

International Flight Planning

BY AMY LABODA

I can remember the first time I planned an international flight—it was to the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos and Dominican Republic, and it was no more difficult than planning a trip from Florida to Ohio. Since then I've been to Mexico and Honduras in my own airplane. The Mooney, with its speed and economy, makes an excellent over-water bird. And for all of you who balk at the idea of taking a single engine piston-powered airplane over water I remind you that you don't seem to have that hesitation about flying over mountains, and to me, that terrain is infinitely less hospitable.

The difference between flying internationally and flying between States is summed up in the paperwork, and the paperwork can be daunting, but not undoable. You just need to determine a few critical

items and contact the proper authorities ahead of time. The key to any international trip is to ask the right questions—and get answers you can count on.

Can you fly a US registered airplane there?

Look at your airplane call sign. Chances are yours leads off with N, for November. That means your aircraft is US-registered. First on your list of chores is to make sure that you can fly your US-registered craft to the international destination you've chosen. I don't mean can the airplane make the trip (you've figured your range long before you got this far), but rather, will the officials on the ground allow you to land, or remain on their sovereign soil?


What documentation do you need?

Consult the experts at Aircraft Owners and Pilot's Association (AOPA), the FAA, the Interna-

tional Civil Aviation Authority (ICAO) or any of the numerous flight planning services, including Jeppesen, to answer that question. If you know the lingo and have lots of patience call the country itself and try to get your answer from an official there.

Most countries welcome US-registered aircraft carrying the standard paperwork (you know, AROW). Beyond that you need a Radio Station License and a Radio Operators license from the FCC to operate an aircraft equipped with radios in ICAO countries. You'll also need your pilot certificates and a current medical, along with your passport or at least a birth certificate.

English is the official language of aviation, but don't be surprised if you and the controllers you talk to are the only ones speaking it. In



Latin America, Spanish is still spoken by most of the native pilots and controllers so you should brush up if you want to know what is going on in the skies around you.

Do you need special insurance?

Beyond aircraft paperwork and language barriers, there is the insurance conundrum. Most US policies include coverage for flights to certain international destinations. Mexico, however, demands that you carry a “Mexican” policy. This policy can usually be arranged through your present insurance carrier (mine did not charge me for the extra coverage). You should carry at least a copy of this Mexican policy when you fly there—the officials may not ask to see your pilot certificate, but they will want to see insurance. I watched one Piper Comanche pilot in Cancun, Mexico desperately calling home to have someone fax him a copy of the policy he’d left behind. He was still in the customs holding area an hour later, as we headed out to our refueled airplane and on our way.

The Mexicans have also had problems in the past confusing private and commercial flights. The commercial flights pay hefty handling fees, from which the private flights are exempt. AOPA provides its members who fly corporately owned aircraft under Part 91 flight rules with paperwork that can alleviate any confusion on the issue. If you fall under this scenario, get it.

It turns out that my insurance policy has a section specifically outlining those international destinations at which it covers me. I photocopied that section and took it with me. I also took my Mexican policy. I carried the AOPA paperwork because my airplane is owned by a corporation, along with

a notarized letter from the corporate officers giving me permission to fly the airplane outside of the US. I like all my bases covered.

Which airports can you land at?

Next on the list of things to do is determining the Airports-of-Entry in your destination country. Turns out that you cannot just lift off from the grass strip near your house and land on that quaint Bahamas out-island. Instead you must leave the US from an approved international departure point and arrive to clear customs at an approved international arrival airport. The Bahamas is good about posting customs agents on many of its out-islands, making point-to-point flights doable to pleasure spots as remote as tiny Walker’s Cay. On a trip to Honduras, however, we had to land in Roatan, 35 miles from our island destination of Guanaja, and clear customs and immigration before receiving the okay to head on to our final destination.

If your journey is a long one you should scout out fuel availability and maintenance facilities at your airport-of-arrival. It is nice to have a mechanic and parts on hand if your airplane breaks abroad. The last surprise you need to have is that there is no fuel at your destination, and you haven’t enough fuel left over from your trip there to get to an airport with fuel. This is where Flight Planning companies such as Jeppesen can be worth their weight in gold. Not only do they cover the paperwork and obtain your overflight and in-country approvals, they can also research fuel and maintenance availability to nearly realtime. Even if all your pre-trip information says there is fuel available, the smaller and more remote your des-


tinuation, the more cautious you should be about fuel management (read that: there may not be fuel the day you arrive). Always have an alternate.

Beyond that, bring cash. Yes, credit cards are more convenient and traveler’s checks are more secure, but trust me on this. I cannot tell you how many times, after the fuel was in my tanks, that the proprietor has demanded greenbacks—US greenbacks at that—as the only suitable payment for his services. It has happened in the Bahamas, it has happened in Central America. Dollars are in demand. That mechanic fixing your airplane probably doesn’t take American Express, either. I reiterate, especially if there is a language barrier and your destination is remote, bring cash.

While you are searching out approved international airports, take some time to acquire as many copies of the General Declaration forms, Cruising Permits, Tourist Cards, and whatever additional paperwork you will need, and, if possible, fill the forms out as completely as you can (in triplicate) before you arrive at your destination (a flight planning service will do this for you). US Customs often has such documents available free. You can fill in the exact dates and times of arrival when you get there. If you don’t, you’ll spend your time on the ground laboriously filling out forms, instead of sipping a tropical libation by the pool at your hotel. AOPA and some FBOs carry the documents as well.

What kind of flight rules are there?

Planning on flying to the Bahamas after dark? Don’t, unless you are on an IFR flight plan, and even then, don’t expect to land anywhere other than Nassau or Freeport. Tak-



ing off from remote Crooked Island for your flight back to the States? Don't, unless you've planned to stop first at a Bahamian Airport-of-Entry to clear customs and immigration before leaving Bahamian airspace. Planning on a direct flight back to your hometown airport? Don't, unless it is a designated US Airport-of-Entry, and one of the first along your route. Even if you do have an international airport near home, you can't over-fly others along the way unless you have obtained an over-flight permit from US Customs.

Most international destinations abide by ICAO flight rules, which are similar, but not the same as our own. VFR and IFR flight conditions, clearance and flight requirements in Class B, C and D airspace, and rules about flying at night can all be just different enough to get you in trouble if you don't know them. And don't expect officials to be sympathetic when you plead ignorance as your excuse for breaking one of their rules. The FAA doesn't cut them slack when they fly in our country, why should they cut you slack in theirs?

Invest in some good research materials, such as Jeppesen products or even Pilot Publications *Guides to the Bahamas and Caribbean*. Remember, ICAO rules match those in most of the world, so, at least, don't break those.

Is there a charge for ATC?

We're lucky in this country, it does not yet cost us money just to use the airspace (okay, it does, but there are not yet direct user fees). Cuba, Jamaica, and other Caribbean and Central American countries, however, do charge for operating in their airspace. Before you head off, check and see if you need permission to fly in specific countries' air-

space, and if you will be billed for any air traffic control services used. Even if you think you got off Scot-free, don't be surprised if a bill turns up weeks or even months later. Pay it if you expect to fly in that airspace again (they will remember your N number).

Our trips to Mexico and Honduras both took us close to Cuban airspace, but, not wanting to pay any fees, we were careful to avoid crossing in. On the way to Honduras we also crossed Belize, which, at that time, had no need of prior notice of our arrival and charged no fees. Honduras wanted a fax in Tegucigalpa to let authorities know we were coming, but nothing more than the usual landing, parking and handling fees. The Cayman Islands charge for everything, including flight plan filing. Be prepared.

Planning the route

Still with me this far? Then you must really want to make this trip. Now is the time to find the most current charts for the area you expect to fly over. Don't be surprised if the ONC charts are years out of date. The ground mapping in RMS Technologies and Jeppesen's new flight planning software is your best bet for current images of the terrain. Otherwise, try a really good land map (some of NASA's satellite images are superb). Most of where we have flown was over water, where towers don't suddenly spring up and terrain elevation isn't much of a problem. Flying down the coastline of Central America, however, I was quick to point out to my navigator/husband how our GPS database had more accurate depictions of the airports below than the ONC charts.

I've found that the Internet has made getting current international weather infinitely easier to obtain

than getting current charts. Intellicast, Jeppesen, WSI, DUATs and numerous other services pump out current satellite, radar and infrared imagery from around the world 24 hours a day. I even found one spot that gives me Bahamian METARs online.

Once out of the US, however, an Internet connection is no longer guaranteed. Telephones abound, though, and I've come to rely on a long distance call back to the States to the Miami International Flight Service Station for my best Caribbean and Central American weather briefings. To its credit, the Cancun, Mexico airport has a top-notch weather briefing department, with current facsimiles and METARs available to flight planning pilots. Even in tiny Walker's Cay, Bahamas, the proprietor of the one hotel tacks up facsimiles of the 12, 24 and 48 hour forecast maps each morning.

Do you have a back door?

Weather and charts in hand, a qualified departure point and destination assured, it is now time for me to draw the final line on the chart and make the final ground speed and estimated-time-en route calculations. It is also time to plan my alternate.

I play the "what if" game. What if I have a mechanical problem in the first hour of flight? No problem—I'll divert to Key West. What if there's a major weather system in the Gulf, more than what FSS has forecast? No problem—I've got fuel to make Key West all the way to my point of no return, after which I can continue with plenty of fuel around the weather to Cancun or Cozumel, Mexico, or, worst case, land in Havana, Cuba, and wait it out. Landing in Cuba, though by no means a

desirable option, isn't a problem for the Cubans. You'll just have to do some explaining why you were there to US Customs on the way home. Anymore it isn't so much being in Cuba that is the problem, but whether you spent money while you were there. If you have an emergency you're a fool to fly by a perfectly good runway.

I don't want to do any of those things, but you bet I've thought about it, planned it, kept it on the back burner in my brain. You should do the same when planning your extended flight.

Are you equipped?

I rarely fly long cross-countries in aircraft without weather avoidance equipment and without a GPS to back up my pilotage. I especially recommend that you use a good GPS with a current database when flying internationally. There is nothing like a moving map display when you are flying over vast, featureless terrain, or completely unfamiliar terrain.

On the Honduras trip the Strikefinder showed me that the thunderstorms embedded in the gray clouds ahead were well north of my position. The Comanche pilot ahead of me didn't know that, and wanted badly to deviate south into Cuban airspace, except Havana Center refused permission. Then Havana asked his position. You could taste the terror in that pilot's mouth as he hedged his position report for nearly 10 minutes. Did he deviate south into Cuban airspace? Havana Center played it cool, so I can't tell you. He seemed relieved to be on the ground when we reached Cancun an hour later.

Beyond radios and weather detection equipment, are you ready if

you have to splash down? I always carry a raft and individual life jackets (airline style, in pouches) for each passenger, and, yes, I stuff them under each seat. I also brief my passengers on how to get out of the airplane in the unlikely event of a water landing. I'm especially clear about how the raft is to be handled. It is to be handed up to the right seat passenger who is the first one out of the airplane. The right seat passenger is briefed not to pull the activation lanyard until he or she is well away from the door of the airplane, since the explosive force of the raft self-inflating could decapitate us all if it happened in the cabin.

Enjoy The Ride

You've got your paperwork, in triplicate, your certificates, your passports, your proof of insurance, your notarized documents, your flight planned, your charts folded, your airplane prepped for a sustained ride. The weather looks good and the sun is just rising. You've practiced a few critical Spanish phrases and you walk a bit funny from all that cash stuffed in your left shoe. I'd say, if the weight and balance works out, it is time to head for the airport, into the sky, and off on your adventure.

Flying yourself you'll have a chance to frequent the native side of most countries, and sometimes you'll get there faster and more efficiently than by airliner (our trip to Honduras took six hours, while by airliner it would have taken 12). More than that, you can see your destination as the birds and local pilots do. That has its own rewards.



New And Improved Product

Developed by Boeing's Material Technology Laboratories, Boeshield T-9 is effective because of its excellent water displacement, penetration and protective film development. T-9 exhibits excellent results in salt spray exposure, "EXCO" immersion,



and dielectric current tests. Boeshield T-9 also meets all flammability requirements of Federal Aviation Regulation 25-32 after the solvents have evaporated, and is effective from -40 F to 250 F.

Boeshield T-9 has a mineral spirit base and while not recommended, it has been sprayed using hand pump garden sprayers. However, more sophisticated compressed air powered spraying systems are strongly preferred.

Once on the surface, Boeshield T-9 uses capillary action to (reportedly) cut through and stop existing corrosion, find its way into lap joints, seams, and around rivets, and eventually weep out the exterior. However, this activity stops after a limited time (usually 5 to 7 days, depending on temp. and humidity) at which point a waxy film develops in all areas. When replication is necessary (usually 3-5 years) the existing T-9 coating will be re-liquefied and resume its penetration and weepage.

Boeshield T-9 is safe to use around most paints, plastics, vinyls, wiring, and many glues. T-9 is available in 1 and 5 gallon pails at \$79.75 and \$349.95 respectively, and both 4 and 12 ounce aerosol spray cans at \$6.95 and \$11.95 each, as well as a 1 oz drip size squeeze bottle which is perfect for locks etc., at \$2.95. To order and for further information, please contact Boeshield direct or Coy Jacob's Mod Squad/Mooney Mart Complex at: (941) 484-0801 Call the order desk w/your credit card (800) AC4SALE or visit their web site @ <http://www.mooneymart.com>