

South of the Border

CHAPTER TWO

Everyone should fly to Mexico at least once in their flying career.

My own dreams of flying to Mexico started only a few years after getting my license, when I met a wonderful pilot from the golden era of air mail pilots and barnstormers. His name was Mark Walker, and he was an old man by the time I met him, in the late 1980s. He'd met Ernest Hemingway, and he'd forgotten more adventures in biplanes than I'd ever had. But he was still full of life, energy, laughter and stories. Oh my, was he full of stories! But the tale I loved best was the one about flying to Mexico.

Mark lived in Orange County, California, back in the late 1940s and flew out of the Martin brothers' FBO there. And he told me how he used to take an old Fairchild PT-19 military

trainer, put a bottle of whiskey, a blanket, and a couple of steaks in the baggage compartment, and take a lady friend with him down to the beaches of Baja Mexico for the night. They'd build a fire on the beach, grill the steaks, drink the whiskey, and sleep on the blanket under the stars, flying back the next day.

I was entranced. Short of landing a flying boat in a South Pacific lagoon for a similar kind of barbecue, it was hard to imagine a more perfect combination of beauty and adventure. But it had gotten a lot tougher in the years since to just land on a beach in Baja and spend the night, and most of the pilots I knew weren't up for the vagaries of Mexican flying, even to established airports. So my dreams of flying to Mexico remained just that: dreams.

Ten years later, however, I had my own airplane and was living back in southern California again. I'd also found out that the gray whales I'd seen off the coast of California actually gave birth in a couple of protected bays on the Pacific coast of Baja, and that people were allowed to go out in small, outboard Panga boats among the mother-baby pairs in the bay.

Unfortunately, my airplane (a Grumman Cheetah with a notoriously weak nosewheel) was a far cry from a PT-19, or even a Piper Super Cub or other appropriate beach-landing aircraft. So that part was probably out. But flying to Mexico to see the whales still rang with the sound of adventure. I decided to go, and I enthusiastically began telling friends about my plan.

Their response was, shall we say, a bit more muted.

"You want to take your Cheetah WHERE?"

"Baja. I want to see the whales."

“Do you not LIKE your plane?” the common response went, followed by a whole list of horrors I was about to encounter. Mexican Federales with M-16s who would confiscate my airplane. Bandits who would steal it. Corrupt officials who would take all my money. Rocks on unimproved runways that would destroy my paint, gear, and prop. U.S. Customs agents who would take apart or confiscate anything that was left.

But I was determined. I’d been dreaming of flying to Mexico for 10 years, and it seemed an adventure worth undertaking a few hassles or risks in order to experience. Besides. I wasn’t convinced all the horror stories were true. The Baja Bush Pilots association has something like 1,200 members. If flying in Baja were such a nightmare, that many people wouldn’t do it on a regular basis. And those who had been there told of wide open skies, pristine white beaches, clear blue waters, and the best fish and shrimp tacos this side of heaven.

In any event, there was only one way to find out what it was really like, and that was to go there. So I researched everything I could about paperwork and procedures, convinced a pilot friend to come along on the adventure as a little extra security blanket, and finally got a good enough break in the weather to head south.

My plan was to clear customs at San Felipe, on the east coast of the peninsula, then head down to Guerrero Negro on the Pacific side (named after a ship that sank off the point there) to see the whales. After that, I planned to head back across to a town called Mulege on the east coast of Baja. Mulege is

a popular destination with pilots because its Hotel Serenidad has its own dirt runway, which makes it a convenient stop. It also, for the record, has legendary margaritas that are so potent they should be placarded, especially after a long day of flying.

I intended to depart Southern California in the morning, stop at San Felipe and continue on to Guerrero Negro the first day. But a stubborn marine layer persisted until almost 3:00 in the afternoon, which meant we would be lucky to make it to San Felipe. No VFR night flying is allowed in Mexico, and all the controlled airports close at 5:00 p.m. And as I soon learned, when they say 5:00, they mean 5:00. Not 5:01.

As we crossed over the border, flight service wished us a good flight and terminated our flight following. There would be no more hand-holding until we were back in the States. We had entered the frontier land and skies of Baja, where one of the first rules pilots learn is self-reliance. You can fly almost anywhere you want there, but there is no weather service and little in the way of radar, communications, or maintenance services. Smart visitors to Baja bring their own tools and a large bag of resourcefulness, prudent common sense and flexibility.

As the minutes and miles passed, I began to get concerned. My GPS was predicting that we would arrive at San Felipe at 5:05 p.m. I bumped up the throttle. 5:03. I bumped it up some more. 5:02. By the time I got an estimated arrival time before 5:00 p.m., I had the throttle just below redline.

I called the San Felipe tower at 4:15 in my most charming voice, reported an optimistic 40 minutes out and asked if I could proceed to the field. By 4:30 we would be committed, because we wouldn't be able to make it back to any other

Mexican controlled field before closing time. I hoped a large dose of charm and advance notice might buy me a few extra minutes. The tower approved me to proceed, reminding me that the airport closed at 5:00. By 4:30, they were calling every 10 minutes asking for position reports. By 4:50, I had the plane in a full-power descent, wishing I could pedal faster to gain a few extra knots. I called my entry to downwind a good five miles out, putting on my landing light in the hopes that if they saw me, they'd believe I was in the pattern already. I looked at my watch. This was going to be close. When I got abeam the tower on downwind, my groundspeed was 143 knots and it was 4:59 p.m.

“Niner-four-uniform, it is 4:59,” the tower reported sternly, as if I needed reminding. “You are cleared to land ... IF you can make a short approach.” I cut the power, turned toward the runway, landed, braked hard, pulled off the runway and looked at my watch. It was 4:59:59. Not the ideal way to start my relationship with the Mexican airport officials, but another lesson I learned about flying in Mexico is that a courteous, charming, and respectful attitude goes a very long way. It's their country, it has a long and dignified history, the officials are very proud of whatever position they hold, and they want a little respect for all of the above. Go to Baja with an ego or attitude and they will serve it to you for lunch, along with a bunch of hassles and fines, and backed up with an M-16 or two. (A note to the wise: Don't argue with an M-16. Even if the soldier holding it is younger than your son. You will not win.) But show courtesy and respect, and they may even forgive you for landing at 4:59 p.m.

The next day, we left San Felipe to go see the whales, and I soon learned two more of the basic rules of flying in Baja. The Baja coastline is stunningly beautiful, but the land is unbelievably desolate and rough, and airports are few and far between. As a result, your primary instrument in Baja is your fuel gauge—especially because not all the airports have fuel, and even those that do can't always be counted on to have it all the time.

The consequences of landing short for fuel starvation or any other reason also figured prominently in my thoughts, because Baja is not a land where you'd want to have to put an airplane down. Find yourself with even an open cowling latch in flight (as I did on one leg) and you start evaluating all that those beautiful, remote, craggy canyons underneath you in an entirely new light.

“Flying down here, even a small problem is a big problem,” a Cessna 180 pilot at Mulege told me as he stuffed his blown tail wheel inner tube with sand and rags so he could take off again. Indeed. It's a reminder to think twice before you attempt that difficult crosswind landing on that deteriorating runway, because fixing an airplane in Baja is no small task.

The good news is that because there is so little in terms of official assistance in Baja, the pilots who fly there are wonderful at assisting each other, whether it's loaning tools, parts or gas cans, offering advice, or sharing information. Pilots in Baja use 122.75 as something of a party line, calling to see if anyone in the vicinity of Guerrero Negro knows what the weather's like there, or if anyone's found fuel at San Felipe, or what the runway conditions at San Ignacio are like that day.

That party line can also, at times, provide some really great in-flight entertainment. On our flight from Guerrero Negro to Mulege, my friend and I were listening to the air-to-air frequency when an airline captain—I'll call him Dick—called in from 35,000 feet, asking if anyone was flying over Baja that day. A pilot from the same airline—I'll call him Wally—answered on the frequency, saying he was in a Piper, bound for the same hotel in Mulege as we were. The two airline pilots quickly figured out that they actually knew each other. Then came the \$64,000 question.

“Hey, Wally,” Dick asked, “is Nancy with you?”

There was silence on the frequency.

“Uh ... Wally? Your radio working?” came Dick's perplexed voice.

“Yeah ... yeah, it's working,” Wally answered uncomfortably.

“So, is Nancy with you, or are you alone?”

There was another uncomfortable silence. Finally, Wally came on the frequency.

“Uh, Dick,” he said, “switch over to 123.45, would you?”

I looked over at the friend who was flying with me. He was already reaching for the radio knob—along with every other pilot who was flying over Baja that day. This sounded just too good to miss. We came up on 123.45 just as Dick checked in again.

“So, Wally, what's the deal? Are you alone?”

“Uh, no,” Wally stammered.

“Who's with you?”

“A friend.”

There was a moment of silence. I could almost hear the

snickers filling airplane cockpits all across the peninsula. Then Dick's knowing voice came back on the frequency.

“What's her name, Wally?”

Silence. Then, reluctantly, “Tammy.”

The snickers turned to out-and-out laughter, at least in my airplane. I could picture Dick shaking his head up there at 35,000 feet. “You be careful, Wally,” he said before signing off.

I was still chuckling when I landed in Mulege an hour or so later, tied the airplane down and made my way to the hotel pool, where a number of newly arrived pilots had gathered. We began introductions. And when one pilot introduced himself as Wally, I couldn't resist. I looked at the buxom bleached blonde in six-inch heels next to him, smiled, and said, “Oh! You must be Tammy!” Everyone burst out laughing as I thanked Wally for the best in-flight entertainment I'd had in a long time.

Tammy sure was something. Two days later, when most of us had planned to leave, the single telephone line and satellite weather channel at the remote hotel showed that one of the worst winter storms to hit southern California in years was sweeping across San Diego with surface winds above 80 mph and icing, in the northern New Mexico and Arizona regions, from the surface to well over 20,000 feet. At Mulege, the wind was calm, the sky was clear, and the temperature was a balmy 80-something degrees. We were fine where we were. We just ... darn the bad luck ... couldn't leave.

That conclusion did not sit well with Miss Tammy. We were all sitting around figuring out Plan B, when she stood up in a huff, hands on her hips, and announced, “Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I HAVE to leave. I HAVE to be

back at work tomorrow!” She glared down at the hapless Wally, who averted his eyes and started squirming in his seat. There was an uncomfortable silence in the group. Domestic squabbles never play well in public. Finally, I spoke up.

“Honey ... you’ve never *been* shit-scared in an airplane, have you?” I asked her. A couple of the pilots started to chuckle. Tammy turned and glared at me, but didn’t answer. “Because if you had,” I continued, “you’d know that there’s *nowhere* you have to be that badly.”

An hour later, I walked outside and saw Wally untying his Piper. Another pilot from the group was walking back from the plane, shaking his head.

“He’s *going*???” I asked incredulously, as the pilot approached. He nodded and shrugged, a look of resignation on his face as he turned and we both watched Wally climb on board and fire up the engines.

“I told him I didn’t care how good she was, it wasn’t worth dying for,” the pilot said straight-faced, still looking out toward Wally’s plane. Finally he sighed, shrugged again, and turned to walk back to the pool. “But what’re you gonna do?”

I have no idea how Wally’s flight turned out. As for myself, I ended up having to spend two more days swimming in the crystal clear waters of the Bay of California, sipping margaritas by the hotel pool, and exploring some of the many white sand beaches in the area.

One night, my friend and I went to an unadvertised local restaurant perched on the edge of a sandy beach where the river met the sea. They didn’t speak any English there, and I spoke almost no Spanish. But when the owner couldn’t find us a clean

table inside, he motioned for us to wait a minute. A table, tablecloth, two chairs and a hurricane candle lamp were whisked outside to the beach right in front of the restaurant. The owner gestured for us to sit. Margaritas and fresh shrimp and fish dishes in various types of sauces and tortillas arrived in front of us. A full moon was rising to the east, casting a bright silver moonbeam across the water, straight toward our table, where the water was lapping softly at the sand only a few yards away. Music and voices filtered out into the night from the brightly lit tavern behind us.

It wasn't a PT-19. And it wasn't two steaks, a bottle of whiskey, and a blanket on the beach. But it was pretty darn close.

A lot has changed in world since the days of my friend's PT-19 adventures. There are fewer frontier spaces left to explore ... especially a day's flight away from civilization. But fortunately, Baja is still Baja. It may not be quite as free and unpopulated as it used to be, but make no mistake about it, Baja California is still a frontier land. And while that poses a few more challenges in terms of weather, dealing with local officials, fuel, and maintenance, that's also what makes it an adventure. Besides. The challenges pale in comparison to the gifts that flying to Baja offers: unspoiled landscapes, baby whales, killer margaritas, white sand beaches, clear turquoise waters, sultry moonlit nights... and absolutely, positively, the best fish tacos this side of heaven.