



THE LAS VEGAS STRIP viewed from final approach to Runway 35L, Henderson Executive Airport, Nevada.

VEGAS FOR LUNCH 'WHAT'S THAT SMELL?'

I awoke to a text from my friend Sergio Schaar of San Antonio, asking if I'd noticed the airline-window view of Flagstaff, Arizona, he'd posted online. I had, and I had wondered at the time where he might be going.

"We're in Las Vegas to see Rascal Flatts. Deanna is a big fan," he explained. "When I spotted the San Francisco Peaks from 40,000 feet coming from Texas yesterday, it didn't take long to identify Flag." I asked how long the two were staying in Vegas.

"We're leaving tomorrow at noon," he replied.

"Ugh. I was thinking of flying over tomorrow to meet you for lunch. You're only 90 minutes from Flagstaff by *Flying Carpet*, practically in the neighborhood."

"That's a cool idea—how about today?" Sergio responded. This is what airplanes are for, right? So I scrambled to get up and out the door to the airport.

It proved to be a sparkling clear day, with light winds on the ground and aloft. En route to Las Vegas I entertained myself ogling vistas of the western Grand Canyon. In seemingly no time, I rendezvoused with my friends at Henderson Executive Airport (HND).

Jean and I had first met Sergio and his son Max in 2013, when they toured the Southwest in their 180-horsepower Cessna 172, the *Green Hornet*. We dined with Sergio and his wife, Deanna, in San Antonio a few months later, but that's the last time I'd seen them in person.

Sergio flies often, including numerous Pilots N Paws animal rescue flights, and excitedly revealed that he's changing careers to pursue professional piloting. He



A MECHANIC displays the broken vacuum pump.

recently earned his commercial pilot certificate, and he had just enrolled for flight instructor training. Deanna backs Sergio's dream 100 percent, having left a corporate job to indulge her own passion for animals with a thriving pet-sitting business. What an inspiring couple!

A brief but fulfilling hour later, my friends dashed off to catch the shuttle back to the Strip.

I was cruising happily homeward through cobalt skies when a nasty odor filled the cockpit. It didn't smell like smoke or anything mechanical or electrical, so I first wondered if it emanated from outside the aircraft. But seeing only clear skies and wilderness stretching to the horizon, I steered toward the closest suitable landing spot while sorting things out. Although unattended, Seligman Airport features a nice paved runway, is within walking distance of town, and promised potential help from my cowboy-pilot-mechanic buddy, Baldy Ivy.

Next I checked my carbon monoxide detector, which showed normal, ruling out the ominous possibility of an exhaust-system leak. Scanning back up toward the windshield, I noticed that the airplane, which had been on auto-pilot at 9,500 feet, was gradually climbing through 10,000 feet. The autopilot was unresponsive when I tried to correct, suggesting lost attitude reference, so I turned it off.

It's valuable in such situations to understand your aircraft's systems. The *Flying Carpet* is equipped with an attitude-based autopilot, meaning it derives

aircraft orientation from the attitude indicator. (Rate-based models orient via the turn coordinator.) Sure enough, my attitude indicator no longer matched the outside horizon or the electric backup, meaning either the instrument itself or the vacuum pump that powers it had failed. It turned out the vacuum gauge was pegged, suggesting a failed pump. This was actually good news, as disintegrating carbon vanes in a failing vacuum pump could indeed cause the nasty smell, which by now had thankfully faded. In today's clear skies, a failed vacuum pump would not affect flight safety. Relieved, I canceled my diversion and turned for home.

I chatted with a young fueler after landing back at Flagstaff. He's new to general aviation, and just beginning to get the piloting bug.


"Where did you fly today?" he asked from atop the ladder. I described my spontaneous flight to dine with friends.

"You flew to Vegas for lunch?" he responded. "That's a four-hour drive!" He asked the cost of flying there. The young man had noted hefty hourly training rates, so I delighted in showing him how cost-effective such a trip can be once you're certificated. The round-trip flight cost me \$175 in fuel, and would have been even more economical had friends joined me and shared costs.

A trusted mechanic removed the vacuum pump several days later.

"Is this what you smelled?" he asked, offering me the sheared internal shaft for a whiff. "It's unusual that the shaft broke rather than the coupling, where it's designed to fail." This was indeed the odor that had accosted my cockpit.

An hour later the *Flying Carpet* was ready to get back in the air. Yes, there'd been a minor mechanical inconvenience, but it was a small price to pay for the privilege of meeting seldom-seen friends 200 miles away, on short notice and a whim. 🧐

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