

July 7-10, 2010 - "Denver, or Bust"

One of the things that I most miss about my last plane, a Piper Twin Comanche, was its "long reach" travel capabilities. With a 190 MPH cruising speed, its ability to climb to almost 20,000 feet, and its 1,000 mile range, I was able to "reach great heights in a single bound" (to quote from the old Superman TV show). However, that is not to say that my little Highlander is not able to make similar, albeit shorter and slower trips, as well. I had the chance to prove that premise this week with a flight from Custer, SD over to Denver, CO, to visit with an old friend who has recently completed the build project on his Highlander kit airplane. I first met Roger Stout about four years ago while we were both attending an EAA (Experimental Aircraft Association) seminar workshop on the installation of aviation electronics and wiring. I stopped by to see him during the summer of 2008 when I was on my first trip around the US with my aircraft and RV.

This trip began at 6 AM on a "severe clear" morning, after a large high pressure system entrenched itself over the Western States. I selected a 10,500 foot altitude for my trip south and had a smooth but, because of headwinds, slow flight with my arrival during late morning. My course line took me over the states of South Dakota, Nebraska, Wyoming, and, of course, Colorado.

Roger met me at Denver's Front Range airport, which is located East of town on a "high country" plateau just before the mountains begin. Roger invited me to bring my plane inside of his hangar, and I had him pose for a photo alongside his beautifully finished Highlander. The remainder of that day was spent catching up on the past 2 years since I had last seen him. The evening was capped off with a delicious outdoor grilled salmon dinner, along with a view of the Denver skyline from his backyard deck.

The following day Roger and I embarked on a drive into the mountains to the West for some sightseeing and the opportunity to visit a couple of historic western towns. Along the way we saw many of the gold mines that literally cover those mountain sides. Many of these were small individual prospector speculative attempt at riches which produced little in the way of "pay-dirt". However, every once in a while a major gold vein would be discovered and a new millionaire would "strike it rich".

Central City, Colorado is one of those towns which made its mark, mainly due to the abundance of gold located under its mountains. However, today it is better known for taking that "gold" away from its visitors, as it is one of the "sanctioned" casino towns in Colorado. It has at least a dozen of those "gambling halls" and we had a chance to visit one of them, The Century. We were not so much interested in "striking it rich" ourselves as much as to partake in their advertised \$5.99 prime rib dinner (which I may add was delicious and hearty). Central City still has standing its original 1890 Opera House, which even today sees a number of performances with known operatic singers. In fact the very day that we were there a performance of Puccini's Madam Butterfly was scheduled. We did not attend, but I did pose for a photo in front of that old, historic building.



View from the pilots seat enroute to Denver



At 10,000 feet looking down (wheel at left)



Arrival at Denver's Front Range Airport



My friend, Roger Stout with his Highlander

While in town, Roger took me around to see some of his old “haunts” which he frequented while he was “courting” his wife of the past half century. One of those was the Teller House, a infamous hotel, restaurant and saloon. It gains its notoriety from a painting “the face on the bar room floor” which allegedly was a 1936 “joke” response to the 1876 poem by the same name. In any case, a photo of that artistic rendering was certainly in order, as was a picture of me sitting alongside it on one of the saloon’s bar stools.

Our second day of sightseeing included Roger’s wife Patricia. We all climbed aboard his SUV for a trip along the highest paved road in the United States. “Trail Ridge” traverses its way through the Rocky Mountain National Park, and eventually reaches its summit at almost the 12,000 foot level. However before arriving at that “high point” of our trip, we stopped off at the charming tourist town of Estes Park for a pre lunch cocktail at the Stanley House Hotel. It was made famous as the inspiration for the haunted Overlook Hotel from Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 movie “The Shining”, an adaption of the Steven King’s novel by the same name. While a terrifying movie, this 1909 hotel itself is a beautiful and luxurious product of FO Stanley, the designer of the Stanley Steamer automobile from that same time frame. While we did not see any of the ghosts that are said to frequent that hotel, I did have the opportunity to take some photos while on the property as well as see an original “Steamer”.

The drive through the Rocky Mountain National Park was truly breathtaking. The views around every turn were phenomenal and we stopped several times along the way for photos of the mountain vistas, the snow fields and the numerous wildlife. This included Elk, Moose, Bighorn sheep, and even the occasional chipmunk. The highlight of the trip was when we reached the summit at an elevation of 11,800 feet. We enjoyed an outside picnic in what was 62 degree sunny weather conditions, punctuated with occasional overcast skies and even a short hail storm when the temps must have instantly plunged some 15 degrees. I did have a chance to wander onto one of those snow fields and even got the opportunity to create a large snow ball from all of the “white stuff” still remaining in early July. On our way back we stopped off to visit with one of the Stout’s sons and his family who were at their part time ranch in nearby Fraser. Once back home we continued the recapping of our past several day’s events until almost midnight. That made my 4 AM wake-up call even more distressing. However, I shook off my tiredness as we drove over to the airport and my airplane was soon ready for its 7 AM departure and return trip to Custer. The flight back was as smooth as the trip out, but with the exception, due to tailwinds, of it being an hour shorter.

This sojourn proved that even though this new form of transportation is nowhere near as speedy or efficient as my previous aircraft, it does offer me the opportunity to occasionally use it for travel above and beyond the short, local “low and slow” flights to which I have become accustomed. While my previous Twin would have taken me from “here to there” in half the time as my current single engine “home built”, driving that same trip by car would have doubled the time required via my experimental airplane... and wouldn’t have been even half the fun.



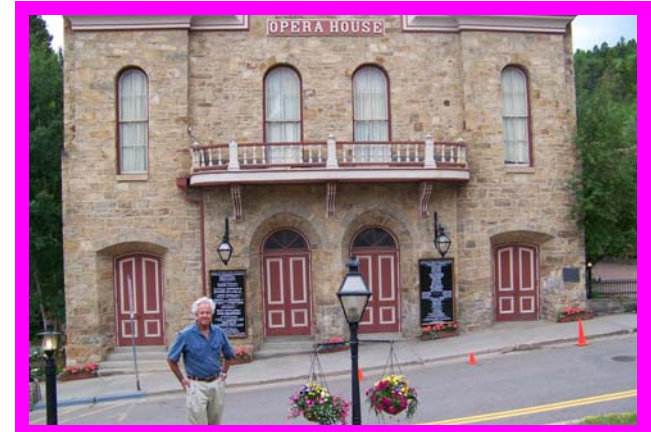
Our drive into the surrounding mountains



Central City, a typical Colorado mining town



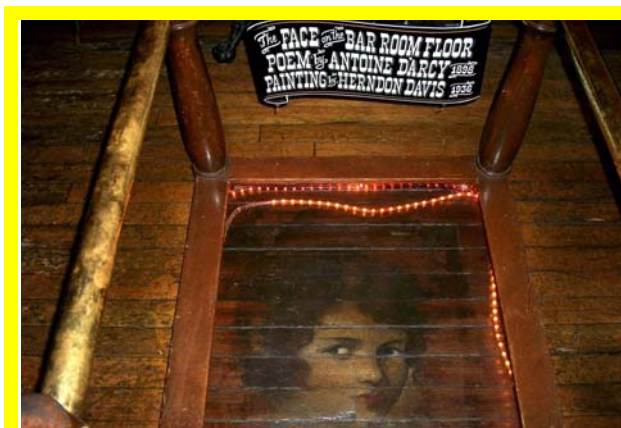
Working mountain gold mines still abound



Me in front of Central City's Opera House



The historic Teller House bar in Central City



This bar is home to the "face on the floor"



Estes Park's Stanley Hotel ("The Shining")



The Stanley's beautiful lobby and fireplace



A majestic Elk, just some of the wildlife seen



We eventually reached the roads summit



There was still plenty of snow left here



Me on a "snow field", with a snowball