

Malibus Around The Horn

Part I

by Robert Mills

On March 25, 2005, four airplanes launched from distant points across the country to gather together in a foreign land, like spies in the night. The departures from San Francisco, Chicago, New York and Colorado Springs all took to the air with a common goal and a single mission. The JetProp, two Mirages, and a Piper Chieftain were about to embark on a test of will and endurance by circumnavigating the continent of South America. The adventure would consume 33 days of challenge and excitement, and take the pilots and their aircraft to places beyond the ordinary.





Southern Fascination

Exploring South America has long been a dream of mine, with images of steamy jungles hiding primitive isolated villages of fascinating indigenous peoples dressed in native costume, adhering to ancient customs, and living outside the modern world. But South America is much more than that. The largest glaciers outside of Greenland and Antarctica are in Chile. At the other temperature extreme, the Atacama Desert is the driest place in the world. With the exception of Australia, South America is actually the most urban continent. Four of the world's 15 most populous cities are there: San Paulo, Buenos Aires, Lima, and Rio de Janeiro. Over 90% of the entire population of South America lives in a city, and most cities are near the coast, the interior being largely that wilderness of my dreams.

Many cities in the U.S. are closer to Europe than to cities in Central America. San Francisco is a thousand miles closer to London, England (4664 nm) than to Buenos Aires (5588 nm). New York City is closer to London (2976 nm) than to Lima, Peru (3153 nm) and Lima is barely *half way* to Ushuaia, Argentina. We were to travel vast distances.

Air Journey

Air Journey, LLC, handled all of the logistics for our group. Each of the four participating airplanes were provided VFR color terrain maps, IFR charts, approach plates, background information on each country, and pre-prepared ICAO flight plans for each leg. Air Journey sent along an experienced guide, Jean Pierre Arnaud, an enthusiastic French expatriate who fluently spoke all three of the necessary languages, Spanish, English, and Portuguese. JP, as we called him, flew with MMOPA member Art Augustensen in Art's Mirage. JP handled liaison on his satellite phone with Air Journey's "home base" in West Palm Beach. He took care of all the paperwork, including customs, immigration, weather briefings and the filing of our international flight plans. In addition, Air Journey also retained experienced local "ground handlers" to greet us at each airport and to provide us with transportation.



The Ramp at the End of the Earth, Ushuaia, Argentina

At each major stop, knowledgeable local guides were also hired to escort us on guided tours. This comprehensive servicing removed virtually all of the stress from the trip. We were free to just fly our airplanes, enjoy ourselves, and savor the experience.

Let the Adventure Begin

The trip started off innocuous enough. My wife, Miriam, and I launched toward the unknown from our home field in Novato, just north of San Francisco at the edge of the wine country, in our 1999 Mirage. We headed initially to Panama City for the rendezvous with JP and the other aircraft. Our adventure began as we flew out of U.S. airspace from Brownsville, Texas, and were handed off to Mexican ATC. We soon were out of radar contact, which of course, is the normal aviation environment throughout most of the world.

With few altimeter settings available, the flight level convention (altimeter at 29.92) begins as low as 3000 feet msl. Mandatory reporting points on airways are established within communication range of local airport towers. As in the U.S. in the event of radar failure, pilots on flight plans must report crossing these points to tower controllers in a format that includes the Zulu time estimate of reaching the next reporting point. IFR requests south of the border for "direct to" will generally be denied if the flight path is away from established airways.

Unplanned Stop

As we flew straight south down the Mexican coast, clouds and turbulence dissipated, but not the fierce headwinds. After a short bout of denial I had to face the truth: we were not going to make our first overnight destination, La Ceiba,



Jungle Rest

At La Ceiba, we rested overnight at a delightful resort in the jungle called Poco Bonito. The next morning the controllers at La Ceiba's tower invited us up to the tower. The controllers gave an excellent weather briefing, and helped us file our international flight plan. In short order we were spiraling up over the ocean to get some altitude before heading up a deep canyon into the wild interior mountains. The untamed mountainous landscape eventually descended to coffee plantations along the far drier Pacific Ocean side. A long row of tall volcanoes stretched northward through the center of the tiny nation of El Salvador. One, El Chaparrastique, a classic cone, had white steam billowing from its caldera. Stephen Spielberg could not have created a more captivating image.

Airborne Greeting

We were routed over Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, then south over Managua, the capital of Nicaragua. Our route next angled us over northern Costa Rica, back toward the Atlantic, and then across the Gulf of Mosquitoes into Panama. Cutting back again toward the Pacific side, we were radar identified by Panama Center as we neared the Panama Canal. There we overheard the three other aircraft in our group on Center frequency. How wonderful to hear familiar voices in a foreign land. What timing!

The others of our group had flown from West Palm Beach over Cuba, refueled in the Caymans, flew over 675 miles of open ocean, and were now finally nearing our rendezvous airport. We greeted each other warmly over to the air-to-air frequency. There were Fred and Nancy Gillick from Chicago, in a Piper Chieftain Navajo N2584Z, Jim and Ann Young, from Colorado Springs in JetProp N85RT, and J.P. and Art in Mirage N97AA. After dodging a developing thunderstorm, we all landed together at Gelabert International, a VFR-only airport surrounded by dangerously high hills next to the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal.

cont. page 54 ▶

Honduras. We would need an unplanned fuel stop. This was my first hint that nature would throw some punches during the trip.

Near Vera Cruz, I called the tower, interrupted the chatter in Spanish, and announced in English that I was requesting permission to land for a "technical fuel stop." Following a long silence, the controller responded in heavily accented but understandable English, "November 962WF cleared to fly VOR A approach 10 mile arc, report 8 mile final." Within minutes I was parked on the ramp in 104 °F heat next to the modern, air conditioned customs/immigration office. My wife speaks Spanish and she smiled warmly and explained our predicament. The tension when we first entered immigration melted as she began joking and laughing with everyone. We were soon on our way.

Pop Up Clearance

Departing Vera Cruz VFR, we delighted in the fun of flying low alongside endless beaches for a hundred miles or so to the beginning of the Yucatan Peninsula. There, seeing towering CB along our inland route, I looked up the frequency for the next airport with a tower. After a bit of language struggle, which the startled controller and I both rather enjoyed, I surprised even myself by getting a pop-up IFR clearance to La Ceiba, Honduras. We zigzagged around the weather across the Yucatan Peninsula, crossing northern Guatemala and over-flying Belize City. From there we were given direct to our destination straight across the Gulf of Honduras. The picturesque La Ceiba airport is on a narrow spit next to the beach at the foot of jagged mountains that leap 7,000 feet straight up out of the coastal jungle. I felt as if I had finally made it to South America. But the fun was only beginning.

Miriam and I were already 3,775 miles from home, but were really only just getting started.

Before leaving Panama we toured the canal from above, flying over the graceful Bridge of the Americas prior to heading across the Gulf of Panama. We flew over a chain of small islands, the Archipelago of Pearls, down the Colombian coast and then inland near Cali, where we crossed into Ecuador. We descended into a deep valley surrounded by volcanoes rising to 20,000 feet, and landed in Quito at 9228 feet above sea level. As I taxied off the runway, my engine died. I had not adjusted my mixture to accommodate the altitude. My embarrassment was only lessened a bit when I saw the same fate quickly befall my fellow travelers. This was not my proudest moment.

City of Eternal Spring

Sitting on the equator, Quito experiences no seasons. But unlike other hot tropical cities at similar latitudes, Quito's high altitude keeps temperatures at a perpetual springtime cool. The fertile volcanic soil, the high altitude sun, and the frequent light rains from condensing mist rising up from the Amazon basin combine to give plants, especially flowers, all the ingredients for vigorous unrestrained growth.

During our visit, the president of Ecuador, Lucio Gutierrez, fired the entire supreme court. Fortunately, the decision was announced shortly after our departure, because huge riots ensued. A state of emergency was declared that closed the airport. A week after we left, mobs stormed the presidential office forcing Gutierrez to flee to asylum in Brazil. That was a close call.

White Belly Above

The fortunately-timed departure from Quito gave new meaning to density altitude. We used what seemed like half of the 10,236 ft runway. I then had to climb rather quickly to FL230 to meet the minimum crossing altitude at an intersection over the cloud-shrouded Andes. I enjoyed a half-hour head-start on Jim and Ann, but I saw on TCAS their JetProp rapidly gain ground as I was passing through



The Inca Mystery Fortress of Macchu Picchu

FL220. The JetProp soon zoomed past me nearly a mile above, its sparkling white belly outlined sharply against the sky's dark blue. Soon we were over Ecuador's largest city, Quayaquil, where we turned south to cross the Gulf of Guayaquil into Peruvian airspace.

The skies cleared as we landed for fuel and customs at Trujillo, Peru, a dusty, desolate strip next to the ocean in the northern desert wilderness. It looked like Iraq, with adobe hovels and a few isolated date palms. The tower controller, who spoke limited English, became flustered when four private airplanes suddenly swooped in together. On the ground someone told us that no American registered private prop planes had ever landed at this airport. We then departed for Lima.

White Gloves and Tuxedos

The fourth largest city in South America, Lima is a sprawling metropolis of more than 10 million people. Through a connection from Thierry Poille, the owner of Air Journey, we were invited by a private family to dine in their villa built in 1537 in the heart of the city. We enjoyed a 7-course feast in a palatial candle-lit mahogany-paneled room, served by white-gloved butlers in tuxedos.

Because we could not produce for the authorities any factory-published performance charts for altitudes above 10,000 feet, Peru would not give us permission to fly our

airplanes over to Cusco to see Macchu Picchu. The airport at Cusco, at 10,860 msl, is often warm enough to have density altitudes over 15,000 feet. Complicating matters, the airport is surrounded on all sides by towering mountains, which sometimes generate extreme orthographic turbulence. Apparently, these factors have led to a number of accidents. We had no choice but to acquiesce to the indignity of hopping on a commercial shuttle to Cusco.



Southernmost Commercial Runway in the World, Ushuaia



Hanging with the Locals in Cusco, Peru

Talk of the Town

On board, the airline pilots said that because our Malibus were parked in front of the main disembarkation ramps here and in Quito, we were the subject of much air-to-air chatter among airline crews all over Latin America. Curious about our trip and our airplanes, the pilots invited one of us (we selected Fred) to join them in the cockpit jump seat for the flight.

Departing Peru turned into an interesting exercise. With our airplanes parked on

the ramp next to the jetliners, the officials considered us smaller versions of the same. To the immense amusement of the pilots in our group, security insisted on issuing each of our wives a formal boarding pass to enter her own airplane. The husbands, whom the locals endearingly insisted upon referring to as “cap-e-tan”, were to conduct the security checks. This led to tasteless ribaldry about which I will say no more.

Apparently, no official airspace user fees for prop airplanes had ever been issued. As Americans in our own private planes, appearing to be unimaginably wealthy, the Peruvian officials decided to practice some extortion. They charged us \$2000 *per airplane* as an airspace fee. Our normally unflappable and diplomatic guide, Jean-Pierre, went apoplectic, waving his hands in the air and screaming all sorts of animated and colorful threats in Spanish. But to no avail. We paid and headed for Chile.

Now That Is Dry

The Atacama Desert in Chile is the driest place on earth, as I mentioned earlier. We landed in Iquique, Chile, a vibrant deep-water port city where there *has never in history been a recorded drop of rainfall*. Mummies in the local museum, found atop nearby Andean mountains, are older than those in Egypt, perfectly preserved by the arid climate. Rock strewn hills of sand, thousands of feet high,

rim the city, whose municipal golf course sports not a blade of grass, only sand and gravel. The desert is so completely barren that NASA uses the site to test Martian rovers.

From Iquique, we flew in silky smooth air down the coast, with the blue Pacific on the right, the red Atacama Desert underneath, and the white snow capped Andes on the left, a special version of red, white and blue. The dry desert air was so crystal clear that I could see the mighty Aconcagua, the highest mountain in the western hemisphere at 22,841 feet, over 250 miles away. The approach to Santiago, Chile, brought us right past that mountain. Imagine flying along at FL170, dwarfed by the peak still more than one mile above.

A Bit Chilly in Chile

Santiago is the wealthiest city in Latin America, sprouting a dense thicket of middle-rise glass skyscrapers at the base of the Andes. After an oil change, a tour, and some world-class dining, we were flying south again over spectacular Andean mountains, glaciers, forests, fjords and, as always, volcanoes. We did a quick refueling in the rain at Puerto Montt, a resort town in the bucolic Lakes District, and then headed out over landscape reminiscent of southeast Alaska. The outside air temperature had been dropping a degree or two every fifteen minutes from the moment we left Iquique. By the time we reached southern Chile the freezing level had descended from over 18,000 ft to 5,000 ft. This temperature profile is not surprising when you consider that Chile is long enough to stretch from Guatemala to Alaska.

A Bit Bumpy

As we neared Puerto Natales, our VFR-only destination airport, darkness was near, and lenticular clouds were ominously standing guard dead ahead. We hit severe turbulence in our descent eastbound below the summits, while my wife was in the back busy taking pictures. I immediately climbed to lose speed, dropped the gear, and put out the brakes. Still, I could barely control the airplane. Loose objects, which in this case

cont. page 56 ▶



included my wife, continued to fly about the cabin making loud and distracting noises. In desperation, I turned and flew southwest away from the higher peaks. That helped. But night was almost upon us and weather was closing in fast. I decided to follow the descending ridgelines south until they got lower, then descended through a hole in the clouds to the leeward side of a deep canyon. That did the trick. Flying low and slow, a few hundred feet above the ground, I twisted down the winding canyon in the twilight following a white-water river. Finally, I put the wheels down on the gusty Patagonian runway in the last gloomy gasp of twilight.

Even Bumpier Still

A nasty storm was brewing as we returned to the airport in Puerto Natales after acting like tourists for a few days. The weather had already turned ghastly in Ushuaia, so we decided instead to make a quick dash about 100 miles south to Punta Arenas, Chile, the southernmost city on the mainland of South America. There we would wait out the weather. The wind, which had been only breezy before, began to rise sharply

as we prepped our airplanes. When the first Malibu took off, the wind was 25 knots. When Miriam and I lined up on the runway shortly thereafter, the tower called the wind at 37 knots, gusts higher. From the moment the wheels came off the runway, I knew that this was going to be a hellish ride. Art's Mirage had taken off ahead of us and JP soon came on the air-to-air, in his calm, understated radio voice, to report severe turbulence.

Patagonia is renowned for some of the worst weather in the world, especially high winds. As we approached the top of the 4,000 foot ridgelines, the eddies slammed into us like professional wrestlers. My Garmin 296 flew off the dash, hit the ceiling and ricocheted into my forehead. The impact was so hard I initially thought the Garmin had broken my skin. Back in the rear seat, no matter how tightly she pulled her belt, Miriam's head kept slamming into the ceiling. She grabbed a sleeping bag in a stuff sack and placed the newly-designed cushion between her head and the roof. She held her elbows up at 90 degrees, with forearms poised straight up against the ceiling. I looked back at her in this



Exploring with the Gang at Torres Del Paine National Park, Chile

ridiculous position. Our eyes meet. She was pale but smiling bravely. We laughed. This is what couples call a "bonding moment." It would count for a million wife-points.

Airspace Incursion

At 9,000 ft the cross-wind was at least 100 knots. In hand-flying the airplane, I had



Fall Colors on the Desolate, Pristine Island of Tierra Del Forego



piling up behind me, the annoyed female controller asked me, “Toe whiskas folks, you continua da poach!?” “Yes! Si!” I shouted. Like there was an alternative? As I approached the runway on a plateau on a high cliff next to the water, the down draft eddy plunged us down toward the frothy surface of the sea. Still recovering I wobbled sideways across the threshold of runway 25 as the tower called “wind 290 at 49 knots.” Gusts had to be 60 knots or higher. The final 50 feet of descent was almost like landing a helicopter. The wheels touched at a ground speed of about 25 knots as I came to an almost immediate stop. On the ground we cut short our guided tour of Punta Arenas. With winds shrieking, and the temperature plunging to 30 °F, we were freezing off our parka-covered behinds.

inadvertently blown 15 miles off course, out of Chile and into restricted military airspace in Argentina. The controllers in Punta Arenas had radar, and they told me in no uncertain terms to get back into Chile and on course. I corrected course, then went back on autopilot, which needed a 50 degree crab to hold course.

As we descended on approach to Punta Arenas, our situation improved, since the city is located on a plain south of and away from the mountains. As I crossed over the airport, I assumed that clearance to land would soon be forthcoming. But instead the controller bumped me for a jumbo cargo jet 20 miles out. By the time that jet had landed and I was finally vectored from downwind into the localizer, I had blown over 15 miles across the Strait of Magellan, over the island of Tierra del Fuego, almost out of sight of the airport. When I turned inbound, my groundspeed was less than 70 knots. With the plane bucking and lurching, I applied full power, intercepted, joined, and headed in to the field. The surface gusts were so strong that in spots they churned the white caps on the surface of the sea into a thick, white foamy spray that blew horizontally, giving the dizzying impression that the sea itself was moving.

Accustomed to dealing with fast jets, puzzled why I was still dawdling, and with more jets

At this point, “getthereitis” was eating us alive. We were now only a one hour flight from Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost city in the world. Located in a deep fjord adjacent to high mountains on the far southern end of Tierra del Fuego, high winds, severe turbulence, deadly icing and freezing rain are common. Knowing that we were likely going to head into all of these forbidding terrors the next day, each pilot that night tossed and turned in bed, lost in his own fears. Jim was worried about low ceilings, Art was concerned about ice, Fred was anxious about getting above the weather in his unpressurized Navajo. Miriam feared turbulence, and I fretted about what would happen to us if we ditched in the icy water in such a remote place with limited rescue assets.

End of The Earth

The next morning, contrary to predictions, the weather was much improved. Spirits soared. We launched into dense low clouds, but soon after crossing the Strait the weather cleared completely. We began exclaiming to each other on the air-to-air, excitedly taking pictures of the glaciated mountains, stunningly beautiful fjords, mirror-surfaced lakes, and colorful fall foliage in the valleys of Tierra del Fuego. The city of Ushuaia rolled under the wing as we banked left out



*Cavorting at the Equator—
One Foot in Each Hemisphere*

over Beagle Channel, named for the ship that took Charles Darwin on his famous expedition. As we rolled onto final, before us lay the southernmost commercial runway in the world, 9051 miles from home. On the ground, with planes neatly lined up in a row, all framed by gigantic icy mountains, we exchanged joyful hugs and happy high-fives.

We lodged in a ski resort above town with a commanding view of the city, surrounded by hardwood foliage in blazing fall colors. The clouds quickly returned during our celebratory dinner as a storm blew in with full force. Later that night as we lay in bed listening to wind gusts rattling the lodge and slamming snow against shaking windows, we anxiously contemplated the eleven thousand miles of adventure that still lay ahead. Those adventures, of which there was plenty, will be described in Part II in a subsequent issue. Do not change that dial.