

Flying a 637 pound homebuilt airplane across the continent might be noteworthy to a Reader's Digest subscriber, but ought to be fairly commonplace to the likes of Experimenter readers. So why was I asked to write about my particular adventure for these pages? Well, it seems that too many of us are staying much too close to home with our creations, and the word needs to be spread that such journeys are eminently doable, a whole lot of fun, and extremely rewarding.

At the outset let me express my gratitude that I had the time needed to do a 6,500 mile trip in VFR conditions. Even if you don't have that kind of time available right now, planning for such a milestone venture can help inspire your current building and flying activities, focusing on a dream you can one day realize. If this account helps a single reader along that route it will be well worth writing.

I believe that for many pilots there's a psychological barrier that keeps them from even thinking in terms of a really long cross-country adventure. As we all remember, the first cross-country trip as student pilots was a daunting undertaking. The prospects of flying into terra incognita riveted our attention on every detail of preparation and at least some degree of fear that something over which we had no control would botch things up. Yet the prospect of returning by day's end gave the challenge a manageable dimension we could cope with - something like swimming the length of the pool for the first time as a kid.

While confidence and enjoyment increase with every succeeding day-long cross-country, we still can't breach the next frontier until we spend the night at a distant destination. Doing so subjects us to a perhaps slight, but no less real threat of uncertainty due to weather if not to mechanical mishap. Yet until we've had to divert to an unplanned overnight stop, we haven't made a real journey, only a succession of trips. Having five of six of my overnight trips since launching my airplane result in such diversions, I was quite ready for a really long journey.

I named my Zenith Zodiac "Sojourner" for a reason. I fully intended my creation to transport me in something of a leisurely fashion to wherever my curiosity might lead. I chose this airplane for many reasons, not the least of which being its range, payload capacity, climb performance, short-field capabilities, and astounding visibility. I've also found it to be extremely comfortable over flights in excess of 4 hours.

Preparing for the trip involved stocking up on the requisite sectionals and an updated GPS database for my Lowrance Airmap 100 which I used confidently and effectively throughout the trip. While I had a JRC 520 handheld with VOR capability in reserve, I'm hard pressed to imagine voluntarily reverting to VOR navigation.

After selecting and marking my routes on the sectionals, I used a spreadsheet program to organize data for each leg including distance and conservative no-wind time estimates, a sequence of applicable comm frequencies, airport elevations, and miscellaneous notes such as nonstandard patterns and promising food stops. I tried to pace each day's flying so as to minimize fatigue and maximize exposure to scenic opportunities.

The only modification I made to the airplane was the fabrication of a wing locker retainer for a quart can of Alcor lead dispersant for use with the unavoidable 100LL which I shun at home in favor of 93 auto gas. (I used all but 1 ounce over my 70 hours of flying and it definitely kept the plugs clean.)

Next came the packing: Snack/survival food and half my warm and cold-weather clothing fit easily into the two wing lockers. Onto the shelf behind the seats went my sleeping bag, air mattress, tent, collapsing chair, camp lantern, tie-down kit, canopy cover, first-aid kit, and overnight tote bag. On the floor ahead of the right seat went a small bag with more clothes, AOPA Airport Directory, and all my charts. The seat was reserved for a water bottle, snack food, cell phone, and the day's charts.

Starting from Asheville, North Carolina, the route I chose would ultimately take me along three great rivers I had never explored - the Platte, Snake, and Columbia - and into regions particularly of Nebraska, Wyoming, and Idaho that I wanted to experience. The most time, aside from visiting family in California, would be spent in northern Idaho.

The venture got off to an inauspicious start. A 6-hour weather delay for low ceilings made my anticipated first stop at Lake of the Ozarks impossible. What I hadn't counted on was getting stopped by remnants of a tropical storm 100 miles from home in Knoxville as the window of passable weather evaporated. There I spent the next 3 nights!

Leaving Knoxville at noon, I made it to tiny Bismarck, Missouri (another stop I had not planned) at dusk, having skipped Bowling Green, Kentucky and Cape Girardeau, Missouri where I had expected to at least stretch my legs. Setting up camp on the quiet rural field, an airport resident bicycled over to offer his truck to go to town for dinner. I opted for snack food and my bed, waking about midnight to a howling wind, driving rain, and by morning ice on the airplane. By then the skies had become brilliantly clear and I made my way about 100 miles west overflying Lake of the Ozarks to the point of my intended *first* night's stop on the western shore. The airport and adjacent "resort" left me feeling fortunate to have spent the night in bucolic Bismarck. On to Sedalia I went for fuel after which I

passed east of Kansas City in 80-mile visibility passing up another planned stop at St. Joseph in favor of landing at Crete, Nebraska, just southwest of Lincoln. Here I was to stay with a fine fellow I had met in August while attending Zenith's Open Hangar Day in Mexico, Missouri. I spent two delightful days with Emil Berberov and his family, the second resulting from my trepidation at flying in headwinds that reached 40 knots at the surface.

Clear air continued as the winds abated, and I meandered along the Platte River at about 1,500 AGL all the way to Scottsbluff whose outcroppings were visible at least 60 miles away. Living in the mountains of Western North Carolina, the flat expanse of Nebraska was striking, yet beautifully punctuated by fall colors in the braided riverbed. It wasn't hard at all to imagine pioneer wagons traversing this very route, especially after spotting the much anticipated landmark of Scotts Bluff - the sign that the Rockies were close at hand.

More high winds dictated an extra day at this western outpost before plowing into somewhat lower headwinds across the broad pass over the Continental Divide. Just keeping up with traffic on Interstate 80, I was happy to take breathers and nourishment at Rawlins and Rock Springs before completing the last leg of the day to Bear Lake, Idaho. I had anticipated terrain-induced turbulence along the way, yet I had a comfortable ride at only 10,500 MSL with 13,000' mountains flanking the route about 15 miles away on either side.

The descent into the verdant valley north of Bear Lake (which straddles the Utah-Idaho line) was breathtaking, especially after flying all day over sand virtually devoid of any vegetation. The attendant at the otherwise deserted airport gave me the keys to one of the state-owned rental relics common throughout Idaho. A flat fee of 30¢ per mile and overnight charge of \$5 is the rule wherever a car is available. I spent a pleasant night 8 miles away in Montpelier - "famous" as the site of a Butch Cassidy bank holdup.

Following an overnight low of 17° I wondered how difficult my Rotax would be to start. Perhaps the rising sun falling on red paint helped warm the engine a tad, and pulling the prop through several turns got at least some oil circulating. Happily she lit off immediately and off I went into the most perfect day of flying of the whole trip. Absolute calm air as I skimmed the ridges of small ranges lying between Bear Lake and the Snake River. Off to the north I could see the Sun Valley area as I followed the river to Burley where I fueled at an FBO which boasted a bulletin board filled with pictures of visiting aircraft. The lady who greeted me immediately asked if she could take a shot of my airplane, explaining that the board was so cluttered she was now only posting photos of "unusual" airplanes.

Anticipation of exploring western Idaho mounted as I followed the Snake

at my customary 1,500-2,000' AGL peering down into the shallow canyon at an occasional impoundment of water, residence, or golf course. After a convenience store snack stop at the very quiet Mountain Home airport, I climbed over the substantial mountains east of Boise, heading north into the first of several gorgeous valleys that extend virtually uninterrupted into Canada. Again in crystal clear air an opposite direction Bonanza slipped by overhead as I neared beautiful Cascade Lake. That was the first non-airport traffic I had seen despite the fact that I had utilized radar flight following continuously throughout the trip.

Descending into McCall, Idaho about 40 miles north, I knew I had come to the right place. After taking a motel room within sight of my airplane I walked about 2 miles into town where I was greeted by a beautiful lakeside park adjacent to which I had a great Italian dinner overlooking the water. The next morning I rented a car for the day and headed for "the fingers" - a stretch of precipitous roadway named for the map depiction of its switch backs that lead down to the absolutely gorgeous Salmon River. A leisurely drive down the narrow river canyon led to lunch in Riggins and hence a return to explore the valley surrounding McCall.

I had faced the next day of flying with some anxiety since first planning my trip. Mountain and canyon flying schools in McCall specialize in back country operations, charging upwards of \$2,000 for work in your own airplane to qualify you for such flying. From mountains in excess of 9,000' (including the ominously named Seven Devils), Hell's Canyon drops to about 750' MSL within a half-mile. Fearing strong winds in this kind of terrain I was prepared to give the dirt a wide berth and not count on seeing much of the extremely narrow canyon. One pilot reported flying the entire length the day before just above the river. Not me, not yet anyway. Fortunately the morning air was calm and the flight awesome despite shadows that obscured some of the canyon's detail.

After a stop at Lewiston I rented a car for 3 hours in Cour d' Alene where I soaked in the clear air, bright blue water, and peak-of-fall colors along the shoreline. Then it was off to Sandpoint and the high point of my trip.

I stayed at a lakeside Best Western resort with all rooms facing east and for those two nights a rising full moon across the water. A great dinner at a restored power house, and another the next night of Alaska crab in the motel dining room were real treats. I spent the intervening day in a car following the shore of Lake Kootenay into Canada and the most spectacular scenery I've ever seen. Yellow larch (tamarack) trees speckled the otherwise green mountainsides. Waiting to cross one arm of the lake on the longest free ferry ride on the continent I gazed up at a glacier about a 2 miles away. An afternoon exploring the storybook town of Nelson capped the day.

From Sandpoint I flew over Spokane, stopped for a great breakfast at the Walla Walla Airport, and continued down the Columbia River to Portland. I spent the night at Sportsman's Field, camping on the airport. On the way in I lost contact with Portland Approach for about 2 minutes under the path of arriving aircraft. I was fortunate to be only 40 miles from Salem where my superb UPS/Apollo SL-40 radio was made, and they surmised I had run into FM radio interference which immediately made sense as I recalled passing numerous towers in the vicinity.

Continuing south I stopped at Medford and then passed immediately alongside majestic Mt. Shasta whose 14,162' peak I had climbed as a high school kid and which now lay some 6,000' above me. So close I couldn't begin to capture it with my camera.

The remainder of my adventure featured stays with relatives in the Monterey area and several days with my son and his young family in Los Angeles where I was able, despite persistent heavy smog, to take my 4 year-old grandson up for at least a trip around the pattern.

The return trip took me over Palm Springs en route nonstop to Prescott, Arizona for the night. My original plan was to stop at Sedona, only some 43 miles further east, however growing darkness suggested attempting my first night landing in my airplane in the depression of Oak Creek Canyon wasn't an option.

With clear skies and a hint of my first tail wind of the trip, I got to Albuquerque's Double Eagle II Airport only to learn of 700' ceilings and quarter mile visibility just 50 miles past the Sandia Mountains immediately to the east. Flying above overcast with no visibility below is beyond my personal limits, so I spent the next two nights parked at the International Airport closer to town as rain came and went. Spiraling to clear turbulence over the Sandias, I continued east to overnight stops near Clinton, Oklahoma and Millington, just north of Memphis. My final 4-hour leg home overflying Florence and Huntsville, Alabama in perfectly calm clear air brought me to the still-colorful mountains of North Carolina and the end of an extremely satisfying sojourn.

Now it's your turn!