

Thanksgiving Trip 2009

Although I enjoyed great family time, this one is going to be mostly about flying.



Beautiful, and rare clean Corona air with the windssock showing winds from the east

I had been invited to see my daughter Teresa and her extended family for Thanksgiving. I always enjoy myself there and wrote that I would be arriving on Thursday. I opened the hangar to find a light coating of dust stirred up by our Santa Ana winds covering the wings. The windows were filthy. I cleaned them. Nothing else was new except a fresh oil change. Temps were in the 70s. Light easterly wind with 50 mile visibility. I was flying alone.

This flight was unusual, compared to the many times I have made this same exact flight. This time I departed straight out on runway 7. The Mooney did some slight jostling around for the first 10 or so minutes as I climbed through 6000' then it was serene smooth. And I could see for miles and miles. Flying through the Banning Pass was smooth like sitting on a living room couch. How rare is that?



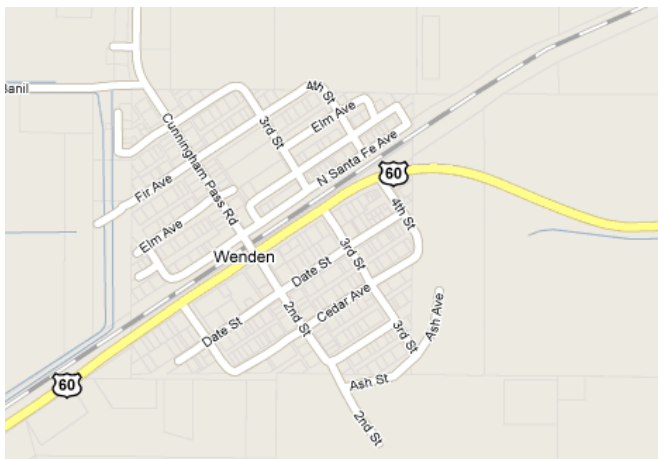
I could see for miles and miles looking north from Riverside



I had the engine leaned properly to conserve fuel and I saw that same neighborhood on the Colorado

It was Thanksgiving day and I was on time for the turkey bird to be presented at Teresa's table. I thought the airwaves would be jammed with ATC talking to all manner of pilots both private and commercial, but it was almost dead on the airwaves. Once I was past Palm Springs and level at 9,500 feet, SoCal turned me over to Los Angeles Center. As there was still almost no talking on the airwaves, I plugged in my MP3 player and listened to tunes for the next hour. The music was rock and roll, the flight certainly wasn't. The autopilot had no difficulty in keeping the Mooney at 9,500 feet +/- 10 feet.

When Los Angeles Center turned me over to Albuquerque Center, it was still quiet out there so after I dialed them in on my radio and announced myself, while looking at blue sky all around and 50 miles visibility, it was then time for more tunes. Almost everyone would have enjoyed this flight. The ride was way smoother than on the highways below.



On Google maps Wenden AZ looks like this, to me it looks like this at 9,500'

Nearing Phoenix, I started my descent almost 60 miles out so I could enjoy a gentle descent rate. As I descended through 6000', it was the same game as before. My Mooney did some slight jostling around for the next 10 or so minutes, but it was gentle, not harsh. Air Traffic Control gave me a straight in approach to runway 7. Darrin was there guiding me into my tie down spot and he secured everything. The dust stirred up by our Santa Ana winds was still there on my wings. He then drove me home to a happy evening around the family table. I am a lucky guy.

The next morning, I checked the flying weather and I saw no bad weather for Friday, and Saturday was going to be just a 20% chance of showers in the LA Basin. That was it. Nothing more. Good, I

love showers. A great way to get a free airplane wash. I opted for flying back to CA on Saturday. I had a VMG flight planned with Adriana D for Sunday, and that was important to me.

Well, Saturday morning, I checked the weather and the forecast had changed to an 80% chance of precipitation with thunderstorms in the LA Basin. I think I uttered 'damn'. I called The FAA Flight Service briefer to confirm what the website displayed. Unfortunately, I was now stuck in Phoenix on Saturday, due to reports of wing icing near Thermal and San Bernardino at my typical altitudes and as I am an old pilot, and obviously not a bold pilot, I opted to stay over one more day to Sunday.

I wondered if I could get up early on Sunday, fly to Corona, pick up Adriana, and take her to Agua Dulce for the Vintage Mooney Group fly-in. First thing Sunday, I checked the weather on the internet, and the answer was again a resounding no - not yet.

Early Sunday the weather was still somewhere between iffy and yucky per www.wunderground.com so I had some coffee and watched new clouds develop over the Phoenix sky. We certainly had an unstable air mass in the whole Arizona - California area. Two hours later, it started to look a little better.

Darrin and I drove to the airport around 10:30 and I called Flight Service from their pilot briefing room. I received one of the longest Standard Weather briefings ever in my 20 years of flying. In the first 30 seconds, he called out the dreaded phrase, 'VFR not recommended.' Then I heard about clouds, rain, snow, icing, moderate to severe turbulence, and pilot reports about being bounced around. I do not like turbulence and I day-dreamed about staying over to Monday.

I walked out to the ramp and Darrin was just about finished with my pre-flight. All he had left to do was to sump the tanks. I often depart with full fuel tanks. Not this time. I planned to depart with 30 gallons on board for a 20 gallon flight. That is a lot of reserve fuel in a car, not in an airplane. I kept wondering about my fuel decision especially as a diversion to an alternate airport at my destination was a possibility due to some potential spooky weather.

It had sprinkled. The windows were filthy. I cleaned them.

Before climbing onboard, I gave Darrin a hug and thanked him for his help. He is a really fun guy and he will do everything for me without me asking. After engine start, he climbed back on my right wing and gave me a thumbs down. Something was amiss. I shut the engine down. The door wouldn't close all the way, as seen from the outside. I could not tell that from the inside. Turns out a part of the door lock was not fully retracted and so the outside door handle would not fully retract flush with the door. I gave him the key and he turned it fully and then the door would close flush. More fun. It seems that I cannot venture anywhere without a story coming out of it.

Deer Valley ground control gave me a taxi clearance to runway 7 Right via taxiway Charlie and Charlie One. There were three Piper Cherokees and a Warrior in front of me as well as an Archer and a Caravan waiting on Charlie Two. And landing traffic. And landing traffic. And landing traffic. I did not get to depart Deer Valley airport until 11:30 and what a ride it was.

After turning and climbing westbound up to 5,000 feet with a severe rainstorm to the north maybe 20 miles out my right window I modified my intents because the cloud bases ahead were not too far above me. I thought that all of this cloud stuff would quit in 20 to 30 miles. Ha, I have much to learn. A half hour later it was safe to climb to 8,500 feet for a while. But as I was still beneath them, I was being continually bounced around. Cumulous clouds do that.

The autopilot constantly kept correcting our altitude after sudden up and downdrafts raised or lowered us 40 or 50 feet. Without George, I would have been worn out.

The ride was not too bad, but not too nice either. I wanted to get on top of them where it would be smooth air. I waited for my chance. I was well over 100 miles into this trip and still confined beneath scattered to broken clouds that never seemed to quit! Then it appeared out the front window.

There was my chance! I had 20 to 30 miles to slide on top of the next group of white puffy cumulus clouds ahead. The next standard westbound FAA VFR altitude is 10,500 feet so I shot for that. Once I got there, I was disappointed to see the cloud tops ahead were even higher. I kept climbing, and slid through a 'valley' in a long row of clouds while arriving at 11,000 feet. It was smooth up there. Rats, more of them were in my face ahead and even higher. It was again time to initialize Plan B.



Yes it was a mite bit chilly outside at 29 degrees, I was above the freezing level

Clouds were all around me up there. I knew that I would soon be closed in with clouds that I could not get away from. I was way too busy to take a picture of what I saw ahead, and I was looking around as to what my options were. With a generous tailwind, I was really moving along quickly. My best way out of this was to pull my power way back and enter into a spiraling downward right turn. My GPS captured a max ground speed of 222 knots through that maneuver. I just looked it up and that is 255 MPH. IAS was way below redline. I sunk to 7 thousand something then started to climb again once the puffys were behind me.

Flying was somewhat normal for the next 20 minutes. I enjoyed a sip of Phoenix tap water from the bottle parked on the seat next to me. I did not have too long to go until the Banning Pass came into view. I checked my fuel on board for what must have been the 30th time today. So far so good. Plan B for fuel was cooking in the back of my head as always

I had a brief respite from concern until I got close to the Banning Pass by Palm Springs. Sort of what it looked like was a horizontal sucker hole with layers of maybe lenticular clouds spanning across my entrance to the LA Basin. Not too bad I thought and hoped as I veered to the right to go around them.



Coming into the Banning Pass just before I swung 5 miles to the right - that black line is Interstate10



Abeam Banning, I looked north toward Big Bear and saw yesterday's fresh snow and the last clouds

There was some turbulence. A couple of those that sneak up above you and make you clench your gut muscles. Once I was past that 20 mile span of clouds, the whole LA Basin was clean air and clear of clouds. I thought I was home free with 20 minutes to go. Ha, I have much to learn.

Oh yeah, you wanna talk turbulence? BAM!! I hit my head on the plastic ceiling of the Mooney and faster than I could type this, we connected again, this time with a sideways kick to the tail. I clenched my gut again while uttering UGHH in uppercase out loud. Then we rolled over to the right while my

head had another Close Encounter with the Mooney ceiling and a concurrent shove from the other side of the tail section. I checked my fuel supply while grabbing two hands on the yoke. Oh yeah baby, this is piloting! Joe used to grin and say "Ed, the air is alive!" I still would much rather have a serene smooth flight any day. I wish I had more weather pictures, but I was busy flying the airplane.

What's next, you might wonder. Well wonder no more, because 20 miles out I listened to Corona's ASOS on the radio and it was not a day for beginners at my airport. In fact, I would never take someone up in these conditions for a fun flight. Winds from the northeast at 13 gusting to 20 something. Right over that row of trees. You know how much fun/work that can be. I set my speed and flight path when we were 10 miles out. Westbound, I called out to Corona Traffic my position and intentions. There was no reply. No one else was flying. Just me. Duh, wonder why.

There are no VASI lights on runway 7. I could have used some help. (Just like the previous two hours). Final approach was indeed like driving a jeep on a bumpy dirt road. Constant left - right steering corrections had to be made every second. Also pitch and power changes were needed. I wasn't fighting it, but I was sure working with it. OK, I was fighting it.

I got her low and slow enough and touched down in the first 200 feet, and then an untimely gust picked us right back up off of the runway. With pitch and power, I landed again as wind shear dumped us slightly nose first and then ballooned us up 5 feet yet again. I pulled back to an extreme nose high attitude. The stall warning horn blared. After yet another mind intensive touch down 4 seconds later, I had not all that much runway left. Then everything calmed down. A nice slow rollout followed. I think my heart rate came back into line for a change. I did not want to do that again just for fun.

I had called for fuel and the Fly Corona fuel truck was there at my hangar area pronto. I told the guys what I wanted and then I aimed for a Blue Can. Ahhh, you have no idea how good that tasted.. Ten minutes and \$201 later, they were done and they even helped me push her up the rise and into the hangar again. My planning had been correct, I had landed with 11 gallons of fuel.



I called Adriana once I got home. No answer. Hope she understands. The winds at Agua Dulce were just as spooky as they were at Corona, and so it is probably our good fortune that Adriana and I did not go flying anyway. I later learned that just 5 or so brave Mooney pilots showed up there.