

A rookie in the Rockies

What does a pilot in an airport do, after a five hours commercial flight? Go flying for real, of course!

I found myself locked for an afternoon in Vancouver last may, waiting for a business event that was being held on a Sunday morning. I gave a call to the Pacific Flying Club who connected me to flight instructor Robyn Stewart and that started my first pilot venture in the Rockies.

When I got there, I was confronted with my first pilot decision: They had no more vanilla flavor C172 available on that gorgeous afternoon. The only one left was a 172XP, with a 195hp fuel injected engine and a constant speed prop... Hummm... Oh well, that's better than nothing!

Although I was happy about the XP's additional power, Robyn told me it was nice but not absolutely essential. The club even had pilots going to Alberta in a C150 on that very day I was flying. What is more important is the weather. Density altitude, ceilings and upper winds (because of mountain waves in particular) make or break mountains flights every day. First lesson taken!

The first challenge was to leave the airport. CZBB is one of the busiest airport in the country (check www.czbb.com for the stats) and is located, a bit like CYRO, just besides and below the Vancouver terminal airspace. It is a class C airport with a circuit at 800 feet (AGL or ASL, whatever, the airport elevation is 5ft!). Many new VFR reporting points to learn and many specific departure procedures. A VTC is essential and instructor is invaluable for a first flight over there! Robyn was very helpful.

Next thing was the flight planning. Not the straight line and 10 degrees drift lines type. There are two basic options: fly direct above the mountains, who peak at about 6000ft in that area and are park area (gotta fly 2000 above, remember that exam question?) or fly the valleys, the fun and tricky way. Although on that day and with that airplane, we could have easily flown above, I wanted to do it the fun way. Robyn started drawing a line following the valleys and their intersections, from our departure point to the Squamish airport for a touch and go, then to Whistler and back (we finally did not have enough time for the whole thing, which was a bit over two hours). To the rookie that I was, the VNCs looked a bit different from what we're used to over here: have you ever seen any shades of red on your maps? Very high terrain over there! Making sense of the colours is the first step in finding you ways! I learned that the hard way in the air, when Robyn handed me the map, asking me to follow-it to our destination! Another interesting color is the white. At first, I confused the light blue of the lakes with the white of the mountain peaks. I remember looking for a lake as a visual reference to make a turn, and I kept turning around the peak to find it... Robyn was nice enough not to make fun of me...

For the calculations, I was advised to be very generous on the fuel (triple the fuel required for the climbs, make sure there is more than enough since your 30 min. day VFR reserve could be insufficient if you got lost). Look at the upper winds, these induce the mountain waves that can exceed the climbing capacity of your airplane, especially high density altitude on warm days. Remember to be aware of potential altimeter errors (wind speeding up while sloping down to the valleys induce a low pressure that make your altimeter read high).

After flight planning and walk around, we're ready to go! We get our takeoff clearance and surprise: wow! does that airplane climb! With the low circuit altitude, first thing you know you're right up there! Handling the constant speed prop, tricky airspace, and unfamiliar VFR references, quite a lot to do here! Robyn helped me around these difficulties and there we were departing the CYVR airspace heading for the mountains at 4500ASL.

Although flying the valleys, between the mountains, is not particularly difficult, the challenge lies in the navigation. You can't see further than the next curve of the valleys. All the intersecting valleys created by the various mountain look the same. Easy to get lost here! You have to look up for distinctive peaks and features, based on your map and your current heading. Sounds like normal navigation, but in a whole new way. Lakes are also tricky as there are seasonal lakes created by snow melting in the spring. Although I got confused interpreting the altitudes from the map colors, there is one color that we all know: yellow! You can fly over yellow, so follow your way. Keep your finger or a sticky pointer on your current position and look out.

My instinct was to flight right in the center of the valley. Actually, the right way to do it is to fly close to the right ridge. If anything goes wrong, you have the whole valley width to turn. Also, if you find yourself in a downdraft, it is probably worst right in the middle. When you have to cross from one ridge to another, you do it at a 45 degree angle. If you start going down too fast, you can always go back to your original ridge rather than having to turn 90 degrees to get out of the dangerous situation. Why the right edge? To clear opposite traffic flying their right edge.

We arrive to Squamish (CYSE) through a set of spectacular valleys and peaks. Time to start the descent. Luckily enough, the airport is located in a valley wide enough to allow us to descend and maneuver. We get into the circuit and, turning final, darn! Too high! This bird does not descend as easily as I'm used to, with these 55 additional horses running under the hood! Time for 40 degrees of flaps and a good side slip! We touch down on the tiny runway and away we go again! We climb back to 5500 and take another valley route to head back to town. Gorgeous! Sky clear, light haze, very smooth ride.

After close to an hour of this, I start to get the idea. We made our way over a gorgeous lake back to the Vancouver harbor. As we happen to be in the practice area, Robyn suggests a bit of slow flight. The plane has a vortex generator kit installed, let's see! We slow down, pull down all flaps, throttle all the way back to idle and I wait for the stall

horn to come on! We're at 40 knots indicated and nothing happens! Amazing! I want one of these toys!

Time to head back home. We take one of the VFR routes back, which brings us over the bridges and the city. Complex airspace again I tell you. Thanks to Robyn's help, we make it to a straight in final to Boundary Bay. Be careful with the two displaced thresholds of that runway (about a third of its length). I finally land the bird and I hear Robyn on the intercom: "very nice". Well, I'll take all compliments I can from an instructor! (and I need to pat myself on the back after that humbling flight!)

There are a few flights that are more meaningful to us than others. They all end up as a single line in our logbooks. Our first solo, the first cross-country, flight test, first night. This one too is a single line, 1.4 dual in GWIM, but what a flight! Many thanks to Robyn Stewart and the pleasant team at the Pacific Flying Club. I'll be back!.