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Beyond the \$100 Hamburger

*A “Choose Your Own Adventure”
Story on Flying, Fun, and Safety*

Photo by James Williams

What do I do now? That's one of the most common questions that arise once you earn that coveted airman certificate or rating. After a few flights of showing off your new skills to friends and family, or getting a \$100 hamburger or two, you again arrive at that bedeviling question: What's next?

To answer that question first requires some introspection for us as pilots. In my experience (and admittedly oversimplified view) there are two kinds of pilots: those who like to go places (the utilitarian pilot), and those who simply enjoy being at the controls (the free spirit). While pilots may certainly enjoy both modes, they probably were inspired by or appreciate one more than the other. My primary motivation was always traveling. It even manifested itself in how I viewed airplanes. I tended to look at an airplane in terms of payload, range, and cruising speed. That led to my personal belief that the fixed gear Cessna 182 may well be the perfect GA airplane (you can disagree all you like, but you're wrong).

Once we determine our primary motivation, we can design some great experiences to expand our flight envelope, the idea being that a list of fun activities will enable us to build experience, stay proficient, and develop skills to help us become safer pilots. Think of it as a "choose your own adventure" style of becoming a more well-balanced aviator.

Add a New Surface

Whether it is water, snow, or just grass, there's no faster way to open up an airport than to add a surface type. Water requires an additional rating, but the other two only require some training and prudence. In fact, as a matter of course, you've already completed a good amount of grass strip training as part of your soft field training for your basic certificate. Although, if you've never actually landed on grass, it's a good idea to spend a little time with an instructor to make sure your skills are where they need to be before you try a grass strip. Also, some insurance companies and/or FBOs may limit or exclude grass strips, so be sure to check your coverage as well as your FBO's policies before leaving. Another issue is that several grass strips are private airports and may require prior permission to land. Many owners would probably be more than happy for you to stop by. But, to prevent a pitch fork welcome, make an inquiry first.

While training is the only hard requirement to operate off of grass, water or snow-covered surfaces require both specialized training and equipment. Learning either of these skills could be the subject

of entire articles, so I will leave further technical discussion of those topics to the experts. However, one thing to make sure of is that you can perform in the conditions in which you expect to use your new skill. For example, it's important to remember that the way you load an aircraft will be different if you're going camping (whether it be on wheels, skis, or floats) than when you're training. To gain that real-world experience, you might consider loading up your aircraft beyond a normal everyday situation (within weight and balance limitations, of course) and practice with an instructor that way. We always want our training to be safe and realistic.

Add a Scope

When I discuss scope I am using it in terms of scale. I think this is more appropriate because when you scale up the length of a trip, it changes not only



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Whether it's skis, floats, or simply taking your tires off-road, adding a new surface to your portfolio expands your opportunities for fun flying.

Photo by James Williams

the level of detail needed in your planning, but also the breadth of subjects you have to consider when making your plans. Hence, the entire scope of the preparations changes. Most of our planning in training is somewhat perfunctory since time and cost pressures have a tendency to boil down a trip to minimum requirements. A 50 nautical mile distance requirement means a “cross country” flight can take as little as an hour in many GA aircraft. While there are lessons to be learned with a such a flight, they do lack some of the more demanding requirements. The odds are your flight won’t include changing weather, changing terrain, real fuel planning, the logistics of handling maintenance away from home, or evaluating multiple courses. These are some of the things that come into play when you enhance the scope of your operations.

For a more detailed discussion of long range planning please see the original “Beyond the \$100 Hamburger” article I wrote in the May/June 2007 issue (www.faa.gov/news/safety_briefing/2007/media/mayjune2007.pdf). The article focuses more specifically on the considerations in planning and executing long range flights. By adding scope to our set of tools, we can open up still more opportunities to use our skills in a fun way. Once you test out your new scope, you can then create what I’ll call an air cruise. Let’s say you wanted to visit the Grand Canyon; any other destination on the way is now open to you. You’d be surprised how well a course change of 100 miles or more can be accommodated on a long enough trip assuming the deviation is roughly along the way. In an age of automated flight planning, it’s definitely worth running the numbers. It’s also a good way of not letting your destination be the limit of your fun.

Adding a Skill or Sharpening One

Another way to use that newly minted certificate is to add to it, or expand on the skill you’ve already been trained for. Adding a high performance, complex, or tail wheel endorsement, for example, can expand the number of aircraft you’re allowed to fly. It also enhances the skills you have in various ways. More powerful engines make you pay closer attention to power settings and managing the engine throughout the flight. Flying a complex aircraft should improve your checklist discipline, as the aircraft’s systems are more complicated. Training in a tail wheel aircraft can heighten your awareness of crosswind techniques and demand more precise execution during landing. A further benefit of this

type of training is that what you learn can easily carry over and apply to whatever aircraft you're in.

Additionally, aerobatics and upset recovery training are excellent ways of expanding not only your stick and rudder skills, but also your safety margin. There are valuable lessons to be learned by flying right up to the edge of controlled flight and beyond. First, you learn where that line is and what it's like approaching it. Second, you learn to recover, and the value of that is obvious. Beyond those advantages, aerobatic training bestows pilots with a greater level of aircraft control. It's the equivalent of sharpening the pencil that represents your skills. You'll now have much finer control of the aircraft, just as the sharpened pencil can sketch much finer detail.

Putting it All Together

Here's where the magic happens. By combining the elements we've discussed, we can create our own adventures that maintain and improve our skills, all the while providing enjoyment and great memories. One example would be to plan an air camping trip. You could test not only your planning skills, but also your backcountry flying skills. (For more information on back country flying, see "Coming Out of the Woods" on page 12.) Such a trip would also give you a chance to camp your way around the country, while challenging both your planning and packing skills.



Another idea would be to plan a trip to attend an advanced flight training course, like formation flying or the aforementioned upset recovery classes. It would not only exercise the planning muscles, but allow you to be in good trim arriving at the class having just flown in. The idea could be as simple as flying to a pancake breakfast to enter a landing contest.

Once you add these skills to your tool box it is important to exercise them as time allows. The whole idea is to provide yourself with new opportunities to spread your wings.

Of course, these are just my suggestions; what do you think? If you have any ideas, please let us, and more importantly, your fellow airmen know. You might be able to turn someone on to a new adventure they hadn't ever considered. If we want to have a vibrant, growing, and safe GA system, we're definitely in it together. 

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