

## Two Flights to Belize

Not long after moving to Austin, Texas, I decided it would be interesting to fly to a country in Central America using my Mooney M20F airplane, which was equipped with GPS and could fly at 165 mph for 6 hours on one tank of gas. GPS (Global Positioning System) is a satellite-based navigation system. Belize drew my attention because I learned that English was widely used, and there were many interesting sites to see. Previously known as British Honduras, it was a Crown Colony until 1973 and the last continental possession of the United Kingdom in the Americas. I made two trips in 1993, one in February and a second in March/April. In planning the flight, the problem arose as to what course to take from Brownsville, Texas to Belize. If the shortest distance were followed, it would take the flight across the Gulf of Mexico many miles from land. This would mean that if a problem developed and one needed to land, a water landing would take place many miles out in the Gulf. I was also not certain I would be able to contact air traffic control on the radio for support. So I decided to fly around the Gulf of Mexico, staying close to Mexico in case a landing was required. Even though I had never had a problem, I always planned for that possibility. This made the flight longer, but there was no alternative in view of the safety of my passengers.

For the first visit, Joanne and I were accompanied by Dave Murray and his girlfriend. I had met Dave soon after coming to Austin. As my real estate agent, he was instrumental in finding my first place to live. We departed Austin on February 6. I filled up the plane with fuel in Brownsville since we planned to go the remaining distance on one tank of gas. However, we encountered strong headwinds, and it was necessary to stop for fuel at Villahermosa, Mexico. After we parked the airplane, a man who identified himself as the “Comandante del aeropuerto” stepped forward and demanded a \$150 landing fee. That was an outrageous sum of money in Mexico in the year 1993, and we argued with him for an hour or more. I said to him that this would be bad publicity for pilots flying their airplanes into Mexico. That did not bother



him at all! After the airplane had been fueled, we had everything we really needed. Dave and I considered just getting in the airplane and taking off. At that point, the Comandante decided to assert his authority. He gestured and two men under his command stepped forward brandishing rifles. We were well aware that if we took off, we would be shot or at the very least, the airplane would be disabled. It was now time to concede defeat, and we each chipped in \$75, giving it to the Comandante who suddenly became very friendly. So ended the most exciting part of the trip, but not the most enjoyable!

From there, we flew on to Belize City, clearing customs and immigration. We spent the night in the city, and, the next day, took off for San Pedro, which is at the end of a peninsula on the east side of Belize. Here the full impact of where we were hit us. The weather was gorgeous, and we felt like we were in paradise -- a long way from Austin, Texas! We toured the town, bought some souvenirs, and enjoyed the beach and beautiful water. We then checked into our accommodations and spent the night there.

Up early the next day, we flew the Mooney airplane to a landing strip at a village with the colorful name “Gallon Jug”. where we were picked up by staff from The Lodge at Chan Chich. The site, located in the jungle, is built on top of the main plaza of an unexcavated Mayan temple. The main

Lodge is surrounded by elegant cottages made of native materials. We immediately saw many interesting birds such as the Oropendola, Toucan and Ocellated Turkey. The latter species is not the one you are familiar with for Thanksgiving. Although it is similar to our turkey, it has a different plumage dominated by the color blue. The lodge staff told us that jaguars were frequently seen in the area. So, that night, Dave and I took a trail into the jungle to look for one. Around every bend in the trail, we held our breath expecting to see two eyes looking at us. However, we did not see one, perhaps fortunately! They are over 6 feet long, weigh over 350 lbs and have a powerful bite. We spent an enjoyable two days at Chan Chich, engaging in such activities as horseback riding and swimming. Before leaving Belize, we did some sightseeing by airplane and stopped at a few places. Then on February 12, we flew back to Austin with a stop in Veracruz, Mexico. This trip was so enjoyable that I soon began to plan another.

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For a second trip to Belize, I thought it would be interesting to visit Guatemala first and then go to Belize. Joanne and I were joined by good friends Bob and Doris Benson, whom I knew from my work at IBM. We had planned an early departure on March 26, 1993, but because of an airplane radio problem, we left 4 hours late. I knew this would mean we would arrive after dark at Santa Elena, Guatemala. As required, we had registered ahead of time with our names and passport numbers. so I knew we would be expected. This time we avoided the unfortunate experience at Villahermosa by landing at Veracruz, Mexico for fuel. We then departed for Santa Elena, Guatemala. About an hour before reaching our destination it was completely dark. I felt comfortable anyway because I knew the runway was quite wide, very long and made of concrete. Also we were using GPS navigation, which is extremely accurate and reliable. Well, we finally arrived and I flew over the airport at 1000 ft in preparation for landing. The runway lights were not on so I called on the radio, identified myself and requested landing. There was no answer! I circled the airport and kept trying on the radio to raise someone who could help with the lights. Finally, a vehicle drove on the runway down to the end with its lights on. This was clearly an invitation to land. Even though the runway lights were not on, I could see the runway clearly in the moonlight, so I set up my approach, and descended to an uneventful landing. I was very relieved to be on the ground with my passengers. I then turned the airplane and proceeded toward the ramp following the car. When we arrived at the ramp area, I was astonished to see troops with rifles surrounding the airplane. As we exited the airplane, an officer stepped forward and greeted us. He was quite friendly, but amazed at how we arrived in the dark like that with such accuracy. He told us we could clear customs and immigration the following morning, and so we proceeded to our hotel with his help. That night we had an enjoyable meal and a few drinks. We were so far from Austin and in a country I had never visited, a country which provided a very surprising welcome ceremony!

The next day, we cleared customs and with the help of the same officer, we rented a car. We then visited the extraordinary ruins at Tikal, a site of the Mayan civilization. The monumental architecture of the site dates back as far as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. We saw temples with steps ascending to an area on top where a priest carried out ceremonies some of which involved sacrifice. We learned that Tikal dominated much of the Maya region politically, economically and militarily.

That night, I began to feel somewhat ill and did not eat. Doris had brought a bottle of Cipro. I took one, and the next morning I was in good shape and could pilot my aircraft. We then departed for our next big stop, San Pedro, Belize. Before leaving the area however I requested permission to fly over Tikal. As we passed overhead, the sun was rising. The temples all faced to the east, and it made a very dramatic impression! We then proceeded towards Belize City using GPS navigation. At one point, I

looked off to the left and saw a King Vulture effortlessly gliding at our altitude. It was the first time I had seen this beautiful mostly-white species. And to see it from my airplane! After a short flight, we arrived at Belize City, cleared customs and immigration and departed for San Pedro. Here we spent several days enjoying the local culture, the beach and snorkeling in the Caribbean. One day while snorkeling, we even saw a shark up close!

Next, after two days at San Pedro, we flew to Gallon Jug Airport where, as with the previous trip, we were picked at the airport up by the staff from the Lodge at Chan Chich. This site is located in jungle habitat on the site of an unexcavated Mayan temple. There are interesting birds everywhere, and various mammals, even jaguars. As on the previous trip, we never saw one!

After two enjoyable days, we returned to San Pedro and then finally to Austin on April 5.