

December 22nd - January 4th - A Christmas Story -

Arguably one of the things that makes travel by private aircraft more efficient than a similar trip by car and, sometimes, even by a commercial flight, is its relative speed and economy. Even with a really small plane, like my Just Aircraft Highlander, traveling in a relatively straight line at a consistent 100 mph beats following the meandering Interstates at 70 mph. Factor in traffic slowdowns around cities, lane closings for accidents and maintenance, breaks for gas and food, and for old timers like myself, periodic pee stops, and that 70 mph works out to be more like 50 mph over the trip's duration. It was exactly that theory that suggested that I make my annual Christmas trip to my fiancée's West Palm Beach home this year via my new airplane. Besides, it would be interesting to see if my calculations really worked out as theorized. And the flight's enjoyment would be an added bonus.

When I arrived at the Clemson airport at 9 am on Monday morning, December 22nd, I found that a temperature inversion over northwest South Carolina was producing 18 degree temperatures at ground level. This produced the first variance to my theory. Now my 120 HP Jabiru engine is a really fine piece of engineering and produces a fair amount of power at a very low fuel consumption. However, it apparently does not like really cold weather. It took almost an hour to coax it to fire up...and then only after preheating its carburetor with a hair dryer. This was an hour that I would not have needed with my VW Jetta. However, once running, the Jabiru produced no other difficulties for the entire trip. And what a trip it was. The same high pressure area that accounted for the temperature inversion, also provided me with clear skies and unlimited visibility's for a smooth and speedy flight south. With lift-off at 11 AM, my initial climb to 5,500 feet was swift in the cold dense air, but the newly installed cabin heater provided toasty warmth on my feet and legs. Unfortunately some air leakage around door to frame seals and around the wing roots provided for some briskness at head and shoulder level. This is something that I will have to address before my next winter flight.

My first stop was made just a bit north of Daytona. While I theoretically had just about enough fuel to complete my trip onto West Palm non-stop, that aforementioned difficulty with my tired old bladder dictated a landing. I chose the Ormond Beach airport for this stop, due mainly to its published fuel price of \$2.45 per gallon for its 100 LL avgas. This was a good \$1 to \$1.50 under going fuel rates at other Florida airports. 30 minutes later I was again airborne for the remaining hour and a half flight onto West Palm, with a touchdown at its North County airport coming at exactly 5 PM. OK, now for some quick comparisons. The actual trip took 5 1/2 flying hours, but with my fuel stop it was a full 6 hours from start to finish (7 is your factor in the engine starting problem delay). Total fuel consumption for the trip was 23 gallons-- the exact capacity of my tanks. So, I definitely would have felt uncomfortable trying to make this trip non-stop, even with plenty of small airports dotting South Florida's countryside. At a more realistic cost of \$3.90 per gallon, my out of pocket fuel cost for the flight would have been \$90.

By comparison, previous driving trips that I have made from my Hilton Head home have taken 9 hours from door to door. Had I left from Clemson, and made the drive via Atlanta, and only on Interstates, this would have added 2 hours to the total, with only pee stops taken. However, realistically I probably would have made one fuel/meal stop along the way. While I can get almost 700 driving miles from the 15 gallon tank in my VW Jetta, the 725 miles that my mapping program calculated for this trip would have been cutting things very close without a stop (much like my aircraft). Currently diesel is averaging about \$2.50 per gallon, so my total fuel cost here would have been around \$40.00

The question here is whether it is worth the extra \$50.00 or so to cut the trip time in half? However, before you answer, realize that tie down fees at the airports that I stayed at averaged \$8.00 per night. For the 15 days of my trip, this added \$120 to my trip cost over that of my car, which parks for free. But even with this extra \$175 or so to the expense, it was certainly worth it from the aspect of pure enjoy-

ment and the self satisfaction that comes from conquering the 1,400 miles of airspace involved in this adventure. And it was indeed an adventure.

On the Sunday after Christmas I took my fiancée's 8 year old grandson for an hour flight over to his great grandma's in Sebring, while Miriam drove her Honda for the 2 1/2 hours that this 120 mile trip by car requires. We were just finishing up our lunch at the airport restaurant's outside patio when she arrived. During the week that we spent at her mother's missionary retirement village, I had the opportunity to take Bill Rogers, one of the mission's retired aircraft maintenance A&P's on a sightseeing flight over the complex. These people did most of their duty in Africa and their flying was over some of the most inhospitable terrain imaginable. Aircraft maintenance was certainly a vital portion of his mission task and was never taken lightly. It was a pleasure seeing Bill's look of pure enjoyment gleaned from our short half hour flight. Part of the fun that comes from flying is sharing the experience with others.

One day, when Miriam had to make an "emergency" trip back to West Palm, I took the kid on another flight...this time over to Chalet Suzanne. Now this is one of the most interesting of Florida's fly in restaurants. Located on its own 2,300 foot manicured grass runway, it offers a myriad of small, quaint cottages for overnight or weekend stays, along with a truly gourmet restaurant. Winner of almost yearly golden spoon awards, it certainly ranks amongst the finest of 5 star restaurants. After our brunch we strolled the grounds, looked into the unoccupied cottages and Jordan even "fished" down by the pond. It was a great experience for grandparent/child bonding.

All good things eventually end, and my 2 week trip was almost over. On the Sunday after New Years I flew an hour and a half to the north for a short visit with the widow of the ex-partner in my single engine Piper Comanche. After I purchased his interest in the Comanche, he went on to own a total of 4 Moonkeys, before discontinuing his flying. I had remained friends with Gus for almost 3 dozen years before he died. Since his death, I have stayed friends with his wife and try to see her at least once each year. The airport that I used to fly into when I would visit their Tarpon Springs home is no longer there.



On the Sebring ramp, in front of their outside restaurant



Sebring airport is next to its famous 12 hour race course



My 8 year old "co-pilot" at the Chalet Suzanne grass strip

North Tampa Executive closed years ago, and I didn't want Lois to have to drive too far to pick me up. I notice that my sectional chart showed a private airport called Hidden Lake located in New Port Richey, just a few miles north of her new home. I made a call to Mr. Harold Hendrick, whose name was listed as the airport contact. When I explained my situation, Harold not only granted me permission to use their 4,400 foot paved runway, but put my plane in his home's attached hanger for overnight. This is a delightful fly in community with more than 50% of these upscale homes having their own attached hangers with the other owners using the "T" hangers located right off of the airport's main runway. It was quite an experience taxing down the winding community streets to Harold's home. He had 3 complete airplanes in his hanger, with another 2 in various stages of rebuild. This was certainly an unexpected compliment to what was a pleasant overnight visit.



In front of Harold Hendrick's hanger (behind its decorative fold down door panel with graphics)



My sincere thanks to Harold and Hidden Lake Airport

On Monday morning I departed Hidden Lake for Hilton Head, SC.

Although for 20 years HXD was my home base airport, this was only my second visit by private plane since my hiatus from flying in 1996. I needed to make a return to my condo for several days of year end paperwork and chores, before continuing back to Clemson. Weather was delightful while I was back on the Island, with temperatures reaching into the low 70's for the 5 days that I was there. That gave me a chance to make a stroll or two along the beach while enjoying this unusual January respite from winter. On Saturday I finally completed my 2 week round trip to Clemson with a 2 1/2 hour flight, landing just an hour before the forecast rain and clouds arrived. **Total miles covered...1400.**

Total hours flown...17 Total out-of-pocket travel expenses for the trip... \$250.00.

Total value of this adventure...priceless.