

The Seasoning

Chapter 3: The First Day Out

Saturday, July 22, 8:20 AM. Darren and I arrived at Phoenix's Deer Valley Airport. I had just enjoyed two days of fun at my daughter Teresa's place and it was time to head east. The terminal building at Deer Valley is well thought out with clean restrooms, a restaurant, a lobby with soft chairs, lots of pictures on the walls, and a Pilot's Briefing Room.

I headed right to the Pilot's Briefing Room while Darrin headed out the ramp door with my bags. After getting a favorable weather briefing on the phone from Prescott Flight Service, I joined Darrin and found my airplane opened up to cool down, unchained, and darned near ready to go. I still did a standard pre-flight inspection. My Mooney was ready.

About then, a guy carrying some travel bags walked out of the terminal building and headed straight for us. I called out "Are you Craig?", he acknowledged, and we shook hands as we introduced ourselves. We got the plane loaded and went back inside for a few minutes. That's when I met Bonnie, Craig's wife who drove to the airport with him. We all had a laugh about the fact that "we met on the internet". We said our goodbyes, and Craig and I went back out and climbed aboard the Mooney. We had three legs to fly that day.

27V started right up. While the engine was warming up, we got ATIS and switched to ground for taxi instructions. As there was a light wind from the east, we taxied to runway 7 Left and went through the usual run up procedures. Just as soon as we told the tower that we were ready for departure, "Mooney six eight two seven victor, runway seven left, cleared for takeoff." rang through our headsets. It was 9 AM.

We were off and climbing eastbound with all of Phoenix sliding by off of the right wingtip. After crossing the Salt River Valley, the terrain rises quickly to around 6000'. I had planned for them and was leveling off at 9500' about the time high ground was underneath us. At 10 AM, Show Low AZ went by 3500' below us. Huge expanses of pine trees and rocky hilltops went on for miles in all directions. It was too hazy for clear pictures.





Show Low's Airport

15 minutes later we went directly over a navigational radio station known as the St. Johns VOR. VORs work in conjunction with a nav radio and something called a Course Deviation Indicator (CDI) in the instrument panel of the airplane to assist pilots with navigation. I had included the VOR in my flight plan route only as a backup. Modern GPS map units make navigation much easier than any of the previous methods.



The CDI



The land became desolate



Then dropped into V shaped canyons

Soon it was time to initiate the descent into Mid Valley airport at Los Lunas NM, the first fuel stop of the day. We arrived at 11:14 per my watch, which I had not set forward, and looked around for the FBO to buy fuel. Surprise, there was no building, just a large white above ground fuel tank with the fuel hose and the usual credit card machine. Surprise #2, there were also two men working on the dispensing apparatus. They said they would have it working in an hour. We each had a power bar and a bottle of water from Craig's cooler in back (thanks Bonnie!) and waited. The owner showed up and chatted with us for a while. It was hot and there was no shade. 20 minutes later they thought they had it all fixed so Craig swiped his credit card and started pumping. Surprise #3, the pump stopped after about $\frac{1}{2}$ gallon and the machine printed out a receipt for \$187. That's \$374 a gallon! Craig said a few choice words when he saw the receipt and the owner said he would give Craig credit for the error. (He did send Craig a check.) Ten minutes more and they were testing it. They pumped 5 gallons into a 5 gal. gas container and verified that it was working right. They gave us the fuel for our trouble. Craig swiped his credit card again and started pumping. Everything worked!



I taxied to the very, very end of runway 36 as the field is at 4830' and the temp was near 100 and the runway is only 4340' long. The density altitude was probably around 6500' and I wanted 100% of the runway in front of me. I knew the climb rate was going to be meager under those conditions. It was.



Departing Runway 36 Mid Valley Airport, Los Lunas NM

We climbed for a minute on the runway heading then turned right to resume course to the northeast. We were still closer to the ground than normal for a one minute climb. The density altitude was definitely coming into play here. On the other side of a large expanse of flat land the terrain rose again and this time we were not high enough to have a good safety margin so I made some turns to the north and then to the south. After five minutes of that we had the altitude we wanted and so turned back to the northeast again.



Back up under the clouds

I asked Craig if he wanted to fly for a while he and gladly took the controls. Back up at 9500', Craig dropped the nose to level, I dropped the RPMs and leaned the mixture. We flew

on for a while until Craig mentioned something about a downdraft. Sure enough, the air was descending and Craig had the nose pointed back up just to keep from losing altitude. Between the climb attitude and the headwind, our ground speed dropped to 100kts. Thunderstorms were off to the north. The downdraft went on for 20 minutes. Neither of us had ever experienced anything like it before. Craig remembers it as some tense moments. I wasn't tense, after all, he was driving... We passed by the 'other' Las Vegas.



Las Vegas NM



The weather was getting our attention, time to divert



Then things got better again

Around 2 PM it again time to descend and then by 2:20 we were in Clayton NM, way in the northeast corner of the state. Time for another power bar, some water, more fuel, and thank goodness, a restroom.



Nice facilities and much appreciated.

A really nice old geezer, heck he was almost as old as I am, popped up out of nowhere and asked if we would like the tanks filled. One of us answered that we would appreciate it, and he proceeded to fill 27V back up with 100LL.

The 100 part signifies 100 octane, but it is rated on a different scale than what we call mogas (for your car). The 'LL' is an acronym for 'Low Lead' but you can bet your bippy that it is a heck of a lot higher in lead content than anything your Chevy ever ran on. It is lower in octane than the fuel of the '40's and '50's though, when fuel was designed for war planes. There was no EPA back then.

When he was done, he inquired if we would be going on after we were done . We said we would as long as the weather ahead was good. That's when I heard something for the first time in my 15 years of flying. He said "Well, if you don't there's a courtesy car over there and you can take it into town to get a motel if you want to." I have read about courtesy cars, but I've never had one offered to me.



The fuel area at Clayton NM under scattered clouds

We hung around and rested a bit in the pilot's room at Clayton to about 3:30. Another call to Flight Service confirmed that we could go the rest of the way safely. We were off again.

On this leg we were to be over much lower terrain I so set us into cruise mode at 7500'. There was not to much to do. Again, I asked Craig if he wanted some more flying and he essentially flew the Mooney for the next hour and a half. I looked out the windows and explored features in my GPS that I had never tried before. He let me have it back during the descent. I like to have a few minutes getting used to it before I have to land it you know.

Over southwest Kansas, near Ulysses or Cimarron, there were many fields being irrigated by an apparatus that goes around in a very large circle as it is watering. The circles were either 1/8th mile or 1/4 mile across.



Round fields, birthplace of Cheerios?



Craig snapped a cloudless short final - runway 34 Hays KS



(Wow, I guess we made it) - Craig



The lineman who served us with more fuel at Hays KS

We were greeted by LeRoy and Jean Berland, Craig's folks who took us to dinner and then to their home for a very peaceful night's sleep at their place. I am very thankful, thanks guys. They are genuine Midwest people.

Coming up, leg two to Milwaukee...