

*Washington State trio flies the coastal route to Mexico and Central America. 'Advantages of private flying over any other method are practically unlimited,' says the author*

# South Of The Border By Tri-Pacer

by RICHARD OWENS, JR. • AOPA 46578

**D**ecember is a wonderful time to contemplate winter vacations when our northwest Washington State weather is at its worst. Also, a large Pan American Airlines calendar at my desk was reminding me of better weather down south with a spectacular tropical scene in the mountains of Guatemala. And, Guatemala it was to be, but not by jet *Clipper* as suggested, but by a Piper *Tri-Pacer*.

Our *Tri-Pacer* is a super-custom 1959 vintage with autopilot, auxiliary tank (a must) and the usual VHF and LF radio equipment. We had no ADF, which of course is desirable in a land of mostly nondirectional beacons and broadcasting stations. Actually, since we would follow the coastline all the way to Central America, navigation wouldn't be a problem.

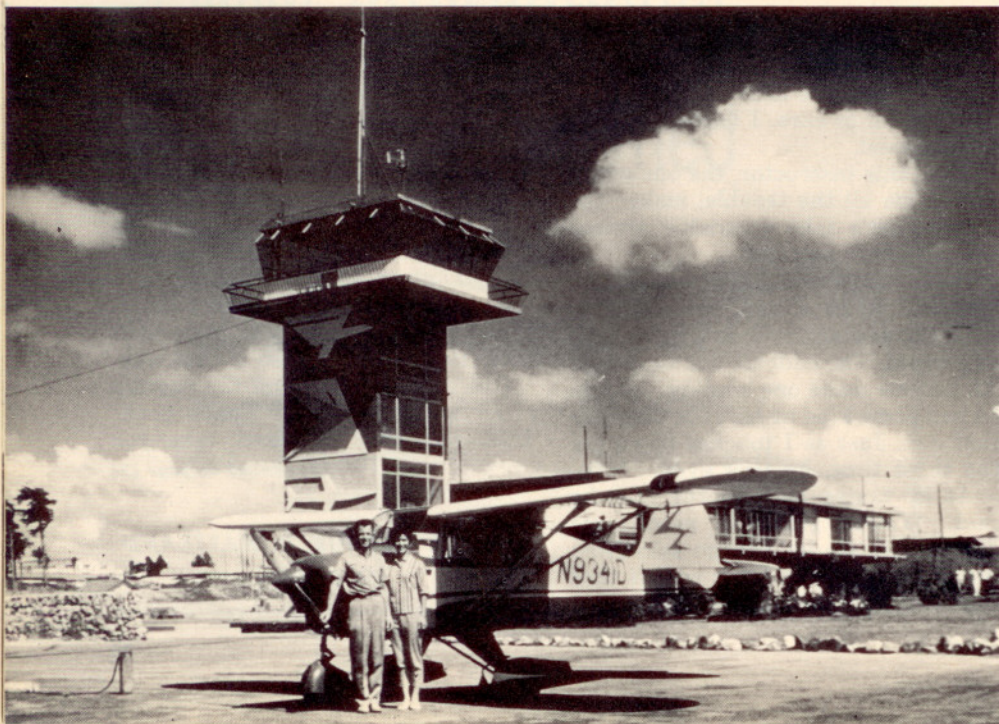
Our ultimate destination was Gua-

temala, but we were actually more concerned with Mexico, inasmuch as two of our three weeks "abroad" were to be spent going and coming across the entire length of it. The year before we had flown into Mexico as far as Acapulco and Mexico City and were fairly well acquainted with their flying complexities and the peculiarities of just existing down there. Flying in Guatemala becomes a little more involved than in Mexico but after having made the necessary prior preparations with our Guatemalan consulate in Seattle we experienced no unusual difficulties.

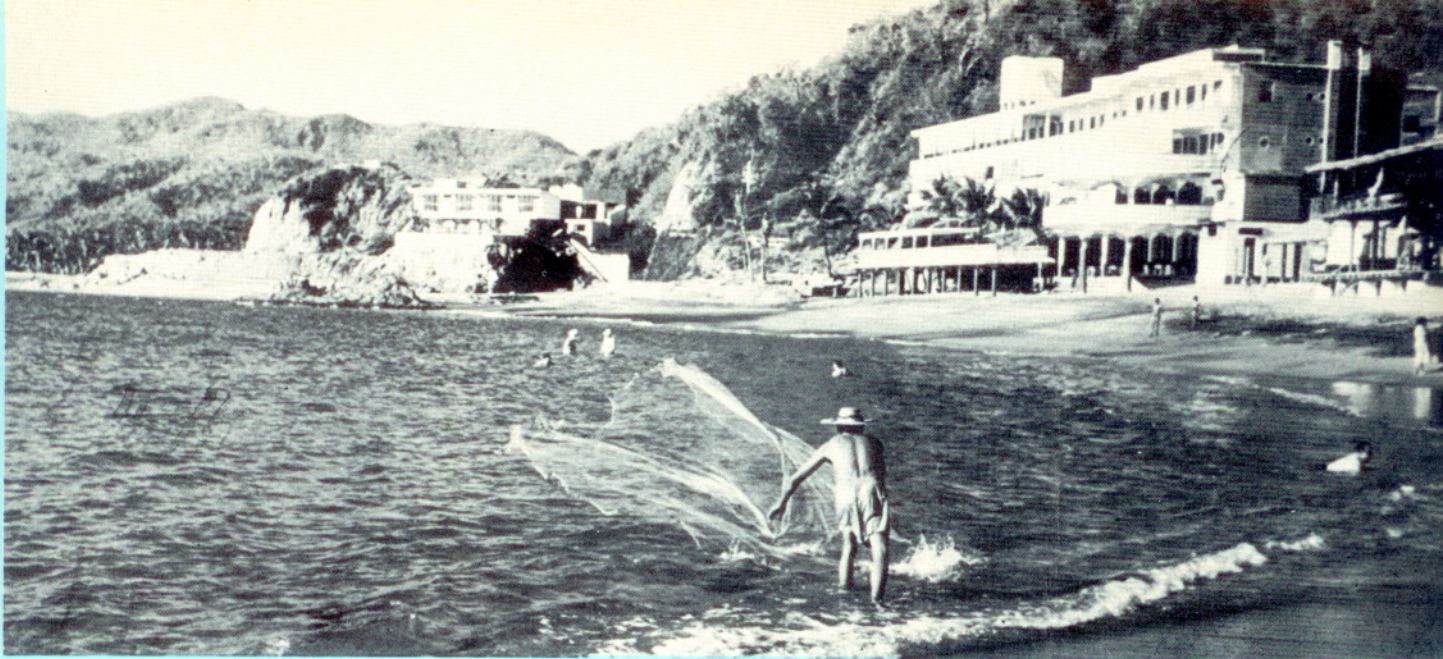
Our trip originated from the northwest corner of Washington state in the middle of February. Our previous trip south was made with four aboard but we cut it to three this time for its obvious advantages. My passengers were Lt. Paul Stewart, U.S. Coast Guard, who also possesses a private ticket and Miss Peggy Ditz, who as a student pilot can probably tell more flying stories than many private pilots.

We departed Port Angeles at 5 a.m. in questionable weather conditions, picked up Lt. Stewart in Astoria, Ore. and proceeded to Las Vegas, Nev., our destination for the night. After fighting rain and snowstorms all the way through Oregon and Nevada we were lucky to barely reach Reno. The following morning dawned bright and clear, however, and that was to be the last of any bad weather for three weeks until our return. We refueled at Las Vegas then flew directly to Nogales, Mexico

Author Owens and student pilot Peggy Ditz pose with Owens' *Tri-Pacer* in front of Guatemala City tower. The airport has considerable traffic







Manzanillo Harbor at Santiago, an area of Mexico not yet discovered by the tourist trade. With no airline service and poor 250-mile highway to nearest city, private plane is the most feasible way to get there

nonstop via Phoenix and Tuscon.

Nogales was our Mexican airport of entry where we obtained our tourist cards and aircraft general declaration. We encountered our first gas problem here and it was necessary for me to make a quick trip back across the border to Nogales, Ariz., to refuel.

From Nogales to Guaymas, on the coast, it is an easy 250 miles due south and just a matter of following the highway all the way. It was dark when we arrived over Guaymas. If not for the fact that I had landed there before we would probably have experienced a little difficulty locating the unlighted field. Recalling their regulations prohibiting night flying except on an IFR flight plan, I approached the airport office with a certain amount of apprehension, but not a word was said about our apparent violation. After closing our flight plan and securing the plane, we proceeded into town and spent a delightful evening and night at one of the better hotels on the beach. While strolling down the beautiful beach that evening under a tropical moon with a gentle ocean breeze rustling the palms overhead, it was difficult to realize we had been fighting our way through snowstorms the day before.

Early the next morning we topped our tanks and at last started down the fabulous Mexican coastline with Mazatlán, some three and a half hours away, our next stop. The northern half of this route to Mazatlán along the coast consists of vast areas of swamp desolation similar to

the Everglades of Florida. While flying over this inhospitable looking country we struck up an interesting conversation with two *Bonanzas* flying down the Baja California peninsula together.

Mazatlán has a tower which can be reached on 118.1 or 122.5 mc and they can usually speak sufficient English to direct you to a pattern and landing without colliding with other aircraft. The town itself is a beautiful resort area and much of its popularity is due to its relatively easy access by auto from the States. It is a rather modern place with quite a

large selection of accommodations and activities. However, our destination for the night was Manzanillo, three hours farther south, so after refueling we were again headed south above the beautiful beaches.

From Mazatlán to Acapulco there is a gas problem if you need 100 octane for a *Tri-Pacer* and want to stop in Manzanillo. There are two stops between with 100 octane—Puerto Vallarta and Zihuatanejo—but Manzanillo has only 80/87 octane. At least, Manzanillo, had only 80/87 octane the last two times we

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"Acapulco from the air is a sight no one could forget," says Owens. Photo shows the famous harbor surrounded by luxury hotels and private homes

Photos by the author





lined up with the instrument approach runway. Hence, an aircraft can track inbound on the localizer radial and be led to the runway.

Since the localizer is also within the VHF spectrum, the distance of reception varies with altitude. At 2,500 feet (MSL) reception is about 25 miles maximum from the airport; at 5,000 feet about 40 miles; and at 10,000 feet the range is about 80 miles.

When inbound on the localizer to the approach end of the instrument runway, this is referred to as the "front course" and the L-R needle acts in its normal omni fashion (i. e., turn toward the needle to stay on course.)

Since the localizer also radiates a radial in an opposite direction to the "front course," this is logically called the "back course," and can be used in the same fashion for tracking inbound or outbound from the airport. The point here to remember is, when flying the back course of the localizer, the action of the L-R needle is reversed. To bring the needle to the center line, the aircraft must be turned away from the needle rather than toward it as in the front course.

Localizer signals are usually found

in the lower end of the aircraft VHF band. Their identifications are preceded by the letter I (two dots.) Frequencies for the various localizer signals at airports, and their magnetic bearings, can be found in the Airman's Guide or approach plates used for IFR work.

So it can be seen that a single omni receiver in an aircraft can be used for a number of services, in addition to tracking inbound or outbound from an omni station. Remember to fly the aircraft by establishing a heading to hold the track, and use the omni to check and verify positions—don't rely on "flying the needle" as the primary reference. By combining the factors of heading, time and distance with omni flying, a single omni receiver will pay a good return in service for the investment.

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## THE AUTHOR

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landed there. If you fly direct to Manzanillo, which is three hours from Mazatlán, you probably wouldn't reach Zihuatanejo, approximately two hours farther, or at least shouldn't try it. So, the only alternative is to stop in Puerto Vallarta 220 miles south of Mazatlán to refuel, then you will have sufficient fuel to stop at Manzanillo and proceed to Acapulco nonstop. With this in mind we stopped at Puerto Vallarta to top our tanks as planned.

There was plenty of gas all right, but as at Nogales no one was available to sell it to us. At least they had a better excuse than before; there was a festival in town and nobody was working. It was suggested we join in the festivities and leave the following day. However, we wanted 100 octane, not tequila, so declined the invitation and proceeded to Manzanillo without any additional fuel. Our wishful thinking was that possibly Manzanillo might have the 100 octane despite the fact that it wasn't available the previous year.

Manzanillo was an hour away. A devastating hurricane in 1959 nearly did away with Manzanillo and the aftermath of the terrific storm was still very much in evidence. A big freighter remains upended against the harbor breakwater and the coconut palms in the area are all torn off at about the 20-foot mark as if someone had planned it that way. Transportation is obtained by buzzing the town which will usually stimulate someone with a vehicle into

action. After doing a good job of this we let down in the gravel strip between the broken mutilated palm trees. Things hadn't changed and there was still no 100 octane available, so we were faced with the necessity of backtracking to Puerto Vallarta for fuel before proceeding south.

Manzanillo is still unspoiled by the tourist traffic and for that reason we especially enjoyed it. There has been no scheduled airline service since the hurricane and the only other access, other than by private plane, is by a rather poor 250 miles of highway from Guadalajara in the interior. We stayed at Santiago, which is approximately seven miles south of the city proper, but still in the protection of Manzanillo Bay.

Our first day here was spent just relaxing on the beach acquiring our first coat of painful sunburn. The second day we rented aqua lungs from an enterprising young native complete with outboard and boat. He took us on an "expedition" up the coast a few miles to a beautiful little bay of crystal-clear water which was teeming with sea life of all descriptions. Most spectacular were the manta rays, huge bat-like creatures 20 feet across their wing tips and many topping the scales at over two tons. Despite their ferocious appearance and gigantic proportions they possess a very docile disposition and have never been known to harm a diver. We cavorted among them within "swallowing" distance and nobody was eaten alive. The following day we were guests of a very hospitable retired Army general and his wife whom we had met on the beach. They took us on



a wonderful deep-sea fishing trip off the coast where we had a real thrill catching our first sailfish, marlin and dolphin.

Early the next morning we checked out and headed back to Puerto Vallarta for the gas we couldn't get before. Fifteen minutes out of Manzanillo it suddenly occurred to me that I couldn't recall replacing the oil-filler cap after checking the oil on the ground, so rather than continue under the circumstances, decided to look for a possible place to land. We located a road with possibilities cutting a straight swath through the jungle, and I set it down for a quick check. My concern was to no avail since the cap was secured and consequently I was the subject of much ridicule for some time afterwards.

We arrived at Puerto Vallarta at the same time a squadron of Mexican Air Force AT-6's pulled in for gas, so had to wait in line over an hour for our turn. From Puerto Vallarta to Acapulco is one of the more scenic stretches with a variety of rocky cliffs and white sand beaches. Also, there seems to be more activity in the water than anywhere else along the Mexican coastline. Countless manta rays, sharks, sea turtles and whales are nearly always visible just below the surface of the clear water. The few villages along here are very primitive and usually completely isolated from any practical access to civilization. Zihuatanejo, 120 miles north of Acapulco, has an excellent paved strip with facilities and a beautiful sheltered bay surrounded by mountains. We had spent several days here the year before and highly recommend it to anyone desiring real privacy and beaches beyond compare.

Acapulco from the air is a sight no one could forget. After the hundreds of miles of desolate coastline the spectacle of Acapulco unfolds before your eyes like an unbelievable fantasy, particularly from the north, where some of the world's most spectacular architecture clings to the precipitous cliffs above the restless blue waters of the Pacific. Then the famous harbor comes into view dotted with the ever-present fleet of yachts and fringed by incomparable beaches and luxurious hotels. Even the airport is beautiful. The terminal is consistent with the usual architecture of the locale and the beautiful landscaping adds a touch of tropical loveliness to the severity of stone walls.

We spent only the night here with plans to spend more time on the return home and were ready for takeoff at 8 a.m. the following morning. South of Acapulco civilization all but ceases for hundreds of miles along the coast, except for an occasional little village nestled beneath the palms. This country is apparently a sea turtle's paradise if the tracks in the sand are any indication of the numbers inhabiting the area. There were hundreds of their nests above the surf.

After counting turtle nests for three hours we landed at Ixtepec 30 miles inland from the Gulf of Tehuantepec.

We had a little difficulty obtaining gas here since travelers' checks were our only means of barter remaining at the time. Apparently our unhappy attendant had never seen such strange devices before and what with the language barrier and all it took a considerable amount of sign language, English-Spanish dictionary and scratching in the sand to convince him that they were negotiable.

After departing Ixtepec we picked up the Pan-American highway (under construction) and more or less followed it the 225 miles to Tapachula, our airport of exit before leaving for Guatemala. The majestic volcanoes of the Sierra Madre range work their way up to 13,000 feet as they approach the Guatemalan border and present a spectacular backdrop to the coastline along the Gulf of Tehuantepec. Our plans were to continue on to Guatemala City that afternoon, but after landing in Tapachula it occurred to us that it was Sunday and we could neither leave Mexico nor enter Guatemala without paying some rather heavy overtime charges.

Tapachula offers none of the allure of the delightful spots along the coast and we all unanimously agreed that this was a dismal place to spend any of our precious time. However, it wasn't as bad as we predicted since we met some very interesting local people who took us out that evening to a splendid dinner and then on a quick tour of their cocoa plantation the next morning.

We cleared out of Mexico following our plantation visit and soon after takeoff were over Guatemalan soil at last. The country changes in a hurry after crossing the border, the vegetation is more lush green and the numerous plantations present an interesting spectacle of colored checkerboard. There is much cotton, coffee, bananas and cocoa raised along the coast between the volcanoes and the ocean and much of the cultivation extends thousands of feet up the sides of the mountains.

The usual approach to Guatemala City is along the coast as far as San Jose, then inland north between two high volcanoes into the city. As we approached the airport we called the tower on both 122.5 and 121.5 mc with no response from either. We found out later that they do not monitor these frequencies, only 118.1 mc and 3023.5 kc of the usual spread of available frequencies which we did not have. We were very skeptical about landing without radio contact due to the considerable amount of traffic in the area. Besides all the commercial traffic the Guatemalan Air Force was touch-and-going with several of our old A-26's and an F-86 jet. We finally worked up sufficient courage, after circling for half an hour, to squeeze into the pattern and touch down without disrupting their legitimate traffic; at least we never heard from the tower concerning our unannounced landing.

After two hours of Customs and Immigration formalities we hurried into

town to our hotel, then spent the remaining afternoon and the next two days touring Guatemala City, the ruins of Antigua and Lake Atitlan, which lies at the foot of two high volcanoes.

It took nearly two hours the following morning at the airport to effect the necessary clearances and obtain gas which put us a little behind schedule of planning on reaching Acapulco that afternoon. Also, it was necessary to cross the field and make arrangements with the tower for our takeoff without the proper frequency for communication. We agreed to receive on 118.1 and acknowledge with a flip of elevators which worked out fine and we were soon on our way.

Instead of retracing our route back to the coast we flew up the north slopes of the Sierra Madre to Lake Atitlan to have one last look at it from the air. From here we crossed back over the mountains at 10,000 feet, then flew directly to Tapachula where we landed again to clear back into Mexico. We also had an unusually distasteful lunch here consisting of canned sardines, exceptionally stale bread and crackers all washed down with hot tomato juice. Our destination after leaving Tapachula was Acapulco with another stop at Ixtepec for fuel. The same distrustful fellow was waiting for us here with an obvious hostile attitude, probably anticipating more travelers' checks, but after flashing a roll of good old Mexican pesos before his bloodshot eyes he topped our tanks in jig-time.

The winter trade winds along the coast are northwesterly and were right on our nose all the way to Acapulco. It took us four hours and 20 minutes from Ixtepec and only three hours flat going the other way. Obviously, no *Tri-Pacer* should try this stretch without an auxiliary tank since it simply can't be done with much of a headwind. There is no gas between Acapulco and Ixtepec along the coast.

In Acapulco we turned our poor tired airplane out to pasture for five days while we went water skiing, skin diving, swimming and night-clubbing in one of the world's most fabulous resort centers. After finally tearing ourselves away from the spectacles of Acapulco we reluctantly headed north again with Puerto Vallarta our next stop.

While topping our tanks at Puerto Vallarta we flipped a coin and decided to spend the night here. We enjoyed it so much we spent all the next day and another night and were wishing that our dwindling three weeks could accommodate even more time at this delightful spot.

From here we had planned a long day of flying and hoped to reach Phoenix, Ariz., so we departed before daybreak. Our first stop was to be Mazatlán, but arriving over it we found the coast completely fogged in, which was the first fog we had seen in Mexico. Culiacan, 125 miles north was clear, the tower informed us, so we continued on and landed there. The fog turned out to be a blessing in disguise since Culiacan's airport has a fine restaurant



where we all enjoyed a wonderful breakfast. There is no restaurant at the Mazatlán airport.

From Culiacan we proceeded to Hermosillo, another airport of entry, half-way between Guaymas and the U.S. border. We cleared out of Mexico here, then entered the United States at Nogales, Ariz.

The remainder of the trip was uneventful except for a wind and snow-storm in the Reno area that grounded us for a day and put us home one day late.

The advantages of private flying in Mexico and Central America over any other method of transportation are practically unlimited. There is such an infinite variety of beautiful, unusual and interesting things to see and do, and how else could one so delightfully sample all this in such a relatively short time? Surface transportation is practically nonexistent in much of these countries and the commercial airlines only touch the metropolitan areas. At least they won't take you sailing above the pounding surf of some of the most beautiful beaches in the world or swinging around the summit of a spectacular volcano in the Sierra Madre.

We logged 76 trouble-free hours on good old N-9341D during this wonderful trip and will surely return at the very next opportunity. Distances become very relative and now that the route all the way to Guatemala seems so familiar, South America is only another long day away!

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