

Couple 'GOZooms'

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The Tuk Inn, mentioned in our 2010 guidebook, was boarded up. We saw nowhere to obtain food, so our evening was spent eating breakfast leftovers in the immaculate airport.

And yet, those are just travel notes compared to walking along the beautiful town beach on the Beaufort Sea, and bedding down in "Hotel GOZoom" at the Tuk Airport under the midnight sun.

We headed south to Inuvik on July 13 and enjoyed the buzz there. What started as a taxi ride into town to check it out and then fly out turned into an overnight stay, with great weather, friendly folks, lots to see and the magnificent opening ceremony of the Great Northern Arts Festival.

Once Chuck had had the opportunity to fly over the ruins of the Inuvik naval radio station where he was posted in the 1960s, GOZoom headed south again, this time to Yellowknife. We were joining the Century Flight Club's fly-in there from July 15-20. Possibly we were the only airplane arriving from the North, luckily avoiding the forest-fire smoke hampering those coming from the South. Our time there was an exhilarating mix of touring Buffalo Airways, hiking to Cameron Falls, learning how diamonds are cut, and flying north to view several diamond mines, and massive rocky cliffs rising out of the eastern end of Great Slave Lake. The latter was our longest flight leg of the trip: 4.7 hours.

On July 20 we left Yellowknife at 5 a.m. to beat the rush of 100 small airplanes departing that already-bustling airport. The early-morning light was simply lovely as we headed south once more, this time to Fort McMurray. What could have been a straight hop was enriched by detours to see more impact craters (Pilot and Carswell) and the surprising Lake Athabasca Sand Dunes (spreading 100 kilometres along the south shore of this northerly lake).

We spent the day flying over the lush terrain and turquoise lakes of northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and skirting some menacing forest fires. Smelling of smoke, we put down at Pickle Lake, Ontario for the night, and arrived home in Ottawa the next afternoon.

We needed time to decompress. Our trip had overflowed with scenery, history, geology and culture. The enormity of Canada hit home from the air: so much rock and trees, so much water. "Incidental" beauty is abundant: river meanders, mountain cirques, glacial eskers, many-coloured deltas.

Settlement is so sparse that at times a fishing camp was worth pointing out. At other times, we observed man's incursion on the land, whether good or bad: artistically mown fields, Fort McMurray's oil sands operations (which appeared tidy and not terribly big from the air), the twin spiral holes of a diamond mine sunk into a lake far north of Yellowknife, or the tiny Pickle Lake cemetery with picket-fenced graves slowly returning to the forest.

We were humbled by the people we learned about in the many museums we visited, such as Chuck Fipke, tireless seeker (and finder) of diamonds in the North, Albert Faille, a prospector who set out via Virginia Falls to find gold eight times and failed eight times, or the hunters of Head

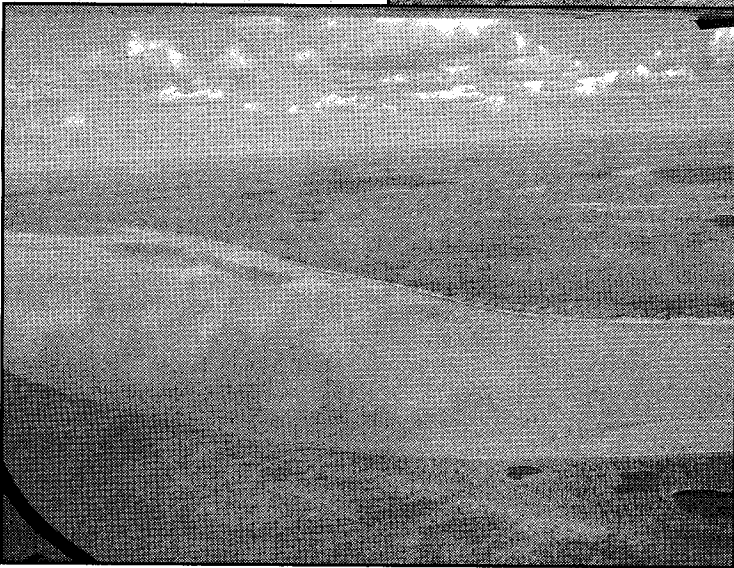
Smashed In Buffalo Jump.

We were delighted by those we met along the way: the Nigerian priest at Inuvik's Igloo Church embracing the North, the young chef in Norman Wells pleased for us to try his rich muskox stew, or the genial mechanic in Watson Lake coaxed out of retirement to fix our starter.

Chuck learned this long ago, but on this trip I learned to go with the flow and simply enjoy it, to plan the big stuff and let go of the rest, and to recognize that flying is a joy and an unmatched way to see our country.

Aviation and airport notes

To those used to general-aviation airports, the following won't come as any surprise. But to a newbie like me, I'm impressed that these facilities exist to sup-



port a transportation network unheard of by most Canadians. I'm also impressed that they work as well as they do, meaning providing reliable radio guidance, decent runways, and working toilets. Beyond that, what one gets is a bonus and is appreciated.

The "extras" include working vending machines, Internet connections, lounges and flight-planning services for pilots, access to mechanics and oil, and the often-encountered generosity of airport staff.

Advice to other newbies: refill your water bottles at every opportunity, stock up on food when you can and keep your leftovers, and make the most of well-supplied bathrooms!

Pack less! Chuck politely said nothing, but the occasional stall warning chirping on take-off meant we were almost at gross weight, and looking back, I took far more than needed. Even the tent wasn't required; we were fine with sleeping in the airplane (interspersed with hotel rooms, admittedly).

The sooner you let go of any bathing and laundry obsessions, the happier you'll be. It's also best to come to terms with the fact that aviation gas is expensive, you'll need lots, and it's



At left: Diamond mine several flying hours north of Yellowknife.

Below: Crossing the junction of the Mackenzie River and the Arctic Circle.

- Fort McMurray, AB: a happening place, buzzing with young people coming and going.

- Edmonton City Centre Airport: staff very helpful even for non-airplane matters.

- Terrace, BC: featured a cafeteria, as well as a diligent airport summer student who cautioned us (bedded down in Hotel GOZoom) not to set a campfire on the tarmac.

- Watson Lake, YT: this is a great airport! The staff let us use their refrigerator, lent us a personal car to get into town for supper, and chided us for sleeping in the airplane instead of using the lounge sofas.

- Norman Wells, NT: impressive three-storey airport, well maintained except for the broken vending machines. An airline based there sold us engine oil - apparently the only source. Excellent wild raspberries along the taxiway. Loved the fact that the town was easy walking dis-

tance from the airport - this is pretty rare.

- Tuktoyaktuk, NT: spotless, well-supplied bathrooms, but no food and no fuel.

- Yellowknife, NT: extremely busy airport, no oil changes available, quite a way from town. Interesting to note that on the day we were to leave, the Matrix building we were to use to enter the airfield was closed for an hour for "diamond processing." In fact, the Century Flight Club banquet took place in the Matrix hangar, where the ceiling bristled with cameras, doubtless for keeping a close eye on the "processing."

- The Pas, MB: the airport itself was eclipsed by its magnificent setting on teal-turquoise Clearwater Lake.

- Pickle Lake, ON: this little airport offered much, and it helped that the airport office was also a local store (where our supper cost all of \$10). When we declined to pay the \$90 call-out fee for fuelling in the evening, the airport staffer knocked on the airplane at 7 a.m. to advise he was fuelling (without the fee) and that the coffee was perking. Yess!

- Timmins, ON - in sharp contrast to Pickle Lake, the fuel man had to be sought out (in spite of our having parked right next to his office), the airport was empty and serviceless on a Saturday, and we had a heck of a time getting back airside due to the "high security" of the airport.

- Rockcliffe Airport and Flying Club, Ottawa - home base. Nothing better than a burger and beer at Tony's Mile High Barbecue after a month crossing the country!

Other notes:

It's almost impossible to get oil north of Fort McMurray.

Two close calls happened in Northern Saskatchewan (totally empty space, so we thought) going east; we swerved to avoid a DHC-3 Otter at 5,500 feet going west, and a MetroLiner descending one-quarter mile directly in front of us (both events in less than an hour).

A bit of stress was experienced west of Pickle Lake on the way east; the smoke from many forest fires brought conditions down to MVFR for 35 minutes.

We flew from Yellowknife to Ottawa in 16.3 hours (two days' duration)!

what's fuelling your adventure.

Finally, enjoy using charts. Ignore the GPS and learn to identify landmarks from their shapes on the charts. It's like doing a jigsaw puzzle from a crazy side angle, and it's a great way for the right-seat occupant to feel "in the know."

Some memorable airports:

- Flin Flon, MB: fabulous lakeside location, working vending machines, friendly people.

Chuck's trip stats

Total Trip Distance: 7,289 nm (GPS trip log)

Total Flight Time: 66.6 hours

Average Leg Time in the Air: 3.7 hours (19 legs)

Longest Leg Time: 4.7 hours (sight-seeing trip north of Yellowknife)

Average Ground Speed: 119.8 kts (using air time)

Fastest Ground Speed: 153 kts (tail wind across Prairies - going east)

Slowest Ground Speed: 93 kts (head winds in northern Ontario - going west)

Average Fuel Burn: 8.8 US G/hour

Average Fuel Cost: \$1.85

Highest Fuel Cost: \$2.22 in Terrace, BC

Weather Delays: only one, and only four hours, in Terrace, BC (fog in the mountains)

Mechanical Issues: only one, the starter, in Watson Lake, YT



GOZoom under the midnight sun at Tuktoyaktuk. Those bumps on the horizon are pings.