nearby, so Jean and I craned our necks and climbed back above the 10,500-foot pattern altitude until the jet materialized on base leg ahead and below us. Sharing this narrow canyon with faster traffic and little maneuvering room requires caution, especially with aircraft taking off and landing in opposing directions. We landed comfortably on the 7,100-foot runway, even with a 20-percent-faster-than-sea-level touchdown speed plus a slight tailwind.

“No big deal,” said Jean. “All that planning paid off!” Although FlyTelluride’s modest ramp bustled with jets and turboprops, the staff welcomed us warmly. Few piston airplanes were parked here, but airport manager Rich Nuttall said they’re relatively common. “Skylanes like yours are frequent visitors; 172s arrive occasionally, and I remember one daring soul showing up in a stock Cessna 150.”

Jean, Molly, and Steve hit the slopes the next morning, while I hiked up the canyon. Unfortunately, however, we were destined to leave a day early to avoid an approaching snowstorm.

With calm winds and warmer-than-usual temperatures for this time of year, we sent Jean’s skis home with the Palleys to lighten the airplane, and loaded only five additional gallons of fuel. Then we rolled sluggishly down the runway and watched the land plummet beneath us into the canyon.

“I wish we could’ve skied another day,” said Jean as we rounded Lone Cone toward lower country and home. “But guess what! Molly’s invited me back in two weeks to join the girls for a three-day ski course!” No wonder she was beaming. 🍷

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