

Welcome and Able:

A Cherokee Flies in the Backcountry

I bought my Piper Cherokee in a fairly typical way, but I've flown it in and out of some remarkable places.



by Adam Rosenberg



I learned to fly in Cessna 150 rental airplanes out of Colts Neck, N.J., a half-mile dirt strip. When the pressure from real estate developers outweighed the interests of a few grass-strip banner-towing pilots in 1988, Colts Neck closed, and I considered buying one of the student-rental airplanes.

My pre-purchase inspection became a “no-purchase” inspection and I ended up buying N4372J, a friend’s 1967 Cherokee PA-28-140. It had lousy paint, a torn-up interior, a chewed-up propeller... and wonderful handling.

From 1988 through 1995, N4372J got an intercom wired in, a new propeller, new paint, a fixed-up interior, a better radio and the other usual improvements we read about in *Piper Flyer*. It also received the Western Skyways 160 hp engine upgrade.

Exploring by Air

Rather than pursue ratings and certifications, I found myself pursuing new and different places to fly. A work assignment sent me to Denver on a regular basis and there I had a local instructor introduce me to Rocky Mountain flying, but not in my Cherokee 140.

Moving around gave me a chance to fly in different areas of the contiguous United States, so I flew N4372J to all three coastlines and to the Canadian and Mexican borders.

I had been going to Moab, Utah for four years hiking and running and sight-seeing, and in 2007 I was 20 years a pilot with my own Cherokee 140. A fellow at Canyonlands Field Airport (KCNV) suggested I fly to Hidden Splendor, a backcountry airstrip on the San Rafael Reef near Hanksville, Utah (KHVE).

I saw a video of Hidden Splendor and other airstrips on a DVD called “Out There... Flying!” and I even read an article about Hidden Splendor in *Pilot Getaways*. Though I’d landed at 336 airports, flying the backcountry was a fantasy for me, like fighter jets or Ironman Triathlons or racing Bugattis and Porsches.

Maybe I can make this fantasy real, I thought. So I called Canyonlands and was referred to LaVar Wells, a seasoned, savvy instructor of Utah backcountry flying. I decided the worst Wells could do was laugh at me for thinking I could fly a Cherokee in and out of these places.

When I called him to ask about backcountry flying lessons, LaVar didn’t laugh at all.

My Backcountry Flying Introduction

Wells invited me to meet him at HVE on a Thursday morning at 8:00. We met, we talked a bit, we climbed into my Cherokee, and he had me make a short-field landing on the dirt runway at KHVE. It was one of my best landings ever (don’t tell LaVar that!) and it earned me the incredible flying we did the rest of that day.

Our first stop was Hidden Splendor (waypoint 660 in Galen Hanselman’s “Fly Utah!” book), 15 nautical miles up Muddy Creek from KHVE on the north-west side of the San Rafael Reef.

Landing on the uphill Runway 34 means flying an approach in Muddy Creek canyon with rocks on both sides: a full 180-degree turn left; nearly 180 degrees right; a quick left, hugging the left wall; and the 1,900-foot dirt airstrip appearing on the right. LaVar flew the first approach to Hidden Splendor and talked me through a few more approaches, all to full-stop landings.

This is an incredibly beautiful place for walking around (or for running a few miles, in my case), for backcountry camping via airplane, or even just for taking a long drive on dirt roads.

You won’t find Hidden Splendor on the Denver sectional, but it’s published in Hanselman’s GH-UT Utah WAC chart and it’s 15 nautical miles on the 285 radial from the HVE VOR at 38 degrees 34.116’ north and 110 degrees 57.436’ west.

The geology of this region has to be seen to be believed and is ever-so-much-more-so beautiful from the air. One wag said you should see Utah with one eye closed so it only looks half as strange. The wonder and beauty are amplified by the challenge of flying here, and further by Wells’ experience and love of the area. Fly with an instructor who loves to fly, and fly the backcountry with somebody who loves to fly the backcountry.

Mexican Mountain was airstrip number two. It’s along the San Rafael River at 39 degrees 1.127’ north and 110 degrees 27.024’ west behind Mexican Mountain. (Type “39 01.127’, -110 27.024’” into Google Maps to find it; it’s waypoint



Pgs. 30-31: The author and his flying companion Jay in flight. Above: Fry Canyon, Utah.



The author, Adam Rosenberg, flying his 1967 Cherokee 140/160.



Taking time to enjoy the view at Mexican Mountain, Utah.



A view of the takeoff at Mexican Mountain.

692 in “Fly Utah!”.) Go around Mexican Mountain making left turns over slot canyons, fly north past the trees, turn sharply left, and you’ll see the 1,900-foot airstrip on short final. The first 500 feet is overgrown and not suitable for airplanes.

LaVar and I got out of my airplane and enjoyed the scenery at Mexican Mountain for a few minutes. The usable 1,400 feet of dirt runway requires a short-field takeoff—and my airplane used all of it.

We took a flight over Upheaval Dome at Canyonlands National Park. I’d seen it from the ground and wasn’t impressed. It’s like the scene in the Matthew Broderick remake of “Godzilla” where they’re standing around saying there’s no sign of a giant lizard, and then the camera moves back and you see the characters are standing inside a giant footprint. Upheaval Dome from the air is impressive—a large, round, sunken formation—and geologists are still debating just what it was.

Getting a Feel for Backcountry Flying

We learn to fly with practice exercises like stalls and steep turns. We learn instruments practicing partial-panel and unusual attitudes. We learn precise commercial flying using lazy-eights and chandelles. For my backcountry learning experience, Wells had me fly half an hour in the Green River canyon, 100 feet over the water, following the twists and turns of the canyon.

After 10 minutes or so, I got used to flying with rocks at both wingtips and water just below. I got used to the rhythm of the Green River’s meandering. I got used to controlling my airplane in the backcountry world, and I felt the joy of flying here. Maybe I didn’t feel the Force like Luke in “Star Wars,” but I learned to feel my airplane in a new and more precise way.

Hite (UT03) was my last new airport on my first flight with LaVar. It’s a short, paved, zigzag runway at the north end of Lake Powell. The trick here is not following Lake Powell, but coming in along the Dirty Devil River from the north and turning left onto the 2,000-foot runway. UT03 is on the Denver sectional.

On the way back to HVE, LaVar pointed to Angel Point (waypoint 706 in Hanselman’s book; “38 19.527”, -110 26.119” in Google Maps), one of the easier backcountry strips, and suggested I land there on my way back to Canyonlands.

I was signed off to solo in the backcountry and I beamed with pride as I did years ago the first time I landed by myself in a Cessna 150. I may have been its most junior member, but I now belonged to the Utah Backcountry club.

Repeat Visits and Best Practices

I’ve been back to Utah again and again, sometimes flying with LaVar, sometimes alone, once with a passenger (into Hidden Splendor, no less).

Some of these places are lovely places to run a few miles. Running is my other hobby, and I mix it with aviation by flying somewhere, running for an hour or two, and flying home—the \$100 hamburger, without the cholesterol. Coming back to a beautiful place again and again makes it ever so much more wonderful.

In addition to becoming familiar with backcountry flying in southeastern Utah, I have also explored Arizona and New Mexico. The quantity and quality of local knowledge available to newcomers varies considerably from one place to another.

Some books and web sites have more up-to-date information than others, and the most up-to-date information one can get is always flying over an airstrip before landing on it. I look for puddles, washouts, logs, rocks and stuff like that. My first trip into Browns Rim at Cataract Canyon, the north end of Lake Powell, I had to make three low passes along the runway to clear the cows away. I can tell you firsthand, cattle do not “shoo” easily.

I use all available information and resources. I find Hanselman's “Fly Utah!” book essential in backcountry Utah. It tells which way is uphill, where the canyon walls protrude, and which parts of the runway are best left to the BTCT (that's “big-tire-Cub-type”) airplanes.

The web page of the Utah Back Country Pilots Association (www.utahbackcountrypilots.org) is very helpful.

If you do any backcountry flying at all, join the backcountry pilot association where you fly. They need our support, too. Word of mouth (whether face-to-face or Internet-based discus-

sion) is still best, when one can find local pilots. Most of them love talking about it.

Tales and Techniques

There aren't a lot of Cherokees at backcountry fly-in events. Maules, Huskies and other little airplanes with big engines and big tires are the usual cast of characters. My Cherokee is welcomed in this crowd, but I have to respect its limitations.

I'm not the only low-wing—not even the only Cherokee—but some airstrips are too high, too short, or too rough for my low-sitting, underpowered airplane. While I've never had an honest-to-goodness propeller strike, I've had the rear black paint on the prop “sandblasted” off to the point where I don't do run-ups on sandy airstrips, and I ease my throttle in slowly to full power as the airplane starts to roll.

I keep my wheel struts on the full end of their range so they don't bottom out, and, more importantly, so the prop doesn't touch anything on the ground. Wheel pants look pretty, and they're worth a few knots of cruise speed, but I don't see them interacting well with rocks or shrubs, so I fly my Cherokee without them.

When I do my preflight, especially after a backcountry trip, I push the wing up before draining my fuel sample. Then I use the rag I put over the tire (so the gasoline doesn't drip on the rubber) to wipe the strut clean so the seals last longer.

My survival supply list is pretty short. I'm no doctor and I usually fly alone, so I don't keep medical stuff beyond disinfec-

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The author preparing for Moab, Utah.

tant. I pack three two-liter plastic bottles filled with water (not the thin-walled gallon jugs from the supermarket; they won't survive a crash or a freeze).

I keep a handheld radio and a Spot Personal Tracker, since most backcountry locations don't have cellphone service. I keep a can of Fix-A-Flat in case I run over something sharp and get a puncture.

Landings are different in the backcountry. After a couple thousand hours as a pilot, I had to re-learn how to land my airplane to safely arrive at these remote strips. Final approach is 60 miles per hour and I can pull back a bit to steepen my descent. I've been warned not to crank the trim all the way back; to leave a little cable on the spool. If I start to float, then I retract my flaps to come down to earth.



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500ft from end of runway



I start my takeoff roll with one notch of flaps (10 degrees) until I have flying speed. Then I put the second notch in (25 degrees) and pull back enough to get into ground effect. I climb at best angle of climb (V_x) if I have to, but many backcountry strips have departure routes that allow shallower angles of climb. Make sure you know your aircraft well and get backcountry instruction before going in there alone.

One advantage of a low-wing airplane is seeing where I'm going in a bank—it's particularly useful when flying an approach with sharp, canyon turns. Another advantage is that I can mount a video camera on my Cherokee's wing using suction cups. (*To see some of the incredible views, search for videos by "314adam" at YouTube.com. —Ed.*)

Keep in Mind

No matter what we fly, we must remember that these places are remote and unforgiving. Mistakes that would get a sour look from a flight instructor at your home field will bend airplanes and break bones out in the backcountry.

After two decades and change, I love the Cherokee, I love the backcountry—and I don't have a problem putting the two together. My logbook has 25 backcountry airstrips in the Four Corners states. I suppose some of the wilder, woollier strips I've set down on further east might qualify as well.

These are breathtaking places to fly and we earn the privilege of flying there

by being at our best with no lapses of judgment or skill. Once we have that, our Piper Cherokees are welcome and able to fly here.

Adam Rosenberg is a 2,180-hour private pilot who has been flying Piper Cherokees for 1,850 of those hours. He is a mathematician in his professional life and a runner in his athletic life. Send questions or comments to editor@piperflyer.org.

RESOURCES

"Fly Utah!"

by Galen Hanselman
www.flyidaho.com

Alaska Airmen's Association
<http://www.alaskaairmen.com>

Backcountry Pilot
<http://www.backcountrypilot.org>

Colorado Pilots Association
<http://coloradopilots.org>

Idaho Aviation Association
<http://www.flyidaho.org>

Montana Pilots' Association
<http://www.montanapilots.org>

New Mexico Pilots Association
<http://www.nmpilots.org>

North Dakota Pilot's Association
<http://www.ndpilots.com>

Oregon Pilots' Association
<http://www.oregonpilot.org>

Recreational Aviation
Foundation
<http://www.recreationalaviationfoundation.org>

Utah Back Country
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<http://www.utahbackcountrypilots.org>

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