

CenAm 2010, we are on our way....

Monday, January 25: Chandler, AZ

Day minus two:

Baja One lifted off Chandler Muni on a clear warm Monday afternoon. Destination was Monterrey Mexico with a stop in Chihuahua to check in. On board were Claudia, myself, and two others, Sanders Achen and Chelsea Welch. Both legs were smooth and easy. Landed Monterrey and was directed to the International inspection ramp even though we had already checked in. Military walked out to the aircraft, smiled at us and cleared us to taxi to parking. After restarting and taxiing to the FBO area, we were greeted by Xavier Cabello, a friend and owner of AiaNet, a handling company based at the airport. After renewing friendships, we were taken downtown to our hotel for the night, the Crown Plaza.



Tuesday, January 26: Veracruz, Mexico

Day minus one:

After a great night's sleep and a Mexican breakfast, Xavier picked us up and took us back out to the airport where we discussed changes to border crossing rules, the 406 issue, and this year's Amigos meeting. Then it was back into the air for another three and a half hour flight to Veracruz. After clearing in, it was a cab ride into town where we stayed at what was one of my favorite hotels, the Imperial, which is located right in the middle of everything. I said used to be, as the hotel as slipped down a couple of notches as it has been run hard and put away wet. I must point out that they were in the process of making renovations so stay tuned on this one. However, after another great night sleep in one of the back rooms away from the square, it was back out to the airport and after filing flight plans and doing the preflight, it was back into the air again, our destination, Palenque.

Comment 1: When going out to the aircraft for departure. We were told to take all our luggage and slide it under the rope past the people inspection machine. We then had to back up, put all of our metal, shoes, and jackets in trays, and then walk through, all of us getting a beep. Once through and redressing, we took our bags and went to the aircraft. Stop.... Think about what you just read.

Who we are.

As we have four people in Baja 1, we made an informal decision that we would break up the responsibilities into groups and assign each to one of the groups. Great idea in theory but not in practice.

I was the person responsible for the aircraft including flight planning and fueling, Claudia was responsible for all the paperwork at the airports including filing flight plans, paying fees, etc. Chelsea was to work with Claudia as well as be the trip photographer and Sanders was to help me with the airplane as well as keep the luggage organized. He was also the goodie man as he brought a giant cardboard box loaded with almost any kind of snack that you might want....

And, as Sanders and Chelsea are licensed pilots, we had three persons all helping to keep the needles pegged and on the magenta line.... What a hoot.

Wednesday, January 27: Palenque, Mexico.

Day one:

Smooth flight down, arrived Palenque where we reacquainted ourselves with the DGAC Commander and Inspector, who both remembered us from the last several flights down.... Stayed at the Ciudad Real, a very nice lodge very close to the airport. Then it was time for a meet and greet session, many who came in the day before, and some who came in the same day. That night it was out to Don Muchos for a tropical dinner with a



live band followed by a fire dance that amazed most who stayed to watch. The next morning, it was out to the aircraft for our next leg to La Ceiba, Honduras.

Comment 1: One of our aircraft needed fuel and as there is no fuel at Palenque, they opted to transfer about 15 gallons from another aircraft. Upon seeing this, the Commander was very upset and indicated that they had

created an extreme fire hazard and that all involved were in serious violation. Now, we transfer fuel all the time on our trips and we have never had a challenge however....the two persons involved were escorted to the flight office and were in deep conversation with the Commander when the wife of one of the two involved pilots burst into a crying fit complete with heavy sobs and buckets of tears. (perfect timing) Upon seeing how upset the person was, it was smiles, no problem, every thing was OK, and it was a done deal. (we have to ensure that Sue is with us on every trip)

Comment 2: After off loading the 15 gallons from one aircraft and performing some fuel calculations, I was asked to off load 15 gallons from Baja 1 so that the other aircraft had a comfortable margin for error.

After our above mentioned incident Claudia talked to the Commander and found out all he really wanted was to be notified so that he could alert the firemen so they could be there, standing by, in case of an incident. So, this time, we marched into the office,

indicated that we needed to transfer fuel, and the Commander jumped on the radio and from the distance, we saw a fire truck, complete with lights flashing and men in white burn suits roaring down the taxi way where they spotted themselves next to Baja 1. However, the aircraft we were transferring fuel to was at least 50 yards away however, apparently there was no danger over there....

**Thursday, January 28 and 29: La Ceiba, Honduras
Day 2 and 3.**

We all filed VFR to La Ceiba and after completing the takeoff roll, disappeared into the clouds (between layers of course) Most went high however, we elected to stay low to see some ground. Again between layers, the flight was uneventful. Entry was easy and the cab ride to our hotel was fast. We stayed at the Quinta



Real, a beautiful hotel located on the ocean. And on the second night, it was round one of our night life.

Located directly next to our hotel was the Palapa, an open walled restaurant / bar that served typical Honduran food and live dancing music.

Comment 1: One of the first taxis that some in our group took to our hotel was traveling on the main highway between the airport and La Ceiba, about a 20 minute ride. As it passed a new car lot, two men came running out of the lot and across the street. Now, this will get a little attention as what was going on but what really got our peoples attention was as they ran, they were shooting guns at the people that were chasing them. Don't know, was not there but.... Welcome to Honduras.

Comment 2: When departing La Ceiba, there was a series of steps that were required including paperwork, fees, etc. That being said, pilots do not have to pay a departure tax. One of our aircraft, a father/son combination were challenged by authorities as they understood that the father was a pilot but did not believe the son was. When asked for proof, the son produced his US pilots license. The inspector looked at the face of the



card and then the back side, smiled, and said, I see the photo of your father on the card; but you are definitely not the person next to him so this is not your card.... Think about it. And, we now have a new name for these two, Orval and Wilber.

Comment 3: When paying landing and parking fees, the fee collector was charging the highest rate possible for every aircraft as she did not have a chart listing aircraft weights. So, to save on the average of US\$50 each, every pilot went out to their aircraft which included “shoes off security check”, got their POH, brought it back in where the weight and balance sheet was copied and every thing was cool.



Comment 4: A first for most, many on our second day, including myself, went up into the mountains where we did an eighteen station zip line experience followed by a trip to a natural hot water spring where it was a long soak in the warmth of the volcano heated water including soda, beer, and a full body volcanic mud application. Yes, I also did it and it is three days later and my skin still feels like silk.

Saturday, 30: To San Jose, Costa Rica:

Day 4,

Departure out of La Ceiba was quick and easy. The coast was clear with low clouds down the central part of the country. All went high talking to Togusi approach, Nicaragua radio, and into Costa Rica where we talked to Coco approach, Coco tower, and then Pavas tower. All simple and easy. And for one of the first times, San Jose was clear with just some broken clouds. Did not need to file IFR or shoot any approaches.



Comment 1: We have a tradition where when in San Jose, it is the Grand Hotel Costa Rica and it is always a lobster dinner. We were not disappointed. This cosmopolitan city with its bustling crowd of people and numerous street entertainers is always a pleasure and a lot of fun. San Jose, a must for every CenAm trip.

Comment 2: My thing is hot showers with a lot of water pressure. That evening prior to dinner, it was time. Clothes off, water temperature adjusted, and step into the shower. Just as soon as I started to unwind, water starting squirting from the back of the head towards the sink. So, to make the fix, I reached up and twisted the head a little and the entire head came off in my hands. So, I still had a hot shower but this time it was from a half inch pipe in a solid stream.... Only in Costa Rica

Sunday, January 31 and February 1:

To Monte Verde via chartered bus, Day 5 and 6, We were met at the hotel at 7:30 where luggage was loaded on top of the bus (coaster) and we all boarded for what was supposed to be a 4 ½ hour drive to Monte Verde. And the reason we were told it would be so fast is that the government had just opened up a brand new toll road that would allow us to do 60 + all the way to the turn off up to the lodge. This would not be the case as this new fast highway had been open for only three days, it was still vacation time for schools, it was Sunday, and we estimate that half the population of San Jose wanted to try the new road as well as make it a beach day. The highway was jammed solid and it was stop and go for at least an hour. The decision was then made to cross the mountain and pick up the PanAm, the one that I have used twice in the past. So, it was at least an hour of winding through narrow mountain roads until we got to the PanAm and then another several hours to the lodge. But once there, it was entirely worth the effort. Located in the cloud forest of Northern Costa Rica, the natural growth of vegetation, the flowers, the birds, and the animals that made scary sounds make it what it is.....



Comment 1: For the first time, there were no surprises other than every meal is five course and served very professionally. This is just not normal on one of my trips but has been a real treat.

Comment 2: Most did three tours, a night nature hike, a morning nature hike, an afternoon zip line, an afternoon canopy tour, and several did a sunset horse ride.... Life is good

Comment 3: What do you mean we have to get up at 6:00 for breakfast so that we can depart via bus at 7:00 to get back to San Jose so we can fly to Bocas Town.



Tuesday, February 2 and 3: To Bocas de Toro.

Day 7 & 8

The people at Pavas gave me flight plans for all when we arrived so departing was simple. All filled out their plans (almost) and I took them to the flight office. Then it was just a quick “pay your landing and parking fee” as well as each non pilot had to pay a

departure tax and we were on our way. Great flight to Bocas. Had some clouds and most went high however Baja 1 found a layer and was able to fly out to the ocean at 3,500 and it was on to Bocas. Now for the bad news.... Bocas is growing up and along with changes downtown, they have expanded the terminal and tower. The procedure for entering the Country i.e. Immigration, Customs, and flight plans now is somewhat organized. And, the tower has been expanded. Although the trap door is still there, there is room for three people to work there. Front street remains the same but more people. Just as I remembered, most are walking slowly with a smile on their face. There is absolutely no hurry in this town.

All took taxis to the Playa Tortuga, a new (for us) and beautiful resort on the beach just north of town. Sun, food, water, life is good.

Comment 1: It seems that one of our pilots did a good deed for a local pilot that just did not work out. As I am told, a local pilot was preparing to depart just as most of us were unloading our airplane. The Immigration person came running out of office trying to stop the takeoff. Seeing this, our hero pilot motioned the aircraft to stop. He then grabbed the papers that the Immigration person was trying to give to the departing pilot and slid the papers through the window of the departing aircraft which then took off.. After the fact, it seems that in giving the departing pilots all of their necessary paperwork, he also gave the departing aircraft his own. So, he is now down at the airport trying to work out the problem of duplicating his papers so he can depart with us in the morning.

Thursday, February 4 and 5: To Panama City Day 9 and 10

We departed Bocas with overcast skies but plenty of room to go over or under. Great trip. We elected to go low so, it was down the coast at about 1,000 feet where we had a great view of all the little fishing villages. Once we got close to the canal, we turned inland and continued on in to Panama City, still low enough to see people and not to get into the clouds. Arrived at Marcos Gilberto airport in time to be vectored out over the Pacific for spacing. We were told that our traffic was a C172 who had a speed of 65 knots three miles ahead. So, we put out all our slow down stuff i.e. wheels, flaps, full power, etc and got her slowed down from 170 to about 90 and waited for the tower to tell us to do a 360. Never happened. We landed, parked, did our paperwork, and it was into town.



Some went out to the canal for lunch, some got an American Subway break, and some just laid back and relaxed. Just something about Panama City that keeps you busy.



The following morning, about eight of us got up at 5:30 in the morning in order to get out to the train station to take the banana train to Colon (The Panama Canal Railroad). This is something that I have wanted to do since I started coming here 10 years ago. All were not disappointed. Once there, and again warned that downtown Colon is full of thieves, beggars, and prostitutes, we cut a deal with a taxi and tight packed it back to the City.

Comment 1: We contacted Panama

Approach when about 40 out where the controller asked us where we were and our altitude. We gave him our radials from his station and replied that we were at 1,250 feet. He came back with "Oh, you are a helicopter, what kind are you". We replied that we were fixed wing AC50. No problem... He replied "Roger" report when 10 out".

Comment 2: At dinner that night, one of the pilots reflected that they were about the same distance from Panama when we got the helicopter comment from Approach. They indicated that we might not have been totally truthful as they had us on their TAS at about 100' above the ground. Gosh..... we must have set the altimeter wrong....

Saturday, February 6: The start back home.

Day +11

Panama City was an easy departure. Paperwork was quick and easy. We planned on three days to get home with two overnight stops. To help on the bladder conditions, we decided to make one or two stops every day. Great idea. Stop one was in El Salvador which still is the very best place to pick up fuel, grab a bite of lunch, and stretch before



continuing on. First night was Tacaphula which was one of two places to enter Mexico from Central America. Did the military inspection at their giant hanger which was quick and easy and then restarted and taxied over to the terminal where we pulled two bags out of the back to take in for x-rays. We were trying to make a quick turnaround so that we could continue on another 100 to 200 miles into Mexico but that was not to be the case. It

just seems to take a long time to do anything in Mexico however, we were cleared and started the taxi process when a person ran out in front of us and gave us the big X or, shut down, we need more from you. So, after paying an additional US\$12 in fees that they missed, it was time to start the process again. Did the taxi thing to the end of the runway, did the run-up, and indicated that we were ready to depart. The tower indicated negative;

please return to the terminal.... When questioned, we were told that the airport that we filed for was closed because of the sunset rule. We then tried to change out destination via radio but were told that we had to come back to flight service and file a new plan. So.... It was back to the terminal where we decided to do a night flight to Acapulco, the next 24 hour airport. First we needed fuel, then the flight plan, and things started to snowball i.e. The Garmin 696 was acting up, (would not come up) the fuel people came out with the wrong truck, (no we don't burn Jet A) so.... we scrubbed the flight, jumped into a taxi, and spent the night in a small hotel over a shopping center downtown.

Sunday, February 7, Continuing home

Day +2

Super Bowl Sunday. Up early, we woke the night clerk at the hotel who scrounged up some breakfast for us and it was back to the airport, do the paperwork, call the tower for permission to depart, and we were on our way for our mid stop, Manzanillo. A four and a half flight, MMZO was quick and easy. Paper work was done, fees were paid, fuel was loaded, and we were on our way for our overnight stop in Alamos. Why Alamos.... In addition to knowing we would have a great room at the Hacienda de los Santos, we knew that the Super Bowl would be projected on the giant silver screen in the Hacienda's theater. We were not disappointed on either point. Landed, checked in, and got to the theater just at half time when there was still some question as to who would win.

Monday, February 8, Last day, and an interception (not the super bowl kind)

Day +13

Had a great morning.... I had a chance to sleep in, had a slow and leisure breakfast, and had a chance to visit with other guests at the Hacienda. Then, it was time to depart. Called Prescott and filed to the states, Claudia did our eAPIS, and it was to the airport and we were back in the air. Now, this is when it got to be a lot of fun. We filed from Cd Obregon to Nogales (AZ) however, once in the air, we decided we would go direct Nogales Mexico, check out, jump over the fence to Nogales AZ, and go on home. So, we were drilling through the sky at 8,500 feet and attempting to contact Prescott to amend and open our flight plan about 10 minutes from Nogales, (Mexico) when all of sudden and out of nowhere, a white Citation Jet with X numbers slid up next to us for about 5 seconds and then did an instant roll away and disappeared back towards Mexico. I jumped onto the radio on 121.5 and called the Jet several times with no response. Then, within the next several minutes, Prescott answered my call to amend so, we amended our flight plan to indicate a flight from Nogales to Nogales, gave them a time of arrival, they gave me a squawk code, and we were set. However, things were a little tense upon landing Nogales. (Mexico) The military was there complete with 6x6 trucks and several hum-vees with machine guns mounted



on top with an unknown number of armed solders everywhere. No sweat, Nogales was a piece of cake. Landed, did our paperwork, put on 60 gallons of fuel, and it was back into the air for the short six minute crossing to the US where it was cheeseburgers for all, paperwork was completed, and we were on out way back to Chandler.

Home Sweet Home, Nothing is Better.... (but I am getting another CenAm urge)