

Malibus Around The Horn

Part II

by Robert Mills

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Robert Mills is a consumer class action attorney with his own law firm, which helps support his lifelong commitment to mountain climbing and hiking. Born in North Carolina, he went west and graduated with a philosophy degree from U.C. Berkeley. Robert bought his first airplane in 1998, a new Saratoga, but soon moved up to a new 1999 Mirage, which has now been to 49 states and 15 foreign countries.

Robert and his wife Miriam, who have three children, currently live in Kentfield, California, near San Francisco. Miriam refers to the Mirage as "the Fox," after the call sign, and says that she is pleased that Robert's mid-life crisis led him to an aluminum mistress that, at more than two tons, makes her feel svelte by comparison.

End of the Earth

I last left you in the city of Ushuaia, half-way into our 33-day transcontinental adventure, after landing at the southernmost commercial runway in the world, 9051 miles from home as the crow flies. We were greeted by a brief patch of good weather and blazing fall colors, which quickly gave way to a brewing storm shortly after our arrival. We spent the night in a ski resort in a driving snow, remembering that eleven thousand miles of adventure still lay ahead, as we would not be flying like crows. In our group were Fred and Nancy Gillick from Chicago, in a Piper Chieftain Navajo N2584Z, Jim and Ann Young, from Colorado Springs in JetProp N85RT, and Art Augustensen in Mirage N97AA. Flying with Art was our guide from Air Journey, who you will recall is Jean Pierre Arnaud, an

enthusiastic French expatriate known affectionately as JP. I was flying with my wife Miriam in our 1999 Mirage.

The following morning greeted us with overcast skies. The snow had stopped falling but we were not in the clear: despite earnest promises, there was no avgas at Ushuaia. Once again JP came to the rescue with his fluency in Spanish, English, and Portuguese. After anxious satellite phone calls, JP located gas at Rio Grande, a small town with an IFR airport on the Atlantic side of Tierra del Fuego about 89 nautical miles away. We headed there, breaking out into sunshine climbing through 11,000 feet. The wind had died down upon our arrival but the approach put us back into dense dark



*The Gang Poses During Tour
of the Amazonian Jungle*

clouds in which we rapidly accumulated clear ice in moderate turbulence. On the ground in Rio Grande I discovered that because the ice was so clear and nearly invisible, I had accumulated much more than I had realized. The temperature on the ground was at freezing so the ice was not melting. I pried long semi-circular blades of ice off the leading edges and handed them out to the amused line crew as souvenirs.

Rio Grande was used as a staging area for the Falklands War in the 1980's. The airport was scattered with ruins and dilapidated buildings. We were directed to taxi down a narrow, weedy concrete path away from the FBO to a rundown building with an agricultural tank on wheels sitting nearby in the bushes. Our avgas was in that tank, which we approached with some trepidation. The tank was hooked up with jerry-rigged jumper cables attached to a make-shift electric pump connected to a garden hose. Rube Goldberg would be proud. When I sump pumped the wings, the gas was greenish and a touch murky. That confirmed that my \$5.04 per gallon purchase also included a generous amount of water. After a lengthy run-up during which the greenish gunk appeared to actually burn, we launched into the gray muck. I picked up a huge, heavy load of clear ice in only a





*Thundering, World-Heritage
Iguaçu Falls on the Brazilian Side*



*The Meeting of the Waters,
Amazon River*

few minutes. At full power I was barely climbing when I finally broke out. Despite temperatures below freezing, the ice sublimated quickly in the strong sunlight on top.

Turn Northward

Climbing high in a tailwind, we zoomed north up the Atlantic coast to refuel at the legendary airport in Trelew, Argentina. The airport is famous for being the former home base of Antoine de Saint-Exupery, a pilot adventurer and best-selling author of *Night Flight*, which chronicles his harrowing airmail deliveries through the Andes. The weather cleared and we flew on through sparkling skies with views to the left of the Atlantic and to the right of the distant Andes near the west coast of Chile.

About 200 miles out from Buenos Aires, Jim, flying ahead in his JetProp, reported lightning on his sferic. We all dismissed this at first. How could there be lightning? The sky was clear to the horizon in every direction. But soon the top quadrants of all of our Stormscopes® were showing popcorn at 12 o'clock. Then gradually, on the far horizon, we could make out tiny white lumps. I watched with a pit in my stomach as they slowly morphed into towering level-five thunderheads flashing like Christmas tree ornaments. Soon, ATC told us that there were cells directly over the

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airports in Buenos Aires. We grabbed the charts and quickly made contingency plans. But we got lucky. By the time we arrived at our destination GA airport near downtown, the boomers had dumped lots of water on the runway but the storms were now north of the city parked over the huge Rio de la Plata delta.

The approach into Rio's downtown Santos Dumont airport is jaw-dropping and dramatic. Imagine the best of Meiggs, Aspen, and Mammoth Lakes with a touch of Honolulu.

Amazingly, even today, the vast Amazon region is still literally uncharted wilderness.

The approach descends suddenly from an MDA of 12,000 ft, passing low over the high mountain ramparts guarding the city. Then the land suddenly drops away. Below are thickets of gleaming white buildings tucked against the steep mountainsides. The approach calls for a 9000 ft. drop in 13 miles. You swoop down over towering granite spires, fly over the famous wide beaches and blue coves full of yachts, descend low over the downtown skyscrapers, and then circle to land over the water.

The DME arc approach was supposed to take me 10 miles out, but when a blindingly close lightning flash lit up my windshield, I freaked. I turned in short and slam-dunked the approach to minimums and landed. The local airport did not have radar. I never violated MDA, and ATC never said a word.

Under Arrest

Arriving earlier, Jim had flown to minimums, could not see a thing, suffered several system failures, went missed, and then landed 12 nautical miles away at our filed alternate, the downtown international airport. When he taxied to the ramp the tower told him he was under arrest because only twin engine jets could land at that airport. He was forced to sign a confession in Spanish before they would let him leave. The next day JP and our local ground handler smoothed things over with some apologies and the remarkably

calming effect of a few Yankee dollars handed over as a "fine." After the cash changed hands, with smiles all around, Jim was allowed to leave and join us at the GA airport. But he was not alone. Sitting in the right seat was a local pilot paid to supervise the flight. While the copilot had all the "proper" licenses he could no more fly a JetProp than sing *soprano* in the opera. But Jim did make it back.

R&R

Taking a break from the brutal business of adventure travel, we took the next three days for R&R. We all delighted in the pampering of the luxurious Alvear Palace Hotel, the finest in Buenos Aires. We were joined by two Argentinean friends of ours, Eva Murillo and her lovely daughter, Lujan, who live in Cordoba. With a cosmopolitan population of 15 million, Buenos Aires feels and looks like a European city. About 99% of the population is of western European origin, mostly Italian. As you walk down broad, tree-lined avenues reminiscent of the Champs-Élysées, the city evokes the best of the New World and the Old.

Here, Fred and Nancy received dreadful news. A routine oil change discovered that one of their engines would have to be replaced. Sadly, they could not complete the trip with us. They ordered a new engine to be shipped to the FBO and arranged for the FBO to install the new powerplant when it arrived. Then they booked a non-stop round-trip flight to their home in Chicago. When the new engine was installed a few weeks later, they flew back to Buenos Aires and completed the balance of the trip returning up the Brazilian coast.

After a dazzling late-night tango show, fabulous dining, and a tour that included the presidential palace and Eva Peron's tomb, we took a boat up the Rio de la Plata to Iguazu

Majestic 3300' Angel Falls,
Canaima N.P., Venezuela





Falls, designated as a World Heritage site. Due to drought conditions the vast complex of 267 waterfalls was low, but still impressive at 20 times the size of Niagara Falls. We toured the local jungle, sighting monkeys, taking pictures of huge colorful butterflies, and petting the many friendly quatis, a cuddly local creature that looks like a cross between a raccoon and an anteater. The next morning we took the boat under some of the smaller falls, getting delightfully soaked.

Brazil Bound

The next leg took us to the Brazil's capital of Brasilia, a planned city with unusual architecture plopped down in the interior highlands. From there we headed northeast to remote Alta Floresta in the Amazonian basin to refuel before flying over the jungle to Manaus, a thriving city on the banks of the Amazon. Amazingly, even today, the vast Amazon region is still literally uncharted wilderness. The relief maps and aviation charts for this area are mostly blank. They denote only the "approximate alignment" of rivers and depict virtually no roads. The maps warn that the "relief data are incomplete," and provide only an overall elevation that is "believed to be" the highest elevation of terrain. We flew more than one thousand miles over this unmapped Amazonian wilderness before and after Manaus without seeing a single road or human structure, only flat green jungle canopy and, of course, endless rivers.

Manaus is where the Rio Negro, a warm, deeply acidic, reddish-black river originating in Columbia, meets the cold, alkaline, chalky-yellowish Amazon originating in the Peruvian Andes. Appropriately enough this confluence is called "the meeting of the waters." The difference in the color and temperature of the waters is dramatic, which we experienced just by dipping our hands in the water during a boat tour.

The Amazon River is bigger in terms of volume than all of the earth's next 10 largest rivers combined. At Manaus, 1400 miles upstream from its Atlantic mouth, the river is still so wide the other side can barely be seen. We explored the nearby jungle by

boat and toured the local markets and opera house. In the squalid slums of Manaus, we witnessed young children playing in incredibly polluted water. Yet, even the poorest people appeared to have enough to eat. The local diet consists of fresh fish and fruits and vegetables. In the marketplaces and streets in Manaus, the people looked lean but vibrantly healthy. This we found to be in fascinating contrast to the pasty-faced obesity we so often see back home.

Storms Ahead

Leaving Manaus, we flew into dark bumpy rain clouds, remaining IMC for an extended period. Jim and Ann, in their JetProp, flew above and around the weather, while Art used his radar to avoid the areas of heavy precipitation. My radar had failed. As we flew along, the clouds suddenly grew ominously dark. Still, we saw no indications of lightning on the Stormscope®. Then the clouds grew darker still. Those of you who have had this experience know what comes next: first, heavy rain, then hail. Marble sized ice-balls sand-blasted the windshield and leading edges (actually scouring off paint and damaging the intake). The sound was horrendous, but even worse was that sudden translucent flash of light. My heart leaped into my throat: we were flying into an embedded thunderstorm.

Should this happen to you, the correct course of action is to lower the gear, slow to 100 knots, and fly straight and level, taking whatever altitude nature mandates, maneuvering only to keep the wings level. Instead, I hit heading mode on the AP, and turned 90 degrees left. A moment later we were hit by an ice avalanche. A wall of larger hail slammed into us with a roar. At the same moment turbulence kicked us so hard the autopilot was knocked off. I wrestled with the yoke but the plane was dangerously close to being out of control. My wife shouted, "What's happening to us?"

At the same moment, JP and Art, who were having their own troubles, called on the air-to-air to inquire how things were going for us. As I keyed the mike, another gust kicked us and I could only meekly squeak "not good." The plane nearly rolled inverted. I felt as if we

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were flying into a tornado. When things did not improve, I remembered that the lines of cumulous clouds I had seen earlier, before we went IMC, were perpendicular to our flight path. I now wondered if my 90 degree turn was the worst possible move, flying us right down the middle of a line of developing cells. I turned the heading bug another 90 degrees left, heading us back toward Manaus. ATC and JP were trying repeatedly to contact us, but when Miriam or I responded, our transmission was unheard. Then all we could hear was static. The Stormscope® now showed strikes all around our immediate position.

Several times in years past in the Midwest, I had become surrounded by developing thunderstorms. All I had to do to escape then was punch “nearest” on the GPS and put my airplane on the ground at any one of the many nearby airports. I hit “nearest” on the Garmin. The nearest airport was 206 miles away, with nothing but jungle between us and the field. That airport might as well have been on Mars. Landing was not an option. I grabbed the yoke tightly with both hands, squared my shoulders, took a deep breath and began chanting the pilot’s mantra to myself: “just fly the *#@% airplane, just fly the *#@% airplane.” Within a minute or so the clouds began to become brighter. Then the turbulence eased, and the clouds got brighter still. A moment later we burst into clear air and bright sunshine, spit out the side of a towering cumulus with a wall that seemed to reach into the stratosphere.

Relief and Rendezvous

JP and Art in the meantime, having not heard from us for nearly twenty minutes, had begun to try to pinpoint our last known position and were preparing to initiate a rescue if we had indeed gone down. The relief in their voices when we checked in was palpable and endearing. We agreed on where the group would meet up. Many minutes passed before my hands stopped trembling. With little or no rescue assets to search for a downed plane, and the last known position only roughly estimated in uncharted, trackless wilderness, I had no doubt that once we disappeared beneath the triple canopy jungle foliage below us, we would never be found.



Bahamian Islands

The thunderstorms were isolated for the remainder of that leg. We landed in calm clear conditions in Ciudad Guayana, in the middle of Venezuela, in mid-afternoon. After refueling and customs, we immediately took off together and flew back south, VFR, low and in close formation up the spectacular Carraro river canyon. This was one of our most delightful legs. We glided over a huge reservoir and then banked and weaved up the white water river amidst desolate landscape that seemed to be the result of a mating between Yosemite Valley and Sedona, Arizona. We landed in late afternoon in the remote highlands of southern Venezuela at a tiny airstrip next to waterfalls in Canaima National Park. The locals quickly whisked us up-river in outboard-powered dugout canoes to a primitive jungle resort on the riverbank.

Falling Angels

By 5 a.m. the next morning we were in tippy dugout canoes zooming up river in a cold rain in total darkness. Over the next four hours we roared 50 miles up river, surging over class three whitewater rapids to Angel Falls. Named after Jimmy Angel,

the American pilot who discovered them, Angel falls are the highest in the world.

I noticed coming up river the absence of virtually any tourist infrastructure here. Indeed, one of the few small tourist shelters we had passed was completely empty. On land, as we ascended several miles up the steep trail to the base of the falls, I asked one of the guides why so few people came to see this magnificent place. “The kidnappings,” he said. “No one wants to come here, now.” Kidnappings? “Who do they kidnap?” I asked anxiously. “Oh, everybody,” he replied, sighing. He also warned me not to touch the trees to steady myself as I climbed because of the fearsome ants. Ants!? Yes, he explained, they bite you and communicate a disease that causes a sudden, dangerously high fever lasting 24 hours. He also casually warned us about the various extremely aggressive and highly territorial poisonous snakes that make a living along the path. Now I had a better idea of why, even in the peak season, we practically had this entire, glorious national park to ourselves. The weather cleared, unfolding before us thundering falls flush from days of

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We Made It!!! Celebration in West Palm Beach

unseasonably heavy rains. The scene was so utterly spectacular that everyone agreed that this was one of the highpoints of the entire trip. Snakes, ants, and two-legged kidnappers were no deterrent.

Back Again

We flew back to Ciudad Guayana, and then headed to the coast and out over the Caribbean, flying up the chain of famous historic islands that make up the Lesser Antilles. Islands were marked by the cumulous clouds that towered above them. Airports were everywhere and the radio traffic was a happy banter of Spanish, English, French, and Dutch.

Jim, always ahead in his JetProp, was first to spot Montserrat, a British possession with the famous volcano still belching steam and ash. American scientists shocked the world by predicting the eruption on June 25, 1998, the first such accurate forecast in history. When the mountain blew, scorching and nearly burying the capital city in a pyroclastic flow of lava, rock and super-heated gas, the 4,000 souls that lived there had already been evacuated, with the exception of 9 holdouts. Those nine

paid the ultimate price for their stubbornness. We circled the island taking pictures of the smoking volcano and the seared, half-buried remains of the former capital city below.

Within sight were Nevis and St. Kitt, two small islands sporting extinct volcanoes. About 300 years ago the two islands were together the world's leading producers of sugar. Today, the ruins of the sugar plantations have been converted into bed and breakfast inns. The 39,000 inhabitants on the two sleepy islands constitute an independent country with their own flag and seat at the U.N. General Assembly. After many weeks of listening to Spanish or Portuguese controllers, we were shocked to hear the Nevis controller speaking English with a lilting East Indies accent. We spent two nights on Nevis, exploring historic ruins and pristine beaches, and recuperating from the rigors of our intense travel.

The US of A

Departing from our retreat at St. Kitts-Nevis we flew over St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, then across Puerto Rico. There we asked for, and were thrilled to receive, vectors to take us

low over the world's largest radio telescope at Arecibo. You will know this 20 acre mechanical immensity built into a mountain-top crater from the 1995 James Bond movie *GoldenEye* starring Pierce Brosnan. After taking in this enormous antenna we headed over to the Dominican Republic to refuel at the resort community of Punta Cana. The ocean there is so clear that we could actually see ship wrecks resting on the bottom along the northern coast. Near the Haitian border we turned north toward the Turks and Caicos Islands, then on to the Bahamas. We marveled at the pastel blue of the sea in the shallows near the Bahamian islands with sandbars and reefs clearly visible through the transparent waters. After a quick fuel stop in Great Exuma, we struck out for Florida. Handed off at last to Miami Center we had the great thrill of once again hearing controllers speak that familiar American English.

As if to welcome us home, the weather turned crystal clear and perfect. We could see Florida from 80 miles out. I felt a lump in my throat, feeling both sad and happy. I was delighted to be home, and back in the wonderful United States, but sad that this incredible adventure was about to end. We watched a red oval sun squat for a few moments right on the sharp edge of the horizon and then sink from view. While the brilliant post-sunset colors were still flaming, we were cleared to land straight-in at West Palm Beach. As we taxied back, a full moon had risen out of the ocean, framed against the flood-light lit American flag flying in front of the Customs office. It was so magical, so perfect; the moment did not seem real. We wore our Air Journey T-shirts into customs, with a diagram of our trip route superimposed on a map of South America. The U.S. Customs officers were so amused by our wild, rowdy enthusiasm, and our passports full of stamps, that they just smiled, welcomed us back and waived us through. Inside the FBO, Thierry and Sophie were waiting to welcome us with chilled French champagne and a blown-up poster-board map of our trip.

The next morning all of us shared heartfelt goodbye hugs as we scattered to reclaim our busy lives. We all felt a profound gratitude for the privilege of experiencing this extraordinary trip.

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