

The Weather Dictates - VMG to Laughlin March 2011

This was not just another flying day. It seemed we had a little of everything. I was up early and the forecast fog was not evident but the sky was sure overcast with bases around 4,000' above the ground. Soni and I met at the Corona airport café at 8:30 waiting for the overcast to break up. We had intended to fly to Laughlin / Bullhead City to meet up with the Vintage Mooney Group. There was a section of blue sky showing to the west for a while but instead of getting bigger, it closed back up.



We went to my hangar and got everything ready to go. I saw a hole in the clouds in the distance to the northeast but it was gone 10 minutes later. Most people can observe the sky while outside but for most of them there is no direct impact. Our whole day required some blue sky. Somewhere.

Another frustrating hour went by with more short term openings in the cloud cover to the southeast, but nothing seemed to last long enough to actually fly there. Finally I saw one with size and promise to the northeast, so we departed around 11:30, finally! (I wondered about our return trip as well).

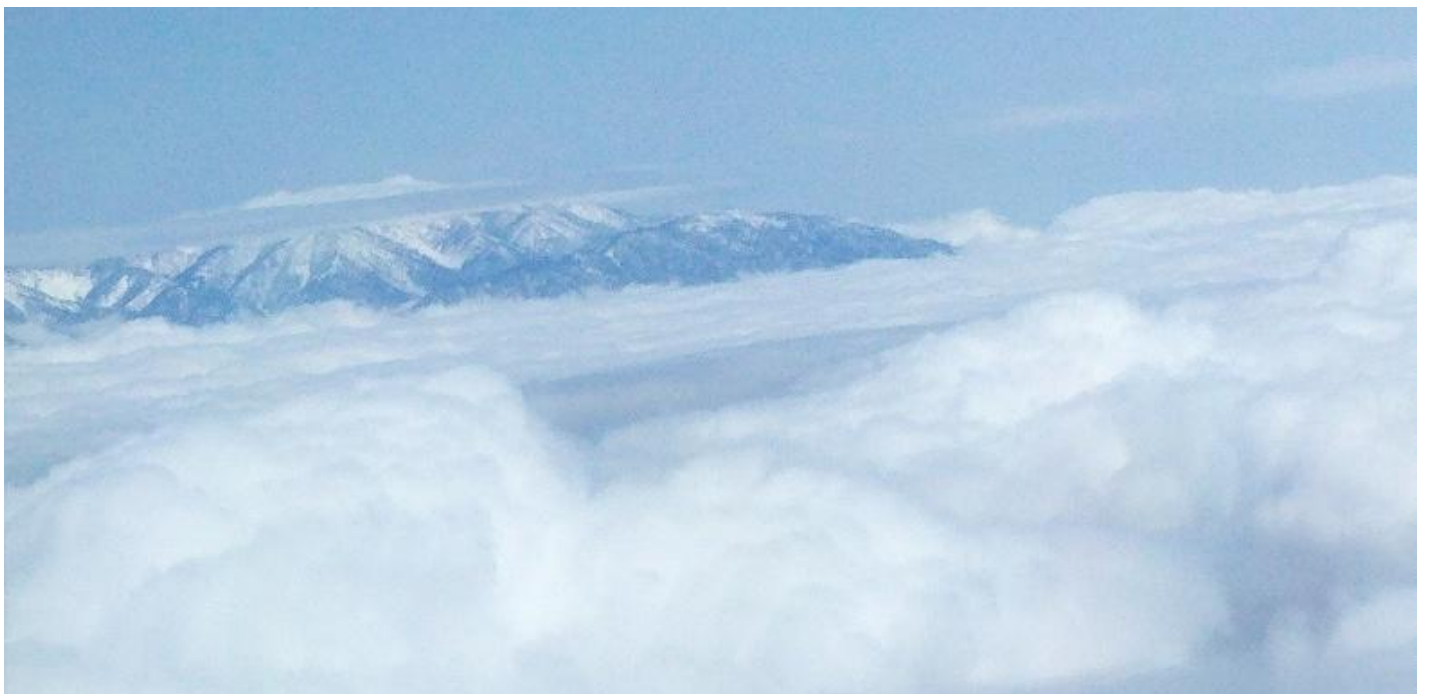
We climbed about 2000' to be well above the ground and under the overcast. We had 21 gallons of fuel for a 11 gallon flight, that was OK. After getting Flight Following from SoCal we were soon asked to turn left, back under an area of solid clouds. I explained and he gave us a second option to turn right so we did. We were now headed southeast. There was nothing but overcast above and ahead.

Being a pilot always involves some risk. Driving the freeway does too but too few drivers are aware. A good pilot always is involved in mental risk management, though we seldom discuss that with our passengers. A really good pilot stays ahead of the risk decisions and has a Plan B at the ready at all times. I am in a lifetime training course to be a really good pilot.



On that southeast heading per ATC we were looking for areas of sunshine on the city below

All of a sudden, huge holes in the overcast made themselves known to us and we climbed right up on top through the biggest one of them. The tops of the clouds were at about 8,000' and we went up to 9,500', well above them. I reported the 8000' tops to ATC. They can use that to help others.



Once on top, the overcast is known as an undercast and it is a magical place of beauty for us

Surprise, I hit my head on the cabin ceiling above me as the turbulence started. The plane was pushed down so suddenly that although I had my seatbelt cinched up tight, I was still propelled up 2 inches to make sudden contact with the plastic interior. Then the rocking and yawing started punctuated by sudden up and down lurches. This kind of flying is not for everybody but Soni is a trooper. She later remarked that she had been eyeballing the altimeter which had not budged. About 10 minutes later we flew out the other end of that turbulent area. A smooth flight and landing at Laughlin came next. It was only 12:30 as a hefty tailwind showed us groundspeeds around 175kts.



Irrigation from the Colorado River turns an otherwise brown desert floor into greens

Soni appreciated the stark difference between the last 100 miles of barren desert, dry washes and rocky mountains below us compared to this farming area near the river. Time to contact bullhead control tower and prepare for a nice landing. It was. Right traffic for Rwy 16 into a 20 MPH wind.

We taxied to, and stopped at the Landmark FBO area. They are good people. Around 6 Mooneys were parked on the line but nobody from the VMG was around anymore. Soon a lineman from Landmark came by in his golf cart and assisted us positioning the Mooney, then gave us a hop to their office. Inside is a plush lobby area with stuffed chairs, big screen TV, clean restrooms, a coffee bar, a plush pilots lounge with recliners and another big screen TV. The gentleman at the counter said we were a good hour behind the rest of the group who had gone across the river to the Aquarius for lunch. We went outside to make plans. Those that know me - know I wanted a cigarette.

It was 67° and breezy with solid sunshine and a few clouds just to break up the beautiful blue sky as delivered to us by 99.9% clean air. The gang was across the river at the Aquarius, a pinkish colored, cube shaped hotel & casino for lunch. I ordered 10 gallons of fuel at the lobby counter and a lineman drove up to my Mooney and pumped it in while I was comfortable indoors. Such luxury.



A little upscale, yet very comfortable surroundings



The Aquarius is over there, the pink cube in the middle reflecting the sunlight.

Transportation was questionable as the man behind the counter said the Aquarius didn't have a shuttle and other options involving walking more than a few blocks were not what I wanted to do. I had a Plan B for lunch as well. My buddy Joe came back to his Mooney and was nice enough to take our picture. His friend and traveling companion Pam walked up and greeted us a few minutes later.



I was having a ball in spite of my captured expression and Soni looks a bit French in this shot.

We departed south into a 20 MPH headwind and Soni was surprised how quickly we popped off of the ground. Well, if I need 65kts at that weight and have that wind, I just need 45kts over the ground to become airborne. We continued straight ahead and leveled off 2500' above the ground for a simple, yet bumpy ride to Lake Havasu's airport. Some really ragged topped hills loomed ahead, so I angled up and to the right slightly to clear them by at least 1,000'. We saw Lake Havasu alive with boaters and there was no traffic on the frequency or on my traffic display as I set up for a rare straight in arrival. I called out a 3 mile final and no other pilots responded so another great landing as officially pronounced by my smiling traveling companion.

Once clear of the runway, I called up Desert Skies on 123.30 and we were informed to taxi to their place. A friendly guy in the expected red T-shirt guided me into parking right in front of their FBO. I climbed out and Soni was there to help me step down safely. My knees give me a ration sometimes. It was absolutely beautiful weather there. We asked the lineman for more fuel and he went over and drove the fuel truck right in front of 5807T. I walked away and lit up.

It was only \$4.79 and Soni pumped it as the lineman explained the proper way to do it. It was all new to her but as she may become a regular fly-buddy, she has much to learn. She was already working the transponder and the Comm radio frequencies on this day. He said we could pay later, after lunch. They are so cool. We had full fuel tanks. A good thing for what laid ahead of us.

We then walked next door to 'Waldo's World Famous BBQ'. I had been there with Aidee and then again with Lana last year. Soni was still very excited as she had experienced so many new things today. She took lots of pictures! I was still thinking about the clouds in the LA Basin. But for now, it was major fun time for the both of us. We must have stayed there for a good two hours altogether.



Notable is the blue biplane hanging over our table and how she saw it in the mirror over the bar

I was having so much fun being in clean air, beautiful temps in the low 70s, a wonderful companion, a long runway, great food, and lower than usual fuel prices. After lunch, we walked next door and went into Desert Skies. Yvonne's beautiful smile greeted us at the counter. Oh no, the famous Slushy machine was broken, empty, and laying on its side on the counter. Hope it is fixed by hot weather time. Yvonne offered us two bottles of cold water to go. I will keep coming back to Desert Skies even though self serve fuel was 2 cents cheaper next door at the D2Aero FBO. I paid up and we went back outside. I just didn't want to leave paradise. It was that good just being there! Time to go.



The air was just

so clean and clear

We took off for home. It should be a straight line to Banning from here just missing R-2501E.



ATC gave me a heads up and I explained that my route should just miss the southeast corner of the restricted airspace but if my GPS and his radar did not agree, to please give me vectors for spacing.

The real reason I chose to put all of this down for you is the last half of our flight home called for some pilot decision making. I occasionally have to grab Plan B for safety but today it went further than that. We were cruising along at 8,500' and I noticed some concentrated clouds ahead. About 30 miles out from Palm Springs, we started getting pummeled again in the same area that gave us turbulence on the way out. It really gave us a good shaking as well as tipping us over quite a ways to the left then to the right, over and over, like a ship in high seas. It was at this time that I was studying the same cloud deck ahead that I had hoped would burn off during the day. It looked solid, and I had no guarantees that there were any holes to get us down safely. ATC even went 'airport weather shopping' for us and told us of the conditions reported at 5 airports near Corona. All but one reported a solid overcast (no holes). No one can guarantee that a hole will remain until I get there.

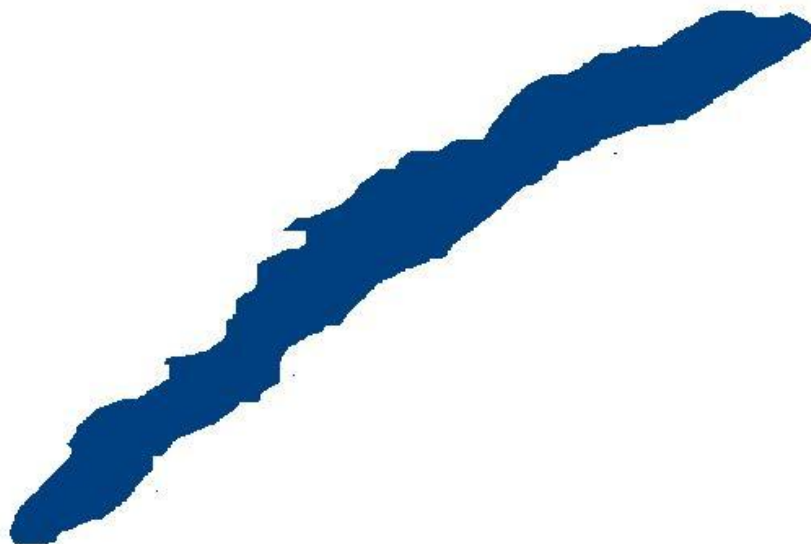
I decided to duck safely under that whole cloud layer ahead (Plan B), so I informed SoCal and she said "Altitude at your discretion" and to inform her if I made a major change in my flight direction. I had done this before in this area with good results, so down like a rock we came. Throttle back to almost idle power, speed brakes popped up, and we started down like a scared bird. Left and right steep S turns helped us lose altitude. I was way too busy to take pictures for you, or to ask Soni to grab my camera. She was so cool during this sudden departure from our cruise altitude, just sitting there waiting to assist me in any way needed. That is a special fly-buddy I have found.

We got down to about 2,800' MSL, maybe 2,000' above the ground. I looked to the west through the Banning Pass area. **Nothing!** It looked like a huge dark gray funnel formed by the two mountains on either side, the rising ground level at the bottom and the cloud deck, now above our altitude. All dark gray over there with only a dim orange glow in the distance. Mother Nature has never looked so ugly to me before. I could not even see Interstate 10 heading west! I told Soni that I would never fly myself anywhere that I could not fly out of. It was surely Plan C time. I was ready.

I informed ATC/SoCal that I was unable to fly west under those conditions and that I would be heading back east to regain my altitude so that I could continue westward above the clouds again (hoping that I would find a suitable hole). I had more than hope, I had a Plan D. I informed ATC that I had 3 to 4 hours of fuel onboard and when she said 'thank you', I could tell that she was relieved.

Not like climbing up to cruise altitude from Corona, no, I was forced to pick this same area of choice turbulence, 10 miles north of Palm Springs, to fly around in circles going back up. At first we were below the surrounding hills to the north and east, but 5 minutes later that perspective changed. On the way up, I checked out the weather conditions in the usually cloud free 'High Desert' area around Palmdale and Lancaster on my GPS, just to be disappointed yet again. Another 10 minutes and maybe \$12 worth of fuel later, we were back again on top at 8,500'. I again informed SoCal ATC of my intentions to proceed direct to Corona and look for a hole in the undercast to get us down later. She said she would assist us in any way she could. What a super ATC gal.

We motored on with a boring undercast until Soni mentioned that she got to see the sunset from that new point of view for her. The sun set right into the undercast layer of clouds ahead. It would soon get dark. I kept thinking about contingency ideas. I had no room in my head for sunsets right then.



A benevolent patch of long dark color struck my peripheral vision at around my 10 to 11 o'clock out my left window. A HOLE! I informed ATC that I would be turning sharply to the left to line up with the eastern (left) part of the hole and then a right turn to align myself with it. We heard the official ATC version of 'no problem' in our headsets and I made several squirrely turns in 3 dimensions to do just that. I am comfortable doing that and it is actually somewhat fun.

Again, I throttled back to almost idle power, got the speed brakes popped up, and we started down through that hole in the overcast. Good visibility of buildings and roads straight ahead and down gave me confidence that this was a good course of action. I certainly could see where we were going as we descended below 4,000' at the base of that area of cloud.

I saw that it was pretty dark outside under the clouds but with city lights and headlights on the roadways, plus my GPS, I was again in fat city, for a while. I still had 30 miles to go to get home and

around the Lake Mathews area, I had to dip to 2,500' to stay below some nasty lower hanging clouds. No matter, I wanted to descend to 1,500' to get down to traffic pattern altitude anyway. Soni said that I made yet another great landing at Corona and so it shall be written. We parked and Soni opened the airplane's door to a surprise. After being so comfy in my Mooney's cabin, it was 54° outside. Jacket time even for me. We opened the hangar and drove our cars out. Blue Can time for me. Soni cleaned up the hangar a bit more as we talked. She is a great fly-buddy.

Remember that I had a Plan D? Yes, if needed, I would have gone back and landed at Palm Springs, and paid for two rooms at a comfortable hotel just to ensure that we were safe. You are welcome to read about me here, but I don't want you reading about me in the newspapers. Lesson reinforced: Always have extra fuel for surprise situations.

Our Stats.

Flight from Corona to Laughlin

168.3 nm in a straight line which I could do if I climbed higher than I wanted to, just my choice.

180 nm as planned around the mountain and the Restricted Area.

195.3 nm as actually flown at 1:14 (includes taxi) on the clock is a respectable 158 knots or 182 MPH.

Flight from Laughlin to Lake Havasu

36.4 nm in a straight line on my computer's flight planning software.

37.2 nm as actually flown at 0:22 on the clock is 101 knots or 116 MPH because I chose to fly slow.

Flight from Lake Havasu to Corona

166.3 nm in a straight line on my computer's flight planning software.

167.5 nm as planned around the mountain and the Restricted Area.

214.9 nm as actually flown at 1:41 on the clock is 127 knots or 147 MPH because of headwinds and many diversions including circling down then circling back up on the way home.

Total for the day

447.4 nm which is about 515 miles. For lunch.

Seems I just can't go anywhere without having an adventure. ☺

Yes, of course I got my goodbye hug, what did you expect?

Ed Shreffler

03/26/2011

Pictures by Joe, Soni, and myself

Email me at: eshreffler@sbcglobal.net

More of my stories are at: <http://www.mooneyevents.com/shreffler.html>