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OCEANSIDE BEACH and Pier, California, viewed from the Oceanside Airport (Bob Maxwell Memorial Airfield) noise abatement departure.

NOTHING SHORT OF MAGIC

FROM SNOWY PINES TO SWAYING PALMS

Never does the *Flying Carpet* seem more aptly named than when journeying from snowy mountain Flagstaff to sunny Southern California. It's nothing short of magical to depart snowy pines and alight two and a half hours later amid swaying beachfront palms. Our neighbors Tim and Hedy Thomas had invited us for a weekend at their seaside rental condo, and for the first time we'd land at Oceanside Airport (Bob Maxwell Memorial Airfield).

Although Oceanside's 2,700-foot runway is plenty long for a Cessna Skylane, it snuggles among hills, so there'd be no room for sloppiness. Instructor Fred Gibbs recently admonished me for approaching a little hot, a habit developed to counter Flagstaff's gusty winds. Shorter runways demand precise flying speeds, so I polished my short-field technique before our trip. Our destination's 28-foot elevation would further shorten our landing by lowering our touchdown groundspeed 10 knots compared to what I'm used to at 7,000-foot Flagstaff.

Parking can be limited at Southern California's busy airports, so I phoned ahead. "There's plenty of room: four transient tiedowns plus two more for overflow,"

airport manager Dennis Easto said. I was intrigued that six parking spots should be "plenty" in such a congested region.

We launched equipped for three climates. While shorts and swimsuits filled our luggage, the back seat brimmed with winter and desert survival gear for any unscheduled landing. When the snowy Colorado Plateau and Bradshaw Mountains yielded to the parched Mojave Desert, we shed coats and opened air vents. Ninety minutes later we descended over Palomar Mountain into a green ocean paradise peppered with fuchsia flowers.

"You can smell the sea breeze from the cockpit!" Jean said, as we rubbed elbows with famed Palomar Observatory. It wasn't easy spotting the runway nestled

among hills along Highway 76. Hearing my pattern radio announcements, the pilot of a skydiving plane high overhead held jumpers until we landed. Mindful of the rapidly approaching departure-end hill, I skimmed passing autos on short final and touched down precisely on the numbers.

Oceanside proved to be an intimate small-town airport plunked in the middle of bustling Southern California. The transient tiedowns were full, so I intercepted Dennis on his riding mower for parking directions. An hour later we strolled sun-splashed sands with Tim and Hedy. For two delightful days we dined *al fresco*, sipped wine under seaside sunsets, and slept to the soothing sounds of surf. Dry weather was forecast all weekend, so we were surprised when dark clouds sprinkled the beach Saturday evening.

What'll that moisture do when it hits the mountains east of here? I wondered. Sure enough, light showers enveloped western Arizona when we awoke Sunday morning. On the positive side, all the airports along our route reported ceilings at or above 9,000 feet msl. That might mean circumnavigating a few mountains, but overall it shouldn't be a problem flying visually underneath. If we didn't like what we saw, we'd land at Lake Havasu City, or Prescott. We decided to depart early to avoid pushing sunset in less than clear skies.

Along with the surrounding hills, Oceanside is bounded to the north by Camp Pendleton's restricted area, and on the south by busy McClellan-Palomar Airport. When I asked a local pilot for Runway 24 departure tips, he directed us to the airport's noise-abatement brochure. Being good neighbors is important at any airport to maintain our friends on the ground. Oceanside, however, has endured

repeated closure threats from noise-sensitive neighbors, so following procedures is critical to its continued existence.

After takeoff, we threaded the San Luis Rey riverbed to the shoreline as prescribed, savored overhead views of Oceanside Pier while paralleling the beach to the harbor, and turned right downwind departure northeastward.

Beyond Thermal we settled above a thin, broken cloud layer at 9,500 feet. It evaporated over the Colorado River but rematerialized beyond. With high ceilings still reported ahead, we intended to drop beneath the thin undercast; however, it appeared lower than expected. Then a higher overcast sandwiched us between layers in good visual conditions.

“Should we continue?” asked Jean.

“Not without an instrument clearance,” I said. “If the undercast closes beneath us we’ll need an approach to land.” I contacted Albuquerque Center for a “pop-up” clearance.

“You’re cleared direct to Flagstaff at 11,000 feet,” the controller replied. Although the freezing level was forecast above 12,000 feet, there were no confirming pilot reports. If ice threatened, we’d backtrack to still-clear Lake Havasu City, steer south toward clear skies and lower terrain, or descend for an instrument approach into Prescott.

Entering clouds, Jean and I monitored outside air temperature and scanned the struts and fuel vent tubes for ice. Fortunately, nothing formed. Passing Prescott we emerged again between layers, and booked a GPS approach into Flagstaff. We broke out over a frozen, wooded landscape far different than the sunny beaches we’d departed.

“That was educational,” said Jean after landing. “Although the airports along our route reported good weather, the clouds were lower between them.” True, and nothing beats the thrill of instrument flying to crown a beach weekend with good friends. 🍷

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