

Dec. 19, 2012 - Venice Fla. & the Suncoast Cafe

Ho! Ho! Ho!. It's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas here in South Florida. When I awoke this morning it was 48 degrees and I actually had to put on a long sleeved flannel shirt and a jacket. When I arrived at my airfield it had warmed up to 60 degrees and the jacket came off. By the time I did my preflight and was ready to start the engine I had changed into a short sleeved shirt. And on my return flight that afternoon it had turned back to summer when it climbed into the low 80's. Such is a Florida winter's day.

Today's flight was clear across the state to its west coast city of Venice, which is located right on the Gulf of Mexico. However since the state is only 150 miles wide this was no big feat. In fact the actual distance between the airports is more like 125 miles and the round trip flight took less than 3 hours. This was going to also be my last flight of this year (on the weekend I will be driving to Hilton Head to spend the holidays) and I had wanted to try out an airport that I had not been to previously. It was an absolutely gorgeous morning with crystal clear skies and almost no wind. In fact the flight both ways took exactly 1.5 hours in each direction, indicating the absence of any wind at all aloft.

I haven't been to Venice Florida for about 30 years. Back in the early 80's one of my clients was the Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus. Twice a year I would fly my single engine Piper Comanche and catch up with each of the two circus trains as they traveled across the US to their performance venues. Once there, I would perform a thermal profile on each of the 5 diesel generators that provided all of the electrical power to the trains. These trains carried all of the show's performers, administrative and maintenance staff, the day labor roustabouts, and even the animals. This was an inspection required by the shows insurers and one which I greatly enjoyed. On one trip I even got to meet Gunther Gebel-Williams, the famous German "lion tamer" who was wearing a "Der Fuehrer" cap and driving a gold Cadillac Eldorado. While I was in Venice delivering some of my reports he took me over to one of his "retired" tiger cages and I got to stroke behind the big cat's ears as he purred in contentment. I even have a picture of that event in one of my photo albums.

However today's trip was to try out the "stuffed French toast" at the airports Suncoast Cafe. This is a french toast sandwich which has a caramelized fruit and honey cream cheese filling. I was told that it was delicious, and I have to concur with that assessment. When I was 20 miles east of the field at my enroute altitude of 1,200 feet I was surprised to see a rather large 4 engine DC-6 aircraft pulling alongside my left side 1/4 of a mile away at my flight level. I watched as he turned to the left, and I presume that he was headed to Punta Gorda which was about 10 miles to the south. In the late '50's and early '60's these planes were in use as airline passenger aircraft but today I suspect that the few that remain flying haul mainly cargo.

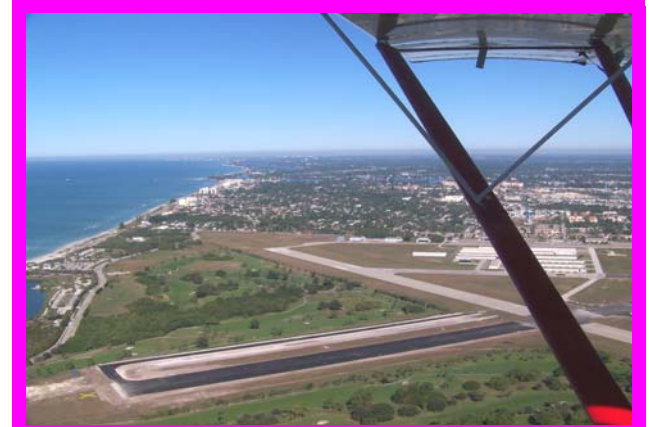
My right hand approach and landing on Runway 13 at Venice brought me over the shoreline and offered a nice view of both this small city as well as the Gulf beaches. The restaurant is located directly in the FBO terminal building and it was dressed out in holiday trappings. My window seat offered a good view of the ramp area along with the various arriving aircraft.



Being passed by a DC-6 at 1,200 feet



Downtown Venice and the Gulf-of-Mexico beyond



My approach to the airport was over the beach



Preparing to do justice to the stuffed French toast