

Obscure and Scenic New Mexico

by Jeff Gilkey



Jeff Gilkey has been flying his Aerotrike Cobra (ELSA, weight shift control) since 2004. He has logged over 1700 hours on cross country adventures into nearly every corner of New Mexico with many extending into Colorado, Arizona, Utah and Texas. For more information, visit his website at <http://www.jeffsflightlog.com>

Bar 10 Ranch

This month we will head out to the Bar10 Ranch, located in the western part of the old New Mexico Territory, in what I call "Greater New Mexico." Our stay at the Bar 10 was organized by NMPA member Perry Null and held on October 28, 29, 30 this year (2018). Last year, we found that the Bar10 can be quite crowded on Friday and Saturday nights and is practically deserted on Sunday, so Perry shifted our stay to Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday this year.

I had a fantastic time last year. Shortly after arriving I found myself wishing I was staying longer. It was easy to convince my trike flying buddy Paul Dressendorfer to extend our stay for an extra day to October 31. Last year, weather forced us to fly our trikes out in one long day. This year, we were able to spread the trip over two days, with an overnight stop at the Marble Canyon Airstrip.

I had been monitoring a gauging station on the Little Colorado and saw a huge pulse of water had flowed through Winslow 3 days before our planned departure on October 27. I read on the internet that it takes about 2 to 3 days for the water to make it downstream from this point to Grand Falls. After departing Belen, we flew out to St. Johns, AZ for a fuel stop. From there, we followed the Little Colorado past Meteor Crater and were greeted by a magnificent waterfall of mud at Grand Falls. It's great when things work out as planned.





We continued north, following the Little Colorado and Big Colorado to the Marble Canyon Airstrip. This place was almost perfectly set up for our needs with a nicely paved airstrip, hotel and gas station. Early the next morning we took a scenic flight upstream along the Colorado to the Glen Canyon Dam and back, then followed the Paria River Canyon upstream to “the Wave” before turning south for Grand Canyon itself.

The Grand Canyon National Park Special Flight Rules Area are in effect here. The airspace rules kept us at altitudes a couple thousand feet above the rim, separating us from the commercial tour operators who fly prescribed routes at or below the rim. The rules designate five keep out zones (purple areas) in the eastern side of the park that ban all traffic below 14000 ft. The western keep out zone bans tour and GA flights below 8000 ft. This can seem overly complicated and intimidating at first, but all you have to do is stay above the floor of each of the sectors, monitor the sector frequencies, and stay at the designated altitudes for northbound or southbound traffic in the corridors. Plus keep your head on a swivel.

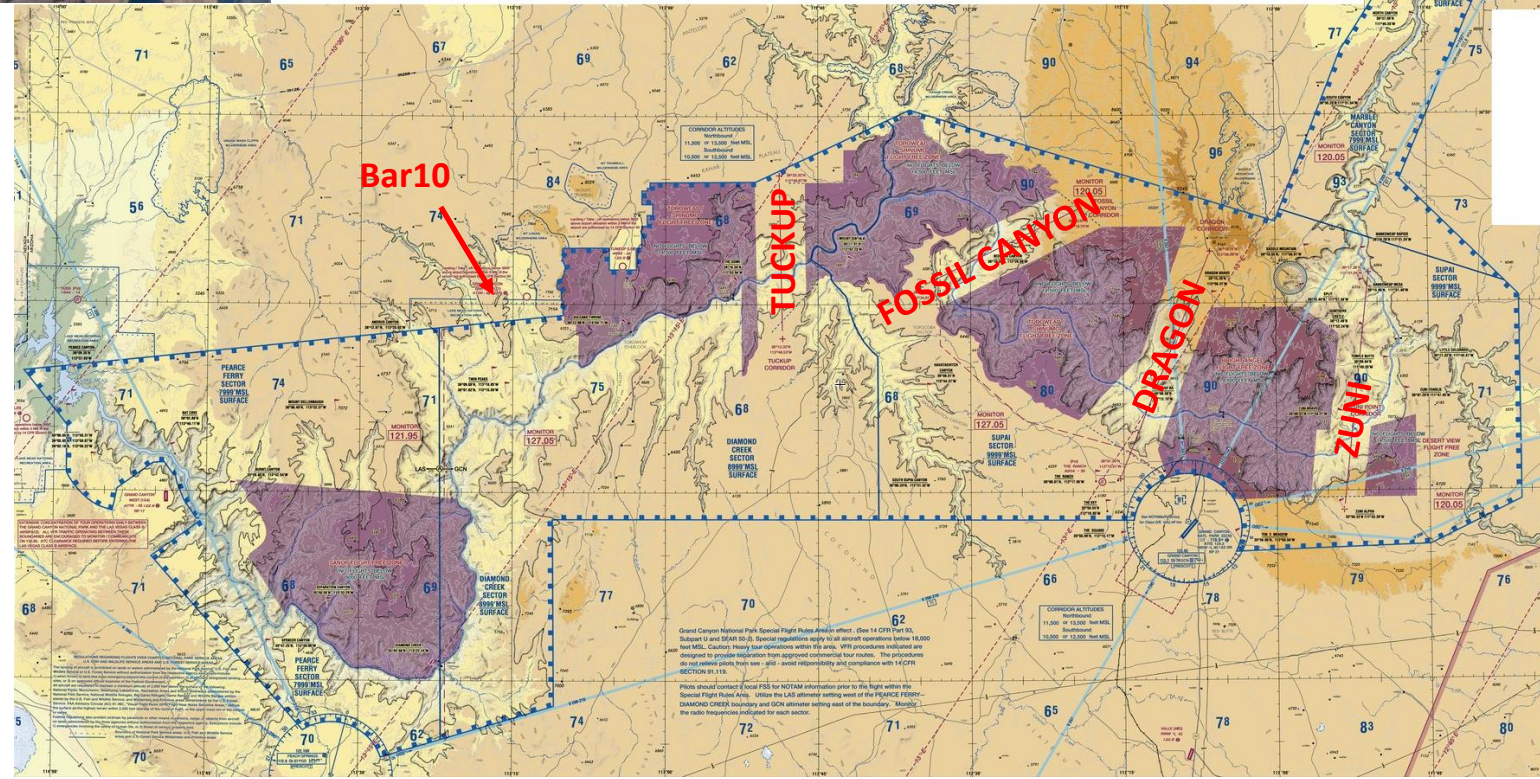
Marble Canyon



To monitor the frequencies of each sector, we set up our radios to scan 120.05, 127.05, 121.95 and 122.75. If we wanted to talk to each other, we would call out on 122.75, which would break the scan on the other’s radio. We would have short chat, then go back to scanning. That kept us off the operator frequencies, but allowed us to stay in contact. We only saw one tour plane in the air over the entire trip.

We crisscrossed the Grand Canyon via the Zuni, Dragon, and Fossil Canyon corridors. After exiting Fossil Canyon, the air space opened up a bit. We still had to fly above the floor of the various sectors, but we were not constrained to the corridors any more and could wander around a bit.

When I fly high and alone over such beautiful terrain, I experience a strange time dilation effect. A 15 minute flight feels like an hour, an hour seems like 3 hours. After 2.5 hours of flight in near perfect smooth conditions, and I was in sensory overload and was ready to land. I followed the Colorado downstream, past Lava Falls and could see the remnants of lava flows that once created natural dams in the canyon. I flew north to the Bar 10 Airstrip and started to spiral down.



Landing was straight forward and easy. Note the limp windssock behind my trike in image to the right, on final to the 3500 ft paved runway at Bar 10. There were no tie downs here, but I had my trusty set of fly-tie anchors to secure my trike to the ground (lower left). It wasn't going anywhere. The airplanes of our group arrived at about the same time for a total of 6 aircraft and 9 people. Perry and Sandra from Gallup, Chet from Edgewood, Paul and myself from Belen, Steve and Kathy from northern Utah, and Steve and Cheryl from southern Arizona.

"JD" drove down with a Ranger utility vehicle and shuttled us up to the Bar 10 Lodge. The Lodge is an island of western hospitality and comfort, located in the middle of nowhere in the Arizona Strip, probably the most isolated and least populated area in the lower 48. The closest town is St George, Utah, 70 miles away on a dirt road. I usually camp on my multiday trips, but I would be spoiled on this trip. Three nights in a cushy warm bed was a welcome change. Paul and I shared a room with two bunk beds in the Lodge, the rest of the group got to stay in private Conestoga Wagon tent cabins (lower right). I am not sure how cold the tents were, but I did notice the tent people were in the lodge for coffee as soon as it opened at 6:30am.



After a great meal Sunday night and breakfast the next morning, we all flew west to the Grand Gulch Airstrip and Mine, about 31 miles north west of the Bar 10 Airstrip. Copper and silver was found here in 1871, and the mine was worked through World War I. It's all abandoned now, with warnings of hantavirus posted on the buildings and all the malachite you could stuff in your pockets around the mine. The largest feature of the mine was an adobe smelter that was made to refine the ore before hauling it to civilization. However, when copper prices fell after WW I, the whole enterprise collapsed before the smelter was put into use.

We returned to the Bar 10 for lunch, then set off on Ranger utility vehicles to visit the rim of the Grand Canyon. The river was 1200 ft below, too far for a hike and return in the 90 minutes we had at the rim, so we contented ourselves with lazing about enjoying the view. Perry got a group picture (with everyone's backs turned).





(Above) I walked over to the rim and found a nice shady spot and sat down for a while to listen to the rumble of the Colorado River far below. (Right) Perry and Sandra at the rim.



We returned to the Bar10 ranch and while waiting for the dinner bell, we were treated to another spectacular sunset (below). Dinner was a large dutch oven filled with pot roast, potatoes, carrots, onions, served with salad and fluffy light biscuits, and apple pie fresh out of the oven for dessert. I was stuffed and slept very well that night.

The next morning after another huge cowboy breakfast, all the NMPA airplanes returned home. Paul and I used our extra day to take 2 hour western loop, following the river downstream to Diamond Creek, then to the west flying past the Grand Canyon West Airport and the SkyWalk (right) before returning to the Bar 10 Airstrip. That night we had our best meal of the trip, huge New York cut steaks - grass fed beef raised on the Bar 10.

I had made arrangements with the Bar10 ranch to buy some mogas. Getting gas here spared us a 2.5 hour round-trip gas run to Hurricane, UT. They also let us check the weather forecast on the computer in the Lodge. High winds and cold temperatures were moving in from the north, with the first wave passing over the Bar10 early Wednesday morning. Paul and I cancelled our plans to fly north into the Canyonlands, replacing them with a new trip south. The winds were forecast to ease off around noon. This was all the excuse I needed to sleep in and have another big breakfast.



Paul and I left Bar10 around noon, crossing the Grand Canyon one final time on our way to Cottonwood, AZ for a refuel stop. We followed the beautiful Verde River south, and then turned west outside of the Phoenix Class B ring to Lake Roosevelt and Dam (right) and the Grapevine Airstrip. With all the houses and marinas nearby, I was not expecting a wilderness experience at Grapevine. On the ground, all of that disappeared over the horizon. Grapevine felt like a quiet spot in the middle of nowhere. We had a beautiful starry sky that night and large campfire. This is a great place to fly to for a visit and campout. I will return here.

We packed up in the dark and took off at dawn on a loop to the south, overflying Aravaipa Canyon. We crossed back into New Mexico near the Lordsburg Playa (below). I had landed on the Playa over 10 years ago, and wanted to try this again, but would not today. It was a large lake, 6 inches deep. I was amused by a small “island” ranch complex at the center, the last refuge from the flood. At this point we decided to head on home. We had tail winds until we shot the gap between City of Rocks and Cookes Peak. From there we battled 25 mph headwinds and rough air all the way to the TorC airport. The AWOS went down as we neared the airport. When I contacted the airport on CTAF, I was informed that the AWOS was undergoing maintenance now. Great timing.



When I circled the field I saw a nearly limp windsock. It was blowing hard 1000 ft up, but was nearly calm on the ground. After landing, we used the courtesy car to get fuel for the trikes and food for our bellies in TorC, conveniently delaying our departure to catch the lighter winds forecast for late afternoon. The last hour mellowed out nicely and we landed at Belen just after at sunset. What a fantastic trip.

I encourage everyone keep the second half of October 2019 clear for the next NMPA expedition to the Bar 10 Ranch. Chet had no problems landing his low wing Piper Cherokee here. The paved runway is in excellent shape with a gentle uphill slope. We saw two Cessna Grand Caravans land during our stay, shuttling visitors to and from Las Vegas. If you have any apprehensions about flying here, just land at a nearby airport in the St George area, and arrive in the morning to maximize your stay at the Bar10. I am sure Perry Null would be happy give you some pointers on flying here.

The staff at Bar10 spares no effort to give you the best possible experience. The food is the best, what I call “Gourmet Cowboy Food”, and when you consider that three meals a day are included, the \$120 / night rates are quite reasonable. They had me when I found out I could buy gas for my trike. Hope to see you there next year.