

Feb. 11, 2015 - Space Ship X - Discover 's Deep Space Launch- Cape Canaveral

It is rare enough, these days, to be witness to a space launch here in Florida now that the Space Shuttle flights have been eliminated from the NASA program. However there are still a number of launches going on, many of them being conducted by private companies. On Feb. 11th there was one scheduled by Space Ship X, for 6 PM from nearby Cape Canaveral, about 100 miles to the north of my West Palm Beach home. It had been delayed by 24 hours, from the evening before, due to a technical glitch. Wouldn't it be neat to try to catch this launch from the added elevation provided by my airplane. I decided, almost at the last minute, to take off from my base airfield in Indiantown at 5:30 PM, and headed to the north at about 1,500 feet. Just past Vero Beach my windscreen was treated to a bright white light moving rapidly skyward. My camera at the ready I began blindly shooting a series of photos and caught the adjacent composite mosaic from still 50 miles distant. It shows my airplanes instrument panel as well as the windscreen with the rapidly ascending rocket just reaching to its upper perimeter. Below center are two other photos, captured through my windscreen. On the middle left is another launch photo showing the distinct fire plume rapidly outpacing the Falcon 9 rocket's contrail while the right photo shows that contrail condensation a minute later as it begins to break-up into a corkscrew pattern.

Since sunset was scheduled for just 10 minutes following the launch, and my current FAA Sport Pilots license does not allow for night flight, I needed to quickly return to my base field before the 30 minute after sunset "grace period" had expired. As I turned back to the south, I was treated to that sunset, on the distant western horizon, with its reflection seen on my wing's under surface. I touched down just as I was losing all available light. The little grass strip that I now fly out of has no lights or even reflectors lining the runway. While I have plenty of night flying experience in my previous airplanes, this Light Sport Experimental does not even have a landing light. I used to enjoy night flights as there was something serene and peaceful sitting there in darkness, with the red glow from the instrument panel the only illumination, as those two powerful twin engines droned on. I have not done any night flying since giving up that Piper Twin Comanche almost two decades ago, and I do miss it. One of these days I will have to arrange for some night flying with an instructor, but it will have to be in something other than my Highlander.

