

A Cross-Country to Remember

By Keith Kirkby

DAY 1.

“Several years ago, my co-worker and I departed out of here for Minneapolis in a Cessna 206 and about 30 minutes into the flight the clouds socked in below us”, I remarked to my good friend Mike. It was July 2nd, 2020, and we were driving out to Meadow Lake Airport in Colorado Springs, Colorado. “I’m not opposed to flying VFR on top of a broken layer in a single engine airplane but, overcast...it always makes the engine sound a little differently”, I added.

It was early, 4:30 in the morning early, and still dark. Mike and I had the ambitious plan to fly my father’s well-kept 1947 Piper PA-12 Supercruiser from Colorado Springs to Traverse City, Michigan by way of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Mike, at the time, was in the process of earning his private pilot certificate and I’m always up for a little adventure, so we were both excited given the prospect of stellar flying weather ahead.

Upon arriving at our local GA airport, KFLY, where I hanger the plane, we noted that the stars had dimmed to the point of...well, we couldn’t see them anymore. On such a perfectly still, summer morning, a fog had descended upon the airport in the short time between when we had committed to leave the house and when we pulled up to the hanger. We had planned for a pre-dawn departure, but that was looking less likely.

We busied ourselves with the pre-flight, pulling the airplane out of the hanger, loading up our two tiny duffel bags (for there really is no space for more in the PA-12) and the much-anticipated lunches that my wife, Deanna, had prepared for us. We headed for the fuel pumps, warily eyeing the sky. The two 19-gallon tanks were filled to the top, oil was checked, fuel tanks were sumped,



Figure 1. VFR on Top...Again!

and we began to work our way down to the run-up area. Amongst the eerie quiet we were able to see the first rays of the pre-dawn sun poking holes in the thin layer of fog and felt more encouraged. We performed the runup and pre-takeoff checks and taxied to the end of Runway 15. At the south end of the runway, I spotted a large hole in the fog, lit brilliantly orange, beckoning us onward. With me in the front seat and Mike positioned comfortably in the back, I taxied on to the runway and firewalled the little engine. We lunged through the gap and were on our way.

Mike's in-laws had been renting a lake house in up-state Michigan for the past several summers for a family get-together, an event which he described as "...a lot of eating good food, drinking good drink, floating in the warm summer lake water, and generally not much else". Sounded perfect to me. Whether I received an invitation to join him and his family this summer because it afforded Mike and I this aviation adventure, or whether they simply enjoyed my company as much as I did there's, I may never know, but I was grateful. As we approached the 30-minute mark of our flight, the sun crept above the horizon, and I observed grimly as the fog and clouds closed in below us. Ugh. I abated my anxiety by thinking about the good food and good drink parts that lay ahead.

We knew it was going to be a long day, so we soldiered through our first leg which turned out to be 4 hours on the dot. The fog and clouds eventually broke up nicely and as we worked our way into the American mid-west we descended to take in the warm, humid air and gaze upon the endless verdant fields of agriculture. Ahhhh. I slid open the airplane's window wide and thought to myself, this is the Supercruiser's happy place! After 4 hours packed into the little airplane, however, we were relieved to spot the airport at our first stop for the day – Columbus, Nebraska, located about 80 miles west-northwest of Omaha. We had slipped into the Central time zone by now and touched down at 10:30 local time. We filled the airplane's tanks, drained our tanks, added a quart of oil and folded ourselves back into the tiny cabin for our next leg. The temperature and weather were perfect, we felt good!



Figure 2. Low and Slow Over the Midwest

We were still about 5 hours from our desired destination for the evening, Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Although this was just within the range of the PA-12's fuel-thrifty engine, we had no illusions about trying to do that in 1 hop! Our second 2.5-hour leg took us to Hampton, Iowa. This was heavy crop-duster territory and, while we enjoyed watching the numerous 'dusters applying their product to the surrounding fields as we neared the airport, we did get the sense that we were possibly intruding when we joined the pattern for landing. Although there was a surprisingly high volume of traffic going in and out of the small airport, nobody spoke on the radio! I think crop-dusters work a little bit like helicopters...they just do their own thing. By now the temperatures had warmed to the point of being uncomfortable, especially with the aircraft on the ground and that big fan in the front turned off. Between that and just simply feeling like the locals didn't need our kind around those parts, we made it a quick turnaround and were back in the air within 30 minutes.

Our 3rd and last leg of the day, another 2.5-hour hop into Oshkosh, was really just about getting there and done for the day. We were both feeling a little tired of being cramped up in the small plane and the afternoon thermals were just adding another level of fatigue. Fortunately for me, Mike was well into his flight training and, with full dual controls outfitted in the rear seat position,



Figure 3. The Hilton Ramp at KOSH

was able to provide some welcome relief at the helm in the constant light turbulence. Our spirits brightened quickly as the iconic Wittman Regional Airport loomed into sight with Lake Winnebago glistening in the late afternoon sun beyond. The epic EAA AirVenture, scheduled for a couple of weeks hence, would end up being cancelled because of the Coronavirus. The experience of landing at Wittman was still great and the timing allowed us to stay at the local Hilton hotel, complete with its own ramp! We touched down on Runway 9 right at 17:00 and taxied into Basler Flight Services for fuel. The very friendly line agent (a welcome change

after our previous ramp experience in Iowa), perhaps sensing our desire to simply be done aviating for the day, cheerfully sent us directly to the Hilton ramp and told us he would have the tanks topped off for us upon arrival in the morning. “Cheers, Mate!!!”

Now, I have a great friend, Jim, in Colorado who grew up in Oshkosh. His childhood home, in fact, is located a mere 2,300 feet directly east of the threshold of Runway 27. I’ve been fortunate enough to have been invited by Jim to visit with him and his family in Oshkosh during EAA, twice! I can honestly say that relaxing in the back yard of that home located at the end of West 25th Avenue with a cooler of beer, eating fresh Wisconsin cheese curds and watching the continuous stream of warbirds, trimotors, experimental aircraft, and everything else aviation flying directly over our heads on their final approach to Runway 27 will be a fond memory for all time.

Mike and I were finally in Oshkosh, the PA-12 was bedded down and we were checked into the room. Time to call our friend, Jim, and find out where the fun is to be found. Fortunately for us (and unbeknownst to the EAA, I suppose), the Coronavirus seemed to have had completely skipped Oshkosh and the restaurants and bars, and their patrons, were operating at full power. After a delicious meal of the local delicacy, fried perch, along the shores of Lake Winnebago, we found ourselves enjoying cold beer and libations among a very friendly crowd of people at Pete’s Garage Bar on infamous Oregon Street (at proper prices, I might add!). What a great end to our first day and what proved to be a great beginning to the entire adventure. Thanks for the tips, Jim!



Figure 4. The Sign Says it All

DAY 2.

The alarm went off early enough. After such an enjoyable evening neither Mike nor I exactly lunged out of our respective beds and, knowing that we had a much shorter day ahead of us, we didn't feel compelled to rush. Although we knew we could make the trip from Colorado Springs to Traverse City comfortably in 2 days, we had planned for 3, just in case. After having made such great progress on the first day, we afforded ourselves the luxury of really slowing it down and simply enjoying the raw pleasure of aviating our way across the country. If there was a leg of the trip that proposed to offer such a splendid opportunity, it turned out to be this one.

After breakfast at the hotel, we packed up and walked out to the plane. Basler, as promised, had filled up the tanks and after a quick phone call to settle the bill, we had installed ourselves and our luggage back in the PA-12 and were sitting at the end of Runway 36 ready for departure. At precisely 10:00, we received our take-off clearance and buzzed our full load down the runway and into the mid-morning air. The weather was perfect. Our plan was to fly up the west coast of Lake Michigan toward Sturgeon Bay located in Wisconsin's gorgeous Door County. From there we would continue



Figure 5. Island Hopping Over Lake Michigan

along the shoreline "island hopping" our way into northern Michigan, through Manistique and eastward until we were due north of Beaver Island, from which point we would turn south and endure a short 10 miles of breath-holding over open water to our island destination. We accomplished all of this in a single 2.8-hour leg which flew by (pun intended). The scenery was nothing short of spectacular! We could have easily mistaken the chilly waters of Lake Michigan for the Caribbean Ocean with its hues of green and aquamarine. While island-hopping we spotted venturesome souls hiking amongst the island vegetation and cruising along in kayaks. We gazed enviously down at their adventures while, just perhaps, they gazed enviously up at ours. We even solicited a wave from one of the kayaks as we took a moment to complete a low-level, 360-degree orbit in a gesture of mutual appreciation for the glorious day.

The trusty PA-12 did not disappoint during our short open-water crossing and all too soon we had a visual of Beaver Island. The island is sparsely inhabited and provides a summer holiday destination for mainlanders. There is a small commuter service that provides access to the island using, appropriately, Britten-Norman BN-2 Islanders.

The town is perched at the end of a beautiful bay with Welke Field located less than 2 miles to the south. Chatter on the radio indicated that there was some activity at the airport as we set up to join the left downwind leg for Runway 35, a bizarrely wide turf runway that was currently favored given the wind direction. We were following a Piper Commanche that had just turned base leg and one of the BN-2's was on a long final. I felt pretty comfortable about getting in ahead of the Islander but I soon realized that the Commanche was not going to make that easy. The airport does not have any taxiways and, technically, one must back-taxi along the north-south runway to access the east-west runway and the parking area. The Commanche landed long but given the 140 feet of runway width, I felt like I could get in well behind him and pull over to the side of the runway leaving enough space for the BN-2. The latter turned out to be completely unnecessary because the Islander basically touched down and was parked before I even got the plane turned around. Plenty of room for everyone.



Figure 6. On Final Runway 35

We felt like we had stepped back in time as we taxied the Supercruiser over to the short line of transient aircraft in the grass. We got the airplane situated and as we were tying down using our



Figure 7. Welke Field on Beaver Island

handy anchors that we had brought with us, the pilot of the Commanche walked over to say hello, positively beaming. I guess that was his first landing on turf, or perhaps he felt the same wave of nostalgia that we did, but everyone was jovial and just enjoying the weather and aviation in general. To further paint the picture of how quaint this little place was, I had arranged with the innkeeper, with whom we had our reservation, to fetch us from the airport. A telephone call and very short wait later, we were tucked into her SUV and headed into town.

Beaver Island turned out to be a great place for an overnight stop. The small inn where we rented a room was located right on the bay and very charming. Within walking distance were a handful of restaurants, shops and bars and I feel like we sampled them all. At one point, we committed to a 1 mile walk to a recommended establishment and, to our delight, after polishing off a couple of well-earned beverages, we were offered a ride back to town by a couple of locals in their 70's era pick-up truck. But not before joining them for another cold beer from the cooler sitting in the bed of the truck at their insistence. One mustn't be rude, so we obliged. The weather continued to be perfect, and we enjoyed the warm temperatures and blue-bird skies until it was time to turn in and prepare to finish our trip with our shortest day yet just ahead of us.



Figure 8. Town of Beaver Island on, well, Beaver Island

DAY 3.

We had a schedule to keep on our third and final day of our travels, so there was no sleeping in. We awoke at 6:30 and packed up. Not wishing to trouble our innkeeper for a ride so early on a Saturday morning, we decided to simply walk the 1.5 miles to the airport from town. Strolling through the quiet fields and trees in the cool morning air was the perfect remedy to our initially dopey gait, possibly a result of a little over-imbibing in the local culture the night before. We arrived at the airfield invigorated and, with no fuel needed (or, in fact, available), we performed our pre-flight, packed in and started up. There was no other activity at the airport at that hour and the winds were calm. We lined up on the much narrower, but paved, Runway 27 and, at 08:30, put the coals to the engine. A 90-degree left turn after lift-off put us on a convenient 67-mile final for Runway 18 at Traverse City which included 25 miles worth of additional pucker factor over open water.

It was a beautiful, sunny, and smooth morning, again. We continued to be so fortunate with the weather. About halfway into our leg I tuned in nearby Charlevoix Airport on the radio. Both Mike and I cracked up as we listened to the local skydiving pilot very enthusiastically making his calls as he dropped his customers, much in the style of the late radio journalist Herb Morrison. He clearly appreciated aviating in the perfect conditions as much as we did. What little wind there was at Traverse City actually favored Runway 18, so we continued straight in and about 35 minutes after taking off from Beaver Island we were touching down at Cherry Capital Airport, as it's known, but never called on the radio. We were guided into a transient parking space by an attractively dressed young woman in a golf cart who waited for us to tie down and unload to give us a ride to the FBO where we were served the famous local ice-cream that was produced just down the way. We were truly living The Good Life!

After a short wait, Mike's brother-in-law arrived with his truck to pick us up with his very flashy speedboat in tow. I wolfed down my second container of the ice-cream, introductions were made, and we were off to a local meats store to pick up, what appeared to me, several hundred pounds of steaks, sausages, chicken, and bratwurst. What had I got myself into? I couldn't wait to find out.

My experience that followed over the course of the next 2.5 days was right on target with what Mike had described. With an enormous, rented house perched on the eastern shore of Long Lake and 3 boats with which to explore the lake's sandbars and islands, as well as provide for every watersport one might dream of, the setting was perfect. I ate, drank, played in the water, barely slept, and, overall, had an incredible time. The group comprising Mike's in-laws and friends were staying for an entire week, but I, sadly, needed to leave only 3 days after arriving. I would be flying home solo as Mike stayed on to continue the debauchery and ultimately drive back to Colorado with his wife and 2 kids. It was with a heavy heart (and a full belly) that I bid farewell to my new friends and Mike's family about midday on July 7th.



Figure 9. The Fun Begins on Long Lake

DAY 6.

Mike and his son, Jonathan, drove me to Traverse City Airport and we parted ways. I put in a full fuel order and the attractively dressed young woman drove me out to the airplane in her golf cart, but not before I paused for one more helping of the local ice cream. I had promised the gang to perform what would surely be a very dynamic flyover on my way out of town at 15:00 sharp so, when the young lady started waxing poetic about the incredible condition of the airplane and asking genuine questions, something that any airplane owner normally loves, I had to keep it short! I packed myself, luggage, and snacks into the plane (admittedly enjoying what suddenly felt like an enormous cabin without Mike) and taxied out. I was directed to Runway 36 and after a brief runup I was rolling down the runway followed by a left crosswind departure west bound.

I went into stealth mode. I kept the airplane under 500 feet AGL as I approached the eastern shoreline of Long Lake at the location where I believed the house to be. I knew the trees would obscure my approach to maximize the effect of my high-speed pass. I opened the throttle all the way and roared over the house. I spotted some of our folks sunning themselves on the dock and out in one of the boats. In the heat of the moment, I treated my audience to a series of barrel rolls followed by a daring low-level loop-the-loop. If I could only see the looks on their faces! But, alas, such aerobatics are well beyond the capability of this 48-year-old pilot and 73-year-old airplane and, therefore, were trapped in my imagination only. Nevertheless, I received healthy waves goodbye and Mike later reported that the crew appreciated and enjoyed the gesture. I turned southbound and aimed for the southern tip of Lake Michigan. I was headed to Davenport, Iowa for the night, which, with the discouragement of a 10-knot headwind, I achieved 4.5 hours later in a single hop. Without my friend Mike in the back seat to help make the miles go by and take the controls from time to time, it was a long and boring leg, and I certainly felt a little melancholy having left all the friends and fun so early.

I touched down in Davenport at 18:00 local to calm winds and the sense of the approaching dusk in the air. The airport was very still. I pumped my own fuel as crickets softly chirped all around me. I easily talked the FBO agent into loaning me a crew car to get into town for the night with the promise that I would be back early in the morning. Feeling the fatigue of that very long leg and so much fun and food over the past few days, I stopped for a quick meal and then headed straight to the hotel for a much-needed good night's sleep. That didn't exactly happen.

The first crack of thunder woke me up before midnight. I could see the flashes of an impressive electrical storm peer around the edges of the window shades. The rain came down with reckless abandon and continued to do so for the next few hours. I was able to get back to sleep, but not a restful one as I thought about the poor old Supercruiser sitting out there in the deluge. I was hoping to make it all the way home the next day so, despite my less than fitful sleep, I awoke promptly at 05:30, cleaned up, and headed back to the airport.

DAY 7.

I arrived at the airport to perfectly calm, post-storm flying conditions. I gave both tanks and the gascolator a pair of very healthy sumps and did find a small quantity of water in the bottom of the fuel tester. Yeesh. I finished my pre-flight, loaded up, and was rolling down Runway 33 by 06:30. I wasn't too worried about the little bit of water that I had pulled out of the tanks...there was none in the second full sump that I performed. And I was grateful that I had elected to fill the tanks the night prior thus leaving less room for water. So, I was astonished, and a bit unnerved, when I spotted droplets of water slowly collecting in the fuel quantity sight glasses. Thankfully I did not have any problems as a result of water in the fuel and the accumulation in the sight glasses did finally stop, but a thorough examination of how that could happen was in order!



Figure 10. Water in the Sight Glass

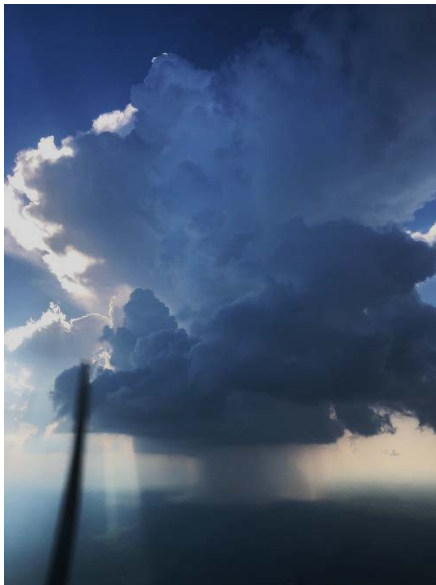


Figure 11. Thunderstorm in the Midwest

The route was simple enough: Direct to Colorado Springs. I set down in Crete, Nebraska for a top-off (with additional, thorough sumping) 3.5 hours after departing Davenport. My next 3-hour leg required that I dodge a couple of isolated thunderstorms before landing in St. Francis, Kansas for more fuel. My third and final leg was 1.7 hours consisting of mid-afternoon thermals and general turbulence and I can certainly say that I was happy when I was finally close enough to Meadow Lake Airport to tune in the AWOS and start preparing for arrival. I was welcomed home with a stiff crosswind and, despite my fatigued state, at 14:30 local time I managed to make a very nice wheel landing on Runway 15. If I do say so myself! After 8+ hours in the PA-12, I was aviated out! I taxied to Taxiway Foxtrot and then the hanger and put the girl away for a much-deserved break (and followed that up with a much-deserved oil change the next weekend).

The trip totaled 26.5 hours of flight time and approximately 2,100 nautical miles. Not the longest cross-country trip that I've done in the Supercruiser, believe it or not, but certainly the most enjoyable. Which is to say, perhaps I can put pen to paper again sometime in the future and chronicle a different adventure.

THE END