

A Small Trip to a Large State

By Keith Kirkby

It's true what they say about Texas: Everything Is Bigger. Including the State itself.

A weekend work project allowed me the rare opportunity to fly myself to the job site rather than relying on my standard commercial airline or driving modes of transportation. Having swapped out my usual ride (the Piper PA-12 Super Cruiser) for my dad's beautiful PA-28 Cherokee 235 for the winter of 2024/2025, the flight from Colorado Springs to Bastrop, TX would be an easy 5 hours.

The itinerary came together quickly. It turns out that my friend and fellow aviation adventurer, Mike, has paternal grandparents in Bastrop. His father also lives a 2-hour drive away in Houston and was willing to make the drive up for a little reunion if Mike were to join me for the trip. That was an easy decision. On top of that, my old neighbors, Terry and Isabel, had relocated to San Antonio and it would be a convenient chance to visit them. My work was scheduled for Sunday, so we decided we would fly out Friday and visit with my old neighbors that evening and stay in the vicinity. On Saturday we would relocate to Bastrop, located about 20 miles southwest of Austin. While I worked on Sunday, Mike would catch up with his dad and grandparents. We would fly home on Monday which would give me a day to reboot before my next work travels. Foolproof.

San Marcos, TX has a very nice airport and sits right in the middle of the triangle formed by Bastrop, Austin and San Antonio. The plan was to keep the plane in San Marcos and rent a car. We would be within a 1-hour drive of any of those 3 locations. Since Terry had to work until 5:00 on Friday afternoon, there was no reason to rush, and we forewent our usual ridiculously early morning departure out of Colorado Springs for a more leisurely schedule.

The day was perfect and the air smooth as we climbed out of Meadow Lake Airport mid-morning on Friday, February 28th. I say climbed...we leveled off at 7,500 feet, about 700 feet above the airport elevation, knowing that the surface of the earth would soon drop away from us as we pointed our nose southeast toward lower lands. Besides the 40 percent increase in airspeed over the tandem-seat PA-12, Mike particularly enjoyed flying in the PA-28 because we could sit side-by-side versus him being relegated to the back. With a generous baggage compartment and an empty rear seat, we had no problem piling in all my work equipment, our 2 small travel bags and the cooler with delicious sandwiches that my wife, Deanna, had thoughtfully prepared for our trip.



Figure 1. Hands-Off Flying in the PA-28

Unfortunately, more horsepower comes with a price, and that's higher fuel consumption...about double that of the trusty PA-12. In keeping with our lazy schedule, we had not bothered to fill the tanks prior to departure leaving us with about 3 hours of fuel on board. Initially, we planned to set

down in Boise City, OK to top off. Mike had never set foot in Oklahoma, and it seemed like a perfect opportunity to check that box. Although it was smooth air at altitude, the reported surface winds were very strong out of the south and, with Boise City having only one short runway angled at about 50 degrees away from the prevailing wind direction, it didn't seem like a great place to stop. I consulted the map and suggested Hutchinson County Airport in Borger. With multiple runways, reported fuel prices that seemed unreasonably cheap, and still being in Oklahoma, it was a win-win-win. We modified our heading slightly and about 2 hours after taking off out of Colorado Springs we touched down in Borger...Texas. Whoops, sorry Mike. We'll bag Oklahoma next time.

The surface winds in Borger were also strong, but we had multiple runways to choose from, and the landing was easy. We were marshaled into a transient parking spot on the tidy ramp, shut down, and walked over to the large and accommodating FBO building. The cheap fuel prices turned out to be delightfully correct and I asked the fueler (very friendly and comforting with his north-Texas drawl) to put in every drop that the PA-28's 4 fuel tanks would hold. Mike and I lounged lazily in the overstuffed recliners enjoying complimentary snacks and beverages and each secretly wondered whether Borger might just be a fine enough destination for the trip as we watched the windsock flicking madly through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Nope, we had a mission, so we forced ourselves out of the luxurious accommodation, paid our bill and walked out back to the airplane. I HIGHLY recommend Hutchinson County Airport, located about 30 miles northeast of Amarillo, to anybody as a great stopover for fuel or the night.

Texas is a big place. We had covered half of the state of Colorado, whipped through an (unfortunately small) sliver of Oklahoma, and were 70 miles into Texas yet we still had 400 miles to go. We launched out of Borger (still no wiser whether the 'g' in Borger was pronounced as a hard, soft or silent 'g', despite the ASOS broadcast) and settled in for the 3-hour remainder of our trip. It's strange how quickly we had adapted to the PA-28's faster cruise speed and now wished for a little bit more.

We watched as Dallas and Austin crept by out of our port-side windows and prepared for approach and landing at the, suddenly very busy, San Marcos airport. The tower controller seemed to have his hands full with incoming and departing aircraft as well as student pilots practicing instrument approaches. Instead of blindsiding the overworked controller with a Canadian tail number, we went into a casual 360-degree holding pattern north of the San Marcos airspace until we identified a suitable spot to interject ourselves on the radio. "X-Ray Yankee Bravo, proceed inbound, report 2-mile final runway One-Seven", the controller instructed. "X-Ray Yankee Bravo, Wilco", I replied, and we were on our way in.

Everything at the FBO went as planned. We drove our waiting rental vehicle out to the airplane to unload our gear and covered up the P-28 where it would sit peacefully for the next couple of days. I paused to reflect on how wonderful, and convenient, general aviation traveling can be.

Bulverde, just north of San Antonio, was showing just under a 1-hour drive away. My old neighbors, Terry and Isabel had relocated to an RV resort in Bulverde where they had been living in their fifth-wheel trailer with their 2 great Pyrenees dogs for over a year while they hunted for the ideal place to build their dream house. It didn't sound like great living to me, and I half anticipated finding that one may have killed the other upon arrival.

We stopped to pick up a couple of cases of beer and checked into our hotel which was conveniently located across the highway from the RV park. We were parched and couldn't wait to relax and crack open cold ones. Terry texted me "ETA?" to which I responded, "5 minutes!". We made the short drive over to the RV park where Terry and Isabel were waiting for us in the parking lot. Mike is a long-time honorary member of my Colorado Springs cul-de-sac thus there were warm greetings all around. The sun was getting low on the horizon and Terry and Isabel were anxious to take us to a "secret place" in their truck. Mike and I reluctantly left our perfectly chilled beers in the trunk of the very warm car and jumped into Terry's truck. We were whisked away via a convolution of back roads, side roads and...forward roads? I'm surprised we weren't blindfolded. What waited



Figure 2. Sunset from the New Abode

at the destination was the completed framing of a beautiful new home perched on the highest point of a 7-acre parcel complete with a valley, plenty of trees and views in every direction. Nicely done, Neighbors! I must admit that I was eyeing the available lot right across the street...perhaps we could be neighbors again! After the tour we watched the sunset from their concrete patio before taking the direct and, mercifully, shorter route back to the RV park where our beer awaited us.

Terry and Isabel rolled out the red carpet (more brownish) in front of their large RV and treated us to a perfect meal of grilled hamburgers, home-made side dishes and, suitably, Kirkland Signature potato chips. Mike introduced me to the amazing trick of simply pouring fresh ice directly into the cardboard cases of beer which immediately brought the temperature of the beverages back down to consumable levels (I can't believe that, at the age of 52, I'd never learned that). We stayed up late drinking beer, smoking cigars and, overall, catching up on our lives. It was a great visit!

A greasy breakfast was in order Saturday morning, owing to our lofty personal goal of each drinking one dozen beers during the previous night's session (accomplished). We located a great little patio in Bulverde where we found just the ticket on the menu...green chili chilaquiles! The date was March 1st and the weather was delightful in south-central Texas.

A few years ago, Mike introduced me to NASCAR racing and I became instantly addicted. One season later, I introduced Deanna and she became a complete fanatic. She had pointed out to me prior to our departure that this weekend's stop on the season racing circuit was a road course located halfway between Austin and Bastrop...how convenient! We had the day to kill, and the course was almost on our way to Bastrop where we planned to spend the rest of the weekend.



Figure 3. The Three Amigos

Although I knew my poor wife would be insanely jealous, Mike and I decided to stop in at the track to catch the Xfinity race (which is to Cup Series racing what Triple A baseball is to the major leagues). The premier Cup series race would happen the next day, Sunday, but we already had plans for that day.

We pulled into the enormous parking lot of The Circuit of the Americas (COTA) track and bought cheap tickets on our phones. COTA is famous as a stop on the F1 racing schedule but has been used by NASCAR for the past few years as one of the half-dozen road course tracks that make up the season (as opposed to the more common oval). Neither Mike nor I had been to a road course before, so this would be something new and exciting. The day had become very warm and sunny without any relief from a breeze so, upon entering through the gate and seeing a convenient and covered beer garden near one of the chicanes in the track, we bee-lined for it. We had arrived well before the start of the Xfinity race, but just in time to catch the end of the Cup series qualifying laps. We had just sat down with our beverages when I spied Deanna's favorite driver coming through the chicane in his yellow Penzoil/Shell Ford Mustang. I snapped a photo as he streaked by, gulped, and texted it to my wife. Time to face the music!



Figure 4. Joey Logano Qualifying Lap

“Are you there?”, she inquired. “Yes! We were in the neighborhood.”, I responded. And to quote accurately, “What in the actual f***? I thought you were there to work!”, was the response. I knew she would be jealous. Deanna calmed down and reminded us that we could gain valuable fan rewards points by checking into the app at the track (all business now).



*Figure 5. The COTA Observation Tower
(Ted Parker Jr.)*

We went for a walk around the grounds, perused the souvenir trailers, and wondered if we could go to the top of the iconic COTA observation tower. Well, it turns out that we could! We paid the small entrance fee and when the young lift operator beckoned us inside we said, “No thanks, we are going to take the stairs”. “You’re nuts”, she responded and closed the doors, unimpressed. We navigated the 25 flights to the top, not too worse for wear...an advantage of living at 7,000 feet above sea level, I suppose. Complete with a glass floor and a complete view of the entire road course, we had summited the tower just in time to

watch the Xfinity cars fire off and begin their pace laps. Although we were technically only supposed to be at the top for a maximum of 30 minutes, we cheated and stayed until the start of the race. The noise was no less deafening than being front row at an oval, but it was a very different experience to watch these “stock” cars barrel around a road course, especially from our vantage

point. It wasn't long before the first caution flag flew because of a crash and we took advantage of the break to head back down to track level.

We returned to our beer patio and watched the race through to the end of the second (of three) stages then decided we should beat traffic and get down to our destination in Bastrop. On the way I texted a tunnel surveyor friend of mine who had lived in Bastrop for many years requesting dinner suggestions. He responded with a healthy list. We checked into our hotel, picked out one of the recommendations and enjoyed a nice meal on the river as the sun descended below the horizon. Sunday was going to be a very early start for me, so we headed back to the hotel (where we had the foresight to put a few beers on ice in the bathroom sink), finished off the night with a cold one and retired. You may be sensing a theme.

I left early, in the darkness. I mean, like advanced darkness. I wound my way through the country roads hoping not to miss my destination...the research and development facility for the The Boring Company, a humorous play on words for the name of a tunneling company owned by Elon Musk. I realized that I had no cause for concern as the enormous facility, all lit up, loomed out of the black. I was to spend the day setting and surveying new control points that would be used for the launching of a tunnel boring machine that would, besides serving as a test of the machine's capabilities, conveniently link the The Boring Company site with the gigantic SpaceX facility that was being constructed across the road.



Figure 6. The Boring Company

The day became hot and windy, and I was quite relieved when it was time to pack up my gear and bid farewell to my hosts. I was treated to a great tour of the facility and enjoyed the hospitality offered in the attached café, but otherwise I was ready to head back to Bastrop, track down Mike, and hopefully catch the final stage of the Cup Series race that was taking place just up the road. He was easy to find at a local sports bar in Bastrop where he had lunched with his dad earlier. The pub had plenty of televisions to satisfy our need for the NASCAR race and great chicken wings to boot. The afternoon drifted into evening and we called it a night back at the hotel. The plan was to depart early to beat the strong surface winds that were forecast to move into Colorado Springs on Monday afternoon.

We woke up early, but to low ceilings and drizzly weather. How did we not see this in the forecast?? We made the 1-hour drive to San Marcos by way of the astonishingly busy back roads in rural Texas. With the aircraft loaded and fueled all we could do was wait for the airport to go VFR so that we could depart. Having skipped any real breakfast (the crap at the hotel does not count), we identified a highly rated Tex-Mex place in town and decided to check it out while we waited for the weather to improve. For those unfamiliar, Tex-Mex food has the unique characteristic in that, no matter what you order off the typically huge menu, it will look exactly the same as any other selection...some sort of combination of Mexican items (taco, enchilada, relleno, etc.) swimming around in sea of beans and cheese. Importantly, the taste was good, but both Mike and I nervously

considered how many bathroom stops we might have to make once we finally started home. In our juvenile way, we debated who could out-fart the other during the trip.

Driving back to the airport we could see pockets of blue sky and were encouraged. Upon arriving and turning in our rental vehicle to the FBO receptionist, the airport went VFR. We buckled in and were off in no time. We hugged the cloud ceilings for several minutes before identifying a large hole that looked suitable to climb up through to put us on the top of the broken layer of clouds.

“How far do you think we will need to climb to get through that hole, Mike?”, I asked. We were currently right about 1,500 feet. “Oh, I would say another 1,000 feet”, he responded. We poured the coals to the motor and began our spiral up through the opening. We finally leveled off at 8,500 feet, right at the top of the layer. Mike’s guess was as bad as mine.

There were a few possible opportunities to stop in for a break and fuel along the way, but we both felt pretty good and had a tailwind, so we decided to just stay the course and make the trip in a single hop. The Tex-Mex remained well-behaved. As we made our way into the Texas panhandle, I started monitoring the surface winds at Meadow Lake. Good God! They were currently reporting winds at 220 degrees at 15 gusting 30. That was 70 degrees off the heading of the runway and even 60 degrees of the heading of the “emergency” east-west runway. That would make for a very healthy cross-wind landing the thought of which heightened my anxiety for the remainder of the flight. Alternate solutions were not great. Pueblo, Colorado Springs, Colorado Spaceport...they all had runways that were not aligned with the prevailing wind direction. We even discussed landing on the parallel turf runway at Meadow Lake. The direction wouldn’t help, but it was much wider and more forgiving than the asphalt in case of uncontrollable drift at touchdown.

We crossed the border into Colorado and I continued to monitor the airport conditions. It had become very turbulent owing to the strong winds aloft spilling over the top of the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains and both Mike and I were ready to be done flying for the day. Although the winds were forecast to get worse, there appeared to be some possible relief in sight. The speed was still strong, but the direction had backed to a more favorable alignment with the runway. If things stayed the way they were, we would be facing a 20-to-30-degree crosswind component versus the 70 that was reported earlier, if we hurried. I eyed the throttle thinking that maybe we should ask just a little bit more of the beefy six-cylinder motor.



Figure 7. Safe On Deck Meadow Lake

As luck would have it, not only did the wind back up in line with the runway, but it had also momentarily ebbed such that our landing was completely uneventful. A lot of stress for nothing. Thank you, Wind Gods! We pushed the PA-28 into the hanger, unloaded the gear and filled out the paperwork. We had barely got the door closed before those same Gods suddenly unleashed their fury on tiny Meadow Lake Airport. Perhaps the Wind Gods had enjoyed Tex-Mex for lunch too. I uttered a short prayer in appreciation for the brief respite that allowed us to arrive safely and then went in search of a bathroom.

THE END