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GA in China

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This is the story of an adventure flying two brand-new Cirrus SR22s from the factory in Duluth, Minnesota, to Zhuhai, China. We flew the Pacific on 16-hour legs in airplanes with extra fuel tanks. Along the way, we encountered ice, diverted, had a fuel tank rupture, bribed people, flew 21 hours on one marathon day, saw the backroom operations of flying in China, were interviewed on Chinese television—and had the time of our lives.

Chase Friesen—an experienced Cirrus instructor and ferry pilot with more than 3,000 Cirrus hours and 11 Pacific crossings in his logbook—and I took delivery of our aircraft in Duluth, home of Cirrus Aircraft. I love coming back to the factory where I got my start as a Cirrus instructor, have made great memories, and still maintain decades-old friendships. When we arrived, our two aircraft were sitting on the ramp. The first, a top-of-the-line FIKI turbo with all the fixings, was white and red. The other was a nicely equipped silver SR22.

We headed to Tracy, California, where the ferry tanks were installed. On the flight to California we had to establish a baseline for the aircraft—determining what was normal in terms of engine readings, airspeeds, groundspeeds, sounds, sights, and smells. When you are 1,000 miles out to sea, your mind plays tricks on you and you think you feel, hear, and see things. It is important to have notes to verify that, yes, that is a normal sound.

Our 160-gallon aluminum ferry tanks took up most of the cockpit, except for the pilot's seat. The three other seats were removed to make room for the tanks. It was cozy.

With the standard fuel capacity of 91 gallons, plus the 160 gallons afforded by the ferry tanks, we each carried 251 gallons—that's 17 to 20 hours of fuel, depending on how aggressively we leaned. The FAA issued an overweight permit that allowed us to fly at 125 percent of max gross weight. With an empty weight of 2,500 pounds (the backseats were stored in the baggage compartment) and 1,506 pounds of fuel, only 234 pounds remained for the pilot, a high frequency (HF) radio, survival gear, food, and clothes.



The leg from Tracy to Hilo, Hawaii, was 2,057 nm and would take about 13 hours. We wanted to land during daylight—with the fatigue of a 13-hour flight we didn't want problems during landing. On our early morning departure from the San Francisco Bay area on IFR clearances, the city was covered in a glowing blanket of fog, just thick enough to cover the buildings without blocking out their lights. The

tops of tall buildings and the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge peeked out. The radios were quiet as we overflew San Francisco International Airport.

Having flown the Pacific a few times, I have realized a few things. First, the Pacific Ocean is big, as in 64 million square miles big. You develop a different appreciation for its size when you fly for 13 hours and don't see a single ship, airplane, or anything else.

Long legs over the ocean. Seeing land after 13 hours sparks relief. The big island rises out of the Pacific to an altitude of 13,796 feet. It's hard to tell if you are looking at land or clouds when you are an hour out. The humid tropic air creates a ring of clouds around the island.

We were greeted by the team at Air Service Hawaii, topped off, emptied the garbage, cleaned the airplanes, said our hellos to Shana the Queen of the FBO, collected our gear, and walked the half-mile to the hotel. After 13 hours we needed to make sure our legs still worked.

We departed the next morning in darkness, starting the second-longest leg of the trip. The flight between Hilo and Pago Pago, American Samoa, is 2,235 nm and would take us southwest across the equator. Immediately after takeoff, we were in the clouds and over the ocean. After a few minutes and a few bumps, we were on top and the stars and moon illuminated the black ocean. Ahead of us stretched 16 hours of flying. Slowly, night clocked out and the day shift punched in.

After a few hours, the sun was out in full force. The cockpit became really hot. We tried to use the air conditioning sparingly so as not to put any extra stress on the engine. Even with it on, the sun was strong. Using a jacket and the sun visor, I rigged up a curtain.

Approaching Pago Pago, I dropped down to about 1,000 feet and flew the last 30 miles at that altitude to get a good look at the water and the outlying islands. The chart for Pago Pago warned of sea spray on the runway, an 11,000-foot-long monster that can land C-5s and 747s, but gets few flights.

Our flight plan had us flying next to Pohnpei, Micronesia. Because of runway paving, the Pohnpei runway was only open until 4 p.m., dictating a midnight departure. We were dropped off at 11 p.m. at the airport and walked through the deserted terminal, where only the sound of ceiling fans and bullfrogs could be heard (I ran over a frog with my roller bag on the way to the airplane). Our two airplanes were stashed in the corner, next to a C-5 and P-3.

Somewhere in the dark of the night we crossed the international date line. The runway at Pohnpei is a gem, more than 6,000 feet long, with multiple GPS and NDB approaches. We entered a left downwind for Runway 9 minding the warning to watch for moored ship masts on final.

The immigration officer who greeted us asked us for our paperwork and led us inside. He chewed on a large chunk of betel nut. The local equivalent of chewing tobacco had turned his lips orange and his gums black. He graciously offered to share, but we politely declined.

The crew of a United 737 came over and chatted about what we were doing, the aircraft, weather en route, and the realities of flying in this part of the world. They were in awe (or disbelief) of our flight plan and the two SR22s.



Our next stop was Guam, a short six-hour hop. It was less than 900 nm and the weather was good. (In case you're keeping score, yes, we had just completed a 16-hour flight and were gung-ho about jumping in for another six hours.)

When the bright lights of Guam appeared, I was amazed by how lit up the island was. It felt like landing in Las Vegas. Our ground handler met us in his Ford pickup and whisked us to customs. We were cleared in a matter of seconds. He escorted us to the front of the airport where a car was waiting. "Would you guys like to get a bite to eat and a drink, or go to the hotel?" After a day that had started 25 hours earlier, during which we had flown for 22 hours and crossed both the international date line and the equator, we looked at each other and said, "Let's get a drink."

The next morning, our customers in China informed us that the Shenzhen airport was closed to non-Chinese airplanes for the next four days. We were stuck in Guam.

Delays. Now, if you have to be stuck someplace, Guam should be near the top of your list. We enjoyed ourselves, rested up, and got ready for our next leg, which would bring us to mainland China. We'd been asked to arrive in China at 9 a.m. so the airplanes could be inspected in daylight. Another night flight was necessary.

Even in Guam, which has a huge U.S. military presence and a large number of commercial aircraft, avgas is scarce. It is purchased in 5,000-gallon containers and shipped into the country. The local flight school sold us fuel for \$11.76 per gallon. This leg would be less than 1,900 nm and take 12 hours. However, there would be no avgas in Shenzhen, so we had to tanker enough for the leg from Shenzhen to Zhuhai. I topped off the airplane I was flying first, then Friesen went about the task of fueling his. After a few minutes, I noticed something leaking out of his airplane. "Stop the pump!" I yelled. Fuel was leaking out of the drain holes in the bottom of the airplane and onto the tarmac. Friesen identified a crack in the front left seam on the forward auxiliary tank. Now what? It was Sunday and we were on a tropical island. I thought we were going to be stuck on Guam for quite a long time—maybe weeks or months.

Our handler knew a welder named John who had worked on fuel tanks for the military. John said that, for \$500, he would take the tank back to his shop, inspect it, fix it if he could, pressure test it, and bring it back. True to his word, he did all that and, about six hours later, the tank was back in the hangar. In a rare rush of good sense, we decided to scrub our 11 p.m. departure. I sent an email to our Chinese customers to let them know we would be delayed by a half-day. This caused a bit of an issue—like the Super Bowl is just a football game.

On to China. GA flying in China is practically impossible. We had been able to get clearance after nine months of using influence, charm, gifts, money, and luck. This allowed us to get a very specific window for our trip. Changing at the last minute was like violating a cease-fire agreement. We eventually got the change only because a local official in Shenzhen decided not to get clearance from his superiors in Beijing and the military—something along the lines of “it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.”

Our route was to take us west 1,400 nm across the Philippine Sea to Manila, and then northwest across the South China Sea to Shenzhen. As we departed, the sky opened up and we found ourselves in the middle of a deluge. I added power for takeoff and could feel the aircraft hydroplane. A few thousand feet later, I rotated and made a left turn over Tumon Bay, away from Guam.

We were very nervous about this last leg. Flying across the ocean for hundreds of miles is a dangerous proposition at best. With the tank issue we had just experienced, we were not sure what to do. Friesen and I had switched aircraft at my suggestion, and I flew the repaired airplane.

Somewhere over the Philippines I lost HF reception and Friesen relayed my calls to ATC. As we neared the coast, we got back on VHF, this time talking to Hong Kong Approach. I was impressed with the controllers’ English language skills; they were easily understood, although the readbacks by the airliners in the area were another story.

When we switched from Hong Kong to the local control in Shenzhen, the barometer was given in hectopascals instead of inches, and the altitude assigned was in meters instead of feet. Flying a Cirrus with the Garmin Perspective panel really made things easy—we switched the PFD to HP and meters on the fly, and following ATC instructions was simple from that point.



I was vectored downwind, then base, cut in at 30 degrees, and told to intercept the ILS. It was pitch black and I was in and out of clouds, but I grabbed the glideslope and flew onto the runway with nary a hitch. When our wheels touched down, ours were the first Cirrus aircraft to fly directly to mainland China. The Cirrus salesman for China, Scott Jiang, was waiting for us. With him were several members of his team who had helped get us there. Jiang drove us to our hotel—this is a flying story, but let me just say that driving in China was the most dangerous thing we did on the trip.

The four of us sat down to a late supper and talked about the trip. Jiang was staying closer to the airport because he would be spending the day with customs, working on importing the airplanes. The ferry tanks had been left off the parts manifest, and this was causing problems.

Because they were not on the import manifest, the tanks had to come out in Shenzhen instead of at the final destination of Zhuhai. For further flights inside of China, we would need a Chinese navigator, a licensed pilot who spoke the language necessary to communicate with ATC. In order to get the navigator in the airplane, we had to reinstall one of the seats.

As soon as we reached the airplanes it started raining. The rain came down so heavily that I was forced to repurpose a garbage bag as a poncho. At first the Chinese got a big kick out of this, but eventually everyone followed my lead. Worried about the leather interiors of the brand-new airplanes getting soaked, I asked if there was a hangar or if we could do this later—and was told in no uncertain terms that we needed to do this here and now. We removed the tanks and, amazingly, despite our lack of tools and with the language barrier, managed to remove the HF radios and antennae from both airplanes as well. Then we installed the passenger seats.

The next morning, Jiang called to inform us that we would be departing at noon. We were picked up and taken to an office across the street from the airport. We sat in that office for seven hours while Jiang worked on getting us in the air. At about 6 p.m., Jiang told us that we were not going to get clearance to depart, but we were going to go out to dinner with the head of the airport's ATC. We needed to curry favor with the man.

At the restaurant, we enjoyed our own private dining room. Mr. Chen, the head of ATC, was seated at the place of honor. He had brought with him two bottles of French wine of which he was very proud (he was a member of the Wine of the Month club). The meal was choreographed to show how respected Mr. Chen was. Each person at the table was asked to stand up and raise, with two hands, a glass that had about a shot's worth of wine in it. We were then to give a toast praising our honored guest. "We would like to thank Mr. Chen for joining us for dinner and his expert leadership at the airport."

After about three hours, the meal wound down. When we learned that Mr. Chen had put the meal on his company tab, we felt as though we had accomplished our goal and began to look forward to our flight plans being whisked through the system.

At 10 a.m. we were given the green light. At the last minute, we installed a third seat in one of the airplanes so that Jiang could ride with us. He said he had arranged something special.

We taxied out, weaving in between the larger jet aircraft. The city of Shenzhen sprawled in front of us. The Zhu Jiang River estuary was on our right and the city covered everything else in sight. It was a maze of roads and buildings with no forest, farmland, or nature.

Our flight from Shenzhen to Zhuhai took about 20 minutes. Zhuhai is very new and very nice. The runway is white pavement and the complex looks as if it is only a few years old. There was an Airbus holding short for us as we made our approach. We touched down and asked for permission to taxi to the Zhuhai Business Aviation Center—the only FBO in all of China.

As we taxied over, I realized why Jiang wanted to come with us. He had arranged a welcoming committee of about 50 people. There were a few other Cirrus owners, some government leaders, two TV crews, girls with flowers, and other pilots. We pulled up to a stop at the new hangar and received a hero's welcome. **GA in China.** There are fewer than 1,000 small GA airplanes in China. It felt like we were flying in on spaceships.

In the United States, people have been flying for 109 years. The system was developed by aviators literally inventing a new way of life in barns and workshops. In China, the aviation system revolves around the military and commercial aviation, and they are going to stuff 109 years of GA history into the next decade (see "GA in China," right). I have been fortunate to be involved in quite a few new airplane deliveries in the United States and Europe, but nothing compares to this. It was a trip that will be hard to top.

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