

# VENTURING FURTHER AFIELD

*USING AIRPORT VISITS TO EXPAND  
YOUR AVIATION EXPERIENCE*

SUSAN PARSON



Photo by Susan Parson

**“Y**ou want me to land *here?*!”

My client’s incredulous query instantly brought to mind the nearly identical — and equally incredulous — question I had posed to my own flight instructor some years ago. In both instances, the prompting event was the instructor’s request for a landing on a runway that, by comparison to the generous length and width of pavement at the home ‘drome, seemed impossibly short and narrow.

A frequent focus of this magazine is proficiency. The lesson, first for me and later for my client, was that runways, and airports, come in many sizes. It pays to be proficient in landing at the smaller ones, and operating safely in the larger and more congested ones. Apart from the benefit such practice offers as preparation for emergency situations, it enhances your skill and comfort level for operations into the unfamiliar fields you inevitably encounter when using your pilot certificate for recreational or business travel.

### **An Airport Tour**

Wondering how to go about it? If you have worked on an instrument rating, you will know that one of the aeronautical experience requirements is to log at least 50 hours of cross-country flight time as pilot-in-command (PIC), or equivalent time. I admit that I initially chafed at that requirement because I just wanted to get on with my flight training plans. Lacking a mentor to guide me (see “What Do I Do Now?” in the July/August 2011 issue of *FAA Safety Briefing*), I also found the project of accumulating 50 cross-country hours a bit daunting. My beginner’s approach was therefore a simple one: I took a sectional chart, drew circles with 50 and 100 nautical mile radii, and made a list of all the airports that landed (so to speak) in the more-than-50-but-less-than-100 nm zone.

I freely admit that I was wrong to balk at the 50-hour cross-country requirement. It was not long before I realized that many educational and proficiency benefits accrue from flying to unfamiliar airports. Though I had flown to a few of the fields on my list in the course of training for my private pilot certificate, most were new territory.

The same was true when I participated more recently in Virginia’s Aviation Ambassadors Program (see sidebar), which cleverly promotes aviation and the state’s 66 public-use airports by using an awards program to encourage pilots and other aviation enthusiasts to visit each one. Here are just a few of

the great lessons learned from my airport visitation experiences.

### **Plans**

You know the cliché exhorting us to plan the flight, and then fly the plan. Though I didn’t exactly need a stone tablet and chisel before today’s smartphones and tablet apps so greatly simplified the flight planning process, I did do a lot of what today’s pilots politely call “manual flight planning.” It was tedious at times; still, the repeated drill of drawing and measuring the course line, calculating performance, evaluating weather/NOTAMs, and consulting the trusty green *Airport/Facility Directory* (A/FD) for the target airport’s vital statistics did a lot to reinforce — and solidify — the fundamental flight planning skills acquired in private pilot ground school. And, in the days before GPS moving map navigators became ubiquitous, the process of flying to so many unfamiliar airports notched up those fundamental navigational skills of pilotage, dead-reckoning, and VOR intercepts and tracking.

In addition to the lessons learned from planning the flight and flying the plan, an equally important lesson from my airport tours was the experience gained from changing the plan on the fly as needed for weather and the range of operational issues that can arise. For example:

- A trip to a smaller airport on a typical summer day in the mid-Atlantic region gave me a whole new appreciation for the challenge of spotting an unfamiliar airport in the thick afternoon haze. I also learned firsthand what 3-to-5-mile visibility looks like.
- On a flight to an air carrier airport in Class C airspace, the controller abruptly cancelled my landing clearance and turned me away from the airport to allow an MD-80 airliner to zoom past. The inevitable “caution, wake turbulence” instruction that followed was a powerful incentive to remember all the wake turbulence avoidance procedures from ground school. And then came the challenges of a last-minute runway change, followed by navigating the concrete maze on the ground — so very different from the single-runway simplicity of my home airport. I did not hesitate to request progressive

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taxi instructions from the friendly ground controller; better for both of us to avoid my becoming a runway incursion statistic.

- A mountain-surrounded airport I visited on another hot summer day reinforced lessons about density altitude. Because its runway was also shorter than the one at my home base, that airport also provided a good reminder of how important practical performance calculations are to safe operations.

### People (and Pets)

One of the best, and most unexpected, benefits of venturing to different airports was the opportunity to meet such a variety of airport people. Like the airports themselves, airplane junkies come in many shapes and sizes. The one thing they typically have in common is an outsized enthusiasm for aviation, airplanes, and fellow aviators. Friendly faces prevailed at even the bigger airports, but what fun to meet so

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**And then there are the airport pets. I've met a few airport cats, but I've lost count of the number of airport dogs who have offered a welcome waggin' to itinerant pilots.**

many people whose idea of weekend fun includes hanging out at the local airport. Especially during my quest to achieve status as a Virginia Aviation Ambassador, these kind souls invariably offered both encouragement and education on local flying conditions and quirks. There was also plenty of education and entertainment from the quirks of the people themselves. I especially remember a small airport whose charmingly eccentric operator kept a prepared lunch — complete with

homemade ice cream and a trove of “there-I-was” hangar flying stories — on hand every weekend for anybody who happened to stop by. Another airport operator made a point of photographing each visiting plane and pilot as part of his comprehensive airport history project.

And then there are the airport pets. I've met a few airport cats, but I've lost count of the number of airport dogs who have offered a welcome waggin' to itinerant pilots.

### Places

Just as pet owners know that no two dogs have the same personality, plane people know that no two airports are truly the same. The larger air carrier airports are an amazing and meticulously organized maze of heavily painted concrete with multi-colored lights and signs. (*For a review of basic airport anatomy, see Tom Hoffmann's "How a Runway Earns Its Stripes" on page 12 of this issue.*) Smaller airports can have some of everything — which is why it pays to consult the A/FD before you launch. During the VA Aviation Ambassador trips, for instance, my flying companions and I experienced everything from bowl-like runways with a noticeable dip in the middle to basic mountain-top strips (e.g., KGDY) to ski-slope runways with unidirectional takeoff and landing requirements.

And don't forget to check for airport amenities. Though few general aviation airports could compete with the mall-like “shopopportunities” that abound nowadays in major airports, you will find a wide range of pilot shops and, better yet, aviation-themed



restaurants that contribute to an airport's unique character. A few airports also host aviation history museums.

## Planes

Speaking of museums ... for those who participate in the sport of plane-spotting, what better way to feed the habit than to visit new airports? Even without a museum on site, airports are a great place for aviation enthusiasts to see a wide variety of aircraft types. I've stumbled upon warbirds, an astonishing variety of experimental/amateur-built planes and, best of all, a number of old friends. I was delighted, for instance, to see the C150 once owned by my flying club on the ramp at its new home base in Delaware. I've sighted several of the steeds I flew in primary training days at airports around the mid-Atlantic. And, since learning the significance of the late 1990s-vintage C172 *Skyhawks* with the "ES" tail number (see "The Legacy of Echo Sierra" in the January/February 2010 issue of *FAA Aviation News*), I have enjoyed looking for those airplanes around the country.

## A More Creative Approach

The bottom line: a pilot proficiency plan based on visiting a range of airports offers a number of aviation educational and enjoyment opportunities with the added benefit that it can help support our country's

vital network of general aviation airports. If your state has a formal airport visitation program, sign up – and let us hear from you, so we can publish a list of such programs in a future issue of *FAA Safety Briefing*. No problem if there is no program, though — your state's aviation department can likely offer a list of its public-use airports, and many states also publish a state-specific aeronautical chart. Also, your inquiry — or suggestion! — might prompt someone in your state to establish its own airport visitation program.

If you are an instructor or flight school operator, an airport visitation program is a great way to put scenario-based training into practice. Those in states with an airport visitation program could enhance the student's training experience by using it for both dual and solo cross-country flights. It also offers an incentive for structured "post-graduate" flying, both for proficiency and for earning higher certificates and ratings. If your state lacks a formal program, why not create your own? Your local GA airports will appreciate your support, and there is no limit to how much you can learn and enjoy in the process. ✈️

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*Susan Parson is a Special Assistant in the FAA's Flight Standards Service and editor of FAA Safety Briefing. She is an active general aviation pilot and flight instructor.*

## States Encourage Airport Visitation

At least two states in the mid-Atlantic region have established formal airport visitation programs.

In Virginia, the Virginia Department of Aviation's Aviation Ambassadors Program is designed to encourage pilots to visit all of the state's 66 public-use airports as well as visit aviation museums and attend safety seminars. As noted on Virginia's website description, the program lets pilots and aviation enthusiasts see the valuable asset provided by the state's airport system and learn more about the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Virginia Aviation Ambassadors Program provides Bronze, Silver, and Gold level recognition for pilots and passengers who visit (via flying or driving) Virginia airports and aviation museums, participate in one of the DOAV/FAA safety programs, and attend the Virginia Regional Festival of Flight. For more information, see: <http://www.doav.virginia.gov/vaap.htm>

In Maryland, the Maryland Airport Managers Association has just established its "Explore Maryland by Air Program." Similar to the structure of the Virginia Department of Aviation's program, Maryland's activity provides Fledgling, Albatross, and Ace levels of recognition for pilots and passengers who visit its 36 public-use airports, its aviation museums, and participate in one or more FAA safety programs. For more information, see: <http://www.marylandairportmanagers.org/explore-maryland-air>

Does your state have an established airport visitation program? If so, let us hear from you! Use your smartphone to scan the QR Code for a VFR-direct trip to our mailbox. We will gladly publish a list of state airport visitation programs in a future issue of *FAA Safety Briefing*.

