

Agua Dulce 2008 (aka Plan B)

The plan was to go to Agua Dulce's airport (L70) with my friend Charles, who is a student pilot and to have a great time at their first 'Airport Day'. There were a lot of planned activities. I was planning to listen to a seminar by Rod Machado, a pilot, flight instructor, author, speaker, humorist, and an all around great guy. It was not to be. Why not? Let me tell you.



Charles checking my oil level prior to flight

I met Charles at the airport around eight o'clock this morning, and we were going to be sure to attend Rod's seminar at 10 o'clock. I had to get some gas, as the tanks were low. While I was at the fuel area, Joe Zammit came over to me. He has a nice red and white Mooney M20E. He has an instrument rating, and I do not. He can fly through clouds. I cannot. There were clouds all over the place and just a little bit of blue sky. I need blue sky.



Murky was the word this morning



Maybe go over there to the left?

After we took off and left the airport, things had changed. The blue sky had closed over with clouds and new openings had formed to the east. I made a couple of left turns and aimed east to see some blue sky in the front window. Several times, I had to explain to Air Traffic Control why I was flying all over the sky in many directions. In the end, we found safe passage through a good-sized area of clear sky.



First I could see the mountains and then later they were hidden

I wish you were there to see for yourself. It was a wild trip - we went right over the top of the San Gabriel Mountains without really seeing them. They were obscured in the clouds below us. Everything looked so different. I double checked the GPS to verify that we were really going in the correct direction while Charles flew the airplane.

We got on top of the clouds over Corona as we reached 5500 feet above sea level. But everything looked weird. It seemed like the mountains that we could see were in the wrong place. Who moved them? The clouds over the mountains were much higher.



Clouds are my highway now



When, we got to the area of Agua Dulce, there was a hole in the clouds below us, and the hole extended way off to the east. We went part way down.

Charles and I had each participated in AOPA's mini-course on safety in the preceding week. Titled "VFR into IMC", it related the tragic death of a pilot who ventured too far into very low clouds and became trapped. I personally urge all VFR pilots to take it at http://flash.aopa.org/asf/acs_vfrimc/. That story was very much on my mind as we descended.

On the way down, the picture changed every 10 seconds and I was constantly re-evaluating my options and decisions. We still could not tell if the bottom of the clouds went down to the top of the nearby mountains. As much as I would have liked to 'see around the corner' I could not check out the area underneath. I vowed not to get trapped in an area that I could not get back out of. Because I could not tell if there was a safe escape once we got all the way down to see better - it was time for plan B.

Plan B

So then, we diverted east through that extended clearing. That is where the clear sky was. After 10 or so miles, we got to the end of the clouds and turned north again. I decided to go to William J. Fox field in the city of Lancaster. Well, that was fun for a different reason. The air there was so bumpy, that I could hardly talk on the radio. I was driving with two hands for a change. Charles punched Direct KWJF into the 430 for me. The winds were 20 gusting to 30 at Fox field. At least there were no clouds. Charles gave me an attaboy for my landing in that wind. Student pilots are not allowed to fly-in those conditions at first. Once we got inside and out of that wind, Charles checked out the cloud conditions for the whole area using his laptop computer, and it looked kind of iffy.

We went back outdoors and leaned forward walking into the wind. Charles unchained the airplane while I held the brakes to keep the plane from rolling backwards. The wind was that strong. The takeoff roll was unusual because of the strong wind. We barely got rolling, maybe 45mph, and we were airborne again. Immediately we drifted to the right and I had to make a 10 degree left turn to stay over the runway. Wow, that was a different feeling. We were westbound and very low clouds were about to blow over the field from the west, so I made a right turn to the north (with Fox Tower's approval) before I even reached the end of the runway.

Once clear of Fox's airspace, I contacted Joshua Approach Control and said my destination was (again) Agua Dulce. Joshua told us of a reported opening in the clouds southeast of the airport and I was enthused. The turbulence had totally disappeared! We climbed back over the beginning of the clouds ahead. Once we got over the Agua Dulce airport again, there were no holes in the clouds. Time for a plan B again.



The ride back south indicated that the clouds had not 'burned off'

Plan B

I told Joshua Approach that we were now going to Corona. We plugged Direct KAJO into the computer (that is what the Garmin 430 really is), and again flew south over the San Gabriel Mountains without seeing them. That is a spooky feeling compared to so many previous flights over the same area. When we got over Corona based on my Garmin moving map, there were no holes in the beautiful white blanket of clouds below us. We had 4 hours of fuel in the tanks and the Mooney was performing beautifully, so there

was no real concern. We could go to Phoenix or Las Vegas if we chose to from our lofty perch. Fine, but we wanted to go back home to Corona. Fly Corona, the flight school was hosting a BBQ. OK, maybe if we....

Plan B

I decided to go to the French Valley (F70) airport by Temecula. It's usually clear there. I told ATC and they kept an eye on us. They sounded relieved when I said that we had 4 hours of fuel on board. This would have been a poor place to be low on fuel. We continued southeast and all of a sudden - a hole in the clouds presented itself to us over Lake Elsinore before we got to French Valley.

Plan B

I announced my intentions to ATC and it was party time. Picture this. Power back to idle, those red speed brakes sticking up out of the top of the wings, the nose pointed way down and me flying a twisting right turn with just the lake out of the front window. This is really driving in three dimensions and I love the mental exercise as much as the physical sensation. We popped under it all in just one minute and then I had a leisurely ride home as Charles drove along under the gray overcast. Five minutes later I was setting us up for the standard approach to Corona's airport. Normally I arrive at 80 knots on short final, and normally the Mooney floats 1/4 to 1/3 of the way down the runway before she slows down and decides to quit flying. This time I set us up at 70 knots on short final and 65 indicated coming over the fence. Boy, she really started sinking quickly. I kept bringing the nose up higher and higher. There was no floating this time. She plopped firmly onto the runway and stayed planted. We were going too slow to bounce at all.

Remember, Plan B works fine if you have enough of them. Yes Wendell, I had a Blue Can then.



Later nearing sunset, more of the same