

A Pilot's Perspective, #7

By Fred Benton

“SHORT FLIGHTS, GREAT SIGHTS”

As a student pilot begins his or her cross-country flight training, one thing that quickly becomes apparent is the radical difference between getting somewhere on wings versus wheels. The old dictum of the shortest distance being “a straight line between two points” is indelibly reinforced. “*Wow!—there’s the ocean—fifty minutes instead of a 5-hour drive!*” That being said, we must also acknowledge that a direct path from point A to point B isn’t always feasible. The terrain you fly over, the current and forecast weather, certain FAA or military restrictions, and the aircraft’s performance capability may necessitate course deviations for safety reasons.

All of us in Siskiyou county are lucky to live in this beautiful landscape. Those of us who fly are doubly blessed, because we have the opportunity to see it all from heights and perspectives possible only from an aircraft. My only regret during recreational flying is that I can’t pull over and park for awhile to more closely study some unsuspected or fascinating feature on the ground. What I can do, at a safe altitude, is throttle back, drop partial flaps and then make a few low-speed orbits, peering down like a red-tail hawk circling above an unsuspecting squirrel.

My current airplane is no fireball, but still... Max cruise speed for my single-engine Cessna is 120 knots per hour (one nautical mile equals 1.15 statute miles). Using 100 kph as a ballpark cross country ground-speed, and assuming calm winds aloft, a vast chunk of northern California and southern Oregon real estate is within a one-hour flight time. For example, Roseburg is within an hour northbound; eastbound—Alturas; southbound--Red Bluff; westbound—Gold Beach. Along any of these flight routes the passing scenery, both near and distant, is superb. And that holds true for every outbound compass heading, from 0 to 360 degrees. The great State of Jefferson never disappoints—there is a visual feast in every direction.

Pilots learning to fly here in Siskiyou county have a real advantage in basic local navigation, because everywhere you glance at the horizon there are distinct landmarks. Who could ever get seriously lost when you have Pilot Rock,

Goosenest, Sheep Rock, Mt. Shasta, Black Butte, Mt. Eddy, Duzel Rock, Cottonwood Peak, etc. standing in bold relief against the sky? Not like finding your way back to home base over the endless fields and farms of Kansas or Iowa...

Short flights, great sights? For example, in the course of a leisurely morning trip, one could take some friends for a circumnavigation around Mt. Shasta (the earlier the better and, of course, only in good weather); or perhaps cruise over just beyond Upper Klamath lake to Chiloquin for breakfast and do a fly-by of Mt. McLoughlin on the return leg; bordering Scott Valley, the eastern edges of the spectacular Marble Mountain Wilderness and Russian Wilderness are impressive, rugged and sprinkled with scenic alpine lakes; flying to Redding for lunch at Benton Field's Airpark Cafe will give you wonderful views of the Eddys, Castle Crags and Shasta Lake; an over-flight of recent major wildfires, while depressing to some degree, gives us an understanding of what USFS, CalFire and local fire agencies are up against in trying to contain and control them (one positive aspect is the significant amount of unburned timber and other vegetation remaining within the final control lines); a really enjoyable destination, particularly in summertime (after the fog lifts), is Gold Beach on the south Oregon coast—the airport is practically on the beach and it's only a 10-minute walk to the port.

These all seem like fun, casual excursions, and to non-aviators they are; however, no conscientious pilot ever takes off with the notion that it will be a “casual” romp through the sky. Proper flight planning, detailed inspection of the aircraft, due-diligence regarding weather, safety briefing for passengers, and all the other normal pre-flight considerations must be addressed. Yes, it's some breathtakingly gorgeous country out there, but “--*there be dragons...*”. You want a person at the controls who has a healthy respect for weather, terrain and overall safety. A pilot who talks about the thrill of flying low, or skimming across ridgetops, or blasting along between cloud build-ups, or weaving his way beneath a low overcast (“scud-running”) is most assuredly NOT the guy you want to trust with your life. Thankfully, there are very few like that.

A short, introductory flight lesson with certified flight instructor Vern Fueston would be a terrific Christmas present for anyone interested in aviation. Vern has an office at Montague-Yreka airport; phone 842-6511.

Merry Christmas and Happy Landings!

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