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**CALIFORNIA'S OCEANSIDE MUNICIPAL AIRPORT** (lower left) lies just up the San Luis Rey River from its namesake town, beach, and pier.

# SANTA ANA WINDS

## THE PRICE OF ADVENTURE

**L**et's face it, piloting isn't for everyone. Flying is as much about adventure as it is about transportation. Jean and I could drive to Southern California for our annual seaside vacation, as others do. Yes, it's a dull eight-hour trek that requires negotiating miles of maddening traffic. But little planning and few decisions are required—just hop in the car, and go.

By *Flying Carpet*, the same journey takes just two hours and delivers us three miles from the beach. Along the way are spectacular views of mountains, desert, and the Colorado River. Sounds impressive to the uninitiated, but flying demands planning, research, and sometimes stress. We pilots see such challenges as the price of adventure—overcoming obstacles for the rewards of stunning sights and completing our “missions.” But for others less suited to piloting, such trials seem troublesome travel complications.

This would be our second flight into Oceanside Municipal Airport for our “beach fix” with friends Tim and Hedy Thomas. It's a delightful airport, but not without challenges: a short, obstructed runway and noise-abatement procedures that demand preflight study. Those I'd mastered last visit. This year's travel was constrained because our hosts could

accommodate us for only two specific days. Every pilot knows the challenges of trying to meet an inflexible schedule. Fortunately, this route normally features benign flying weather, so I wasn't too worried about it.

As the day approached, the Southwest enjoyed record winter temperatures: Flagstaff in the 60s and Oceanside in the 80s. The cause was a powerful weather system generating easterly Santa Ana winds. I knew the effects of the Santa Anas but had never flown in them. Yes, 25-knot tailwinds would speed us on our way. But Oceanside is just 30 miles downwind of California's rugged coastal mountains, raising concerns of mountain wave

stretching out to sea, moderate to severe turbulence, and low-level wind shear at our destination.

On departure morning, Oceanside reported calm conditions, but nearby Carlsbad showed northeasterly winds gusting to 21 knots. “Ridge-level” 3,000-foot winds were forecast at 30 to 35 knots. Most alarming, Hedy texted road alerts for 70- to 80-mph winds funneling through California's mountain passes. I phoned seasoned San Diego flight instructor Barry Knuttila for advice.

“You know how the eastern slopes of the coastal range rise near vertically from the Mojave Desert?” he said. “Picture wind surging up those slopes like surf over rocks on a beach, and then tumbling over the downwind coastal side like a waterfall.” Barry recommended crossing the 7,000-foot coastal mountains at 10,500 feet to top the worst of the turbulence.

“It may still be a rough ride,” he added. “Don't descend until reaching the shoreline, and be prepared to divert if pilot or surface reports suggest hazardous wind shear or turbulence.” I'd already planned larger, more open Carlsbad Airport as my alternate. And the *Flying Carpet* carried adequate fuel to divert back east of the mountains if necessary. Although

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apprehensive, Jean and I soon sped oceanward thanks to the tailwind.

Our first jolts occurred over the Mojave Desert. “And we’re not even to the mountains yet!” Jean exclaimed as she tightened her seatbelt. But to our surprise the ride smoothed, and we experienced only light turbulence topping the coastal range and descending over Ocean-

side Beach. Despite a few bumps tracking the noise abatement approach along the San Luis Rey River, our approach and landing were uneventful. The only minor trauma was to our ears, descending from 10,500 feet to the 28-foot-elevation airport.

With the burden of responsibility lifted, Jean and I soon sipped wine seaside with Tim and Hedy. The next day and a half proved blissfully relaxing, with nothing but great conversation, beach strolling, and outdoor dining. Other than accessing the airport, we never even entered a car.

Another impediment I’d discovered in planning this trip was the establishment of a large presidential temporary flight restriction (TFR) over Palm Springs on our day and route of return home. Palm Springs’s Coachella Valley is bounded by high mountains and restricted airspace both north and south, making it a major general aviation thoroughfare to and from coastal Southern California—and difficult to circumvent.

As usual, the TFR’s central no-fly zone would be closed to all general aviation aircraft. The surrounding 30-mile-radius outer ring was penetrable on an active flight plan with radar following and discrete transponder code. Even there, however, we weren’t assured of getting through: “workload permitting, ATC may authorize transit operations.” Clearly, this was to be avoided. Since the TFR was to activate at 11 a.m., we planned a 9:30 departure.

However, on departure morning, I learned too late that the Palm Springs flight restrictions would activate 90 min-



**SUNSET** at Oceanside Beach, California.

utes early. I filed a flight plan—important to do pretakeoff for TFRs—and prepared to circumnavigate south over the Salton Sea if necessary. Departing the pattern, I asked SoCal Approach about a clearance through the outer ring.

“You’ll need to go around it,” said the controller. “This is a real serious TFR.” To my alarm, neither panel display nor tablet depicted the TFR at that point to help bypass it. I’d examined the chart adequately beforehand to picture its southern extent, but not monitoring progress real-time made me nervous. Just then, the controller called back. “I’m coordinating with LA Center and it looks like you’ll be able to go through it.”

Once cleared through the outer ring, I steered well clear of the no-fly zone and informed ATC before turning on course toward Flagstaff. (I had no desire to test my handy intercept procedures reference card.) Lessons learned along the way: The panel display took 20 minutes to download and display the TFR, and I hadn’t activated my tablet’s TFR map. I should have addressed these issues before takeoff. Once clear, Jean and I could finally relax and savor the joys of our journey.

“Sure beats driving!” said Jean when Flagstaff appeared on the horizon 90 minutes later. Yeah, other folks might prefer to drive their cars for eight hours worry-free. But boy, do they miss out! 🚗

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