

Trip of a lifetime

Chuck and Gillian zooming over the Rockies.



Couple 'GOZooMs' across northern and western Canada

By Gillian Sullivan and
Chuck O'Dale

Canada's North gets pretty darn hot. The Prairies are way more than wheat fields. And it's not necessary to shower every day. These are just a few things two Canadians found out this summer on a trip across their great land.

This trip of a lifetime didn't start out that way. In November 2011, Canadian #1, Chuck O'Dale, asked Canadian #2, Gillian Sullivan, if I'd be interested in a 100-plane fly-in to Yellowknife in mid-July 2012. Of course!

Then, Chuck mentioned an astronomy conference in Edmonton in late June. Definitely! The scale of the trip was growing, especially since we had a couple of weeks free between the two events.

So, on June 25, 2012, we began a four-week journey from hometown Ottawa to Canada's West and North.

Chuck is an easy-going retiree with 20 years of flying his Cessna Cardinal 177 (C-GOZM, aka GOZooM) under his belt, a passion for meteoritic-impact craters, and a love of learning. I'm new to flying in small airplanes, perhaps a tad neurotic, but also with a love of travel and learning.

Our itinerary covered Ottawa to Edmonton, Southern Alberta and Rockies (by car), Edmonton to Prince Rupert to Terrace, north through the Yukon to Northwest Territories including Tuktoyaktuk, south to Yellowknife, and back to Ottawa on July 21. A plus was the Cardinal's six-hour fuel tanks which allowed us to go further afield than the more usual four-hour tanks.

The first thing to strike me, on arriving in Dauphin, Manitoba, after a scant nine

and a half hours of flying, was that it would have taken three bum-numbing days by car. And the scenery had just kept on coming, at our feet. I was reminded of a comment by my co-piloting instructor Jean René de Cotret of the Rockcliffe Flying Club, that flying is a privilege, a means to see things that few people get to see.

Day two belonged to the Prairies and flying over two remote impact crater sites (now Gow and Deep Bay Lakes) in northern Saskatchewan. We pitched our tent for the night in Alberta next to the Slave Lake airport taxiway at the edge of Lesser Slave Lake. The fierce gale tearing at the tent all night was redefined as an awesome tailwind in the morning. Chuck had padded the flight itinerary to allow for weather delays – and we arrived a full day early in Edmonton.

With GOZooM nestled at the Edmonton City Centre Airport, the next few days were spent on the ground, but looking way up at the stars, at the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada general assembly. A highlight was a post-conference field trip to the Whitecourt impact crater two hours west of Edmonton, which we explored and which yielded some meteorite crumbs. Chuck used his aviation GPS to mark the exact location of the crater, so that we could view it later from the air; as it turned out, it was masked by dense foliage.

Next by car, we took the roads less travelled in southern Alberta with stops at Drumheller and Dinosaur Provincial Park, then through the Rockies starting at Crowsnest Pass and working our way up to Jasper and back to Edmonton.

We suffered fatigue of the face muscles that form the word "wow" due to sensory overload of badlands, fossils and mountain vistas. Liberated from flight planning

while grounded, we observed that driving has its own challenges: unmoving cows, humble "Caution" signs in front of abrupt road drop-offs, and an alarming lack of gas stations (this in oily southern Alberta).

Back in Edmonton on July 9, we reunited with GOZooM and skimmed across the Rockies we had just driven through. Chuck appeared to enjoy pointing out

inviting valleys and intoning, "See that box canyon? Certain death."

Many more face-aching wows later, we reached Prince Rupert in order to put the wheels over the Pacific, then doubled back to Terrace, B.C.

The low cloud ceiling the next morning turned out to be our only weather delay of the whole trip.

Then it was onward and upward toward our goal of Tuktoyaktuk, NWT, via Watson Lake in the Yukon, Virginia Falls (with a 96 m drop, twice the height of Niagara Falls) on the Nahanni River, Fort Simpson and Norman Wells.

The six-hour tanks made the trip possible, as Tuk Airport has no fuel. Again we were nothing short of wonder-struck by the scenery and our good fortune at witnessing it. Following the sprawling Mackenzie River north, we agreed that Sir Alexander Mackenzie was some kind of explorer to have canoed it for thousands of kilometres in 1789. Meanwhile, here in 2012, Chuck had input the Arctic Circle coordinates into the GPS, so we were able to cheer our passing over it.

We also noted, ruefully from Mackenzie's perspective, that if he had had a GPS he wouldn't have paddled to the Arctic Ocean when what he wanted was the Pacific.

Landing in Tuktoyaktuk on July 12, we felt we had alit at the top of the world. The place was hot and sunny, decorated with antlers, and more or less deserted.



Virginia Falls on the Nahanni River, NWT.

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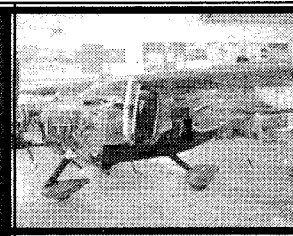
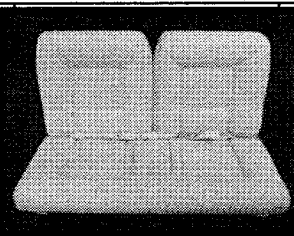
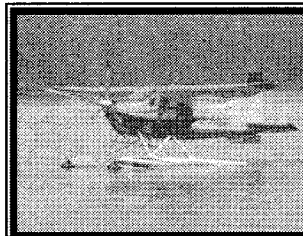


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