

A trip across North America 2

Posted At : June 30, 2011 12:00 PM | Posted By : Admin

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In June 2011, Larry Baum, CEO of The Computing Center, his wife Trudy, and two close friends traveled across North America to Alaska and Canada in Larry's airplane. This Blog of the trip was originally published on the East Hill Flying Club web site. It is divided into separate entries in reverse order.

Whitehorse, YT Tue June 14, 2011 @ 20:00PT: The best laid plans Part 2 ... Sometimes, mechanical devices just fail. So it was with us today. The left fuel boost pump on the Aerostar quit today as we were leaving from Prince George to Whitehorse. Obviously a “no-go” item. Most big engines have an electrical backup boost pump in case of failure of the engine driven fuel pump. That pump is also used for starting and to boost fuel pressure if needed at higher altitudes. It was most frustrating to watch the rest of the group depart for Watson Lake, our first a stop. Fortunately, there is a GREAT shop in Whitehorse. Bobby did a fabulous job replacing the brushes in the pump. We had brought an extra set along “just in case” thanks to Joel at Juliet Delta Aviation. So we were on a way in a record 1.5 hours. Given the rest of the group was stopping for lunch and fuel, we thought we could catch-up. The route to Watson Lake from Prince George follows a river up to Williston Lake, then through a relatively narrow area called “The Trench”.

The lake itself was beautiful with very few roads or any signs of civilization. The weather forecast was pretty good for the morning with lowering ceilings and rain by mid-day. By the time we got to the north end of Williston Lake, the ceilings had dropped to less than a thousand feet and the visibility was about three miles. The Trench is about five miles wide with six to seven thousand mountains on either side with the river floor at about 2500ft MSL. We were flying at about 1500 ft above ground (AGL) and there was a wall of grey that appeared to extend all the way to the ground. I knew Dale had led planes through there over a hundred times, but we were alone and the forecast was for worsening weather for that area. So we turned around and headed back towards the lake. Now a new adventure began. There was a pretty good sized hole in the clouds over the lake. We climbed to 12,000ft and began looking for an appropriate frequency to get an IFR clearance. In Canada, you need to have some kind of clearance over 12,000ft. There were clouds all around, but we knew we were above any terrain. After not seeing anything that looked like a center frequency, I called Flight Service on 126.7. That frequency is used throughout Canada and is both used by FSS and for position reporting. There are remote transmitters all over British Columbia and the Yukon. Whitehorse radio told me that this area of Canada is totally non-radar and we were below Edmonton Center's airspace. So after giving him our position and waiting a few minutes, we got an IFR clearance at 16,000ft direct Whitehorse, about 320nm away. With GPS, we knew exactly where we were and by communicating that to the controllers, it was easy for them to coordinate us with other traffic. Of course there was no other traffic! You were either VFR down low (with decent weather) or way up high. We did not see or hear another airplane on the common frequency all the way to Whitehorse. It was kind of eerie! Even after we got into Edmonton Center's airspace, there were no planes flying IFR down low. And it is still non-radar. We got cleared to a fix and an altitude

about 24 miles from Whitehorse while still 70 miles out. VERY different of course, by the time we got into the Whitehorse area, the clouds broke up and we had great views on decent. And we ended up arriving before the rest of the group. They stopped for lunch at Watson Lake and took a more scenic route into Whitehorse. We had radioed Dale on the Let's Fly Alaska frequency, so everyone knew we were back in the air. Once on the ground, we had a fueling conga line at the ONE self service fuel pump. Took nearly 1.5 hours to fuel everyone! Of course, we got to go first and were done when the others arrived. Small consolation! We're traveling by train and motor coach tomorrow headed for Skagway, then back to Whitehorse for dinner.

Prince George, BC Mon June 13, 2011 @ 22:00PT: As predicted, we all needed to fly from Olympia to Prince George IFR today. After 2000 miles of high altitude cross country flying, another 450nm flight of the same didn't feel very exciting. There was great scenery below us that we didn't get to see. Oh well. The weather always wins! The flight took just over two hours with easy CanPass customs as we landed in Prince George. During the flight, the US air traffic controllers were all asking us questions about what seven Aerostars and one Cessna 414 were doing all flying up to Prince George. We explained about Let's Fly Alaska and that normally, these flights are done VFR down low and that ATC radar controllers aren't involved. We also gave them a heads up that a Bonanza would be following us up as well. Canadians are known for being extremely polite and friendly. So are their air traffic controllers. We were up at 16,000ft and it looked it was going to take about Flight Level 180-200 to top the weather. We had a tailwind, so going higher seemed like a good idea. When I asked the controller for flight level 180 or 190, she told me that flight level 180 wasn't available because the barometric pressure was too low and that flight level 190 was in the wrong direction of flight. Then without missing a beat, this wonderful controller "offered" us a block altitude from 17,000 to flight level 200. Two firsts for me:

- ▣ In 38 years of flying, I had never had been in a block altitude where you own all the airspace between the two altitudes assigned. For us in the northeast with its congested airspace, block altitude clearances are pretty rare.
- ▣ I had never heard a controller "offer" a block altitude to anyone. Typically you have to request it. When we got to Prince George, our other pilots were also quite surprised at the exchange over the radio – pretty neat.

Prince George is a nice town located where the Fraser and Nechako rivers come together. Tomorrow is supposed to be VFR (finally) as we continue north to Watson Lake and Whitehorse, YT.

Olympia, Wa – Sun June 12, 2011 @ 21:00 PT: We made it to Olympia with no issues late Sunday morning. A two hour flight across the Rockies from Kalispel and Glacier Park, Mt. Here's the view of Mt. Rainier from our Aerostar on the way into the Seattle area. Once we landed we met Dale Hemman, the owner of Let's Fly Alaska and the rest of our fellow travelers. Quite a group – seven Aerostars, one Cessna 414 and our leader is flying a Bonanza. The group speed will be 175 knots. Should be quite interesting. At the evening briefing, we talked a lot about “loose trail” group flying and the safety aspects of flying in a group as well as the differences in Canadian and US air regulations. More about loose trail flying after we experience it!!! The Let's Fly Alaska hangar is a bit different than what we are generally used to. Yes, there's a beautiful Bonanza, but as you can see a whole lot more. This is Dale's office that has a kitchen, full bath, pool table and plenty of work and meeting space. We leave for Prince George, BC Monday morning, however the weather forecast isn't in our favor, so right now it looks like we'll be flying up there IFR individually and not as a group. I have posted more photos of Mt. Ranier and other pictures of our trip at: <http://larry72.slickpic.com/a/AlaskaFlyingAdventure2011>