

By Comanche to Mardi Gras

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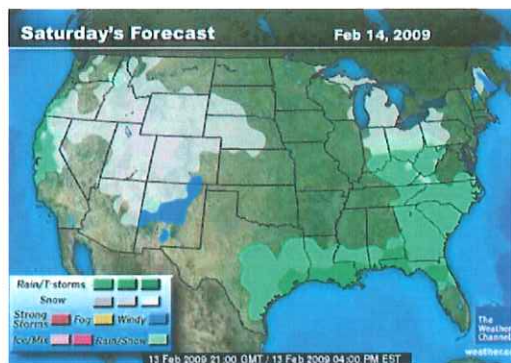
Planning is everything, particularly when considering a long distance flight into unfamiliar territory. The plan was to visit my daughter in Mandeville LA and take in some of the Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans. The weather in mid-February is challenging at best, with, this year, a steady parade of winter storms flowing up from the Ohio River valley. To be ready I planned two routes from Danielson CT (LZD) to Slidell LA (ASD), one going down the West side of the Blue Ridge mountains, the other going along the East coast, and both avoiding the DC airspace.

The first route generally followed the great circle route along V-39 over Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania, skirting the P-40 airspace and AOPA headquarters, with a fuel stop at Luray Caverns (W45). We had vacationed in the Shenandoah Valley last summer and were looking forward to seeing the area from the air. The route continued down the east side of the Blue Ridge along V-143 to Athens Ga (AHN) for the next fuel stop, just outside the Atlanta Class B airspace.



The alternate route followed V-139 from the tip of Long Island to Newport News (PHF). This route is often referred to as the “shark route” and takes you over the Atlantic, well outside best glide distance to shore, but it is a route I have used often before. After fueling up we would continue along V-66 over the Virginia and Carolinas piedmont area, well east of the mountains, to Athens for the fuel stop.

Which ever way we got there, from Athens we would continue westward along V-20, landing at Slidell after a total of about nine hours of flying.



The weather for the day of departure was forecast to be lousy, with snow and freezing rain along our western route through New York and Pennsylvania, but with scattered showers for the lower east coast. We chose the coastal route and I filed three IFR flight plans. The early morning briefing revealed clear or scattered clouds all the way to Athens, and even a tailwind for the first over-water leg - much better than the western route.

I elected to depart Danielson VFR and request Flight Following. Providence Departure gave us a squawk code and then said, “We have your IFR flight plan and squawk. You can use that code for your VFR flight if you like, and switch to IFR at any time as needed.” Boy, talk about user friendly! We accepted the offer, changed the squawk, and continued to Newport News at 7500 feet without problems. When I contacted departure for the next leg I suggested the same approach – IFR squawk for VFR flight – and the tower readily agreed. We continued to Athens at 5500 feet, mostly on top of a scattered layer, dodging occasional buildups and leaning into an increasing headwind.

At Athens, after fuel and some homemade sandwiches, I contacted Flight Services on WxBrief for the final leg. Ahead of us was a broken to solid ceiling at 4000 feet and overcast at 20,000 all the way to Louisiana. Our destination reported broken at 1500 and west winds and light rain, with clearing reported further west. I picked up my IFR clearance (“as filed”) and we headed west around Atlanta. Our 5000 foot cruise altitude put us just above the lower layer and not too deep into the headwinds above. I requested and got “higher”

for a thicker cloud region but gave up another 10 knots to the wind, so back to 5000 when the clouds began to disperse. By the time we reached Slidell the cloud layer below us was broken, with occasional larger holes, and the high overcast was gone. We found a nice hole, cancelled IFR with New Orleans, and descended to Slidell as the sun neared the horizon – a very satisfying day of Comanche flying.

Trip stats: 1175 NM, 9 hours on the Hobbs, 97 gallons of AvGas. Dialing the prop back to 2150 RPM and leaning just rich of peak yielded an average of 133 Kts against a headwind and 10.8 gal/hr for the trip. All with no surprises, no frantic need to come up with a different plan, no arguing with ATC over routing – just fun flying. Maybe next year we can get to see the Blue Ridge from the air. I think I will start planning next week...