

# Aztec To Barbados

*Detailed and entertaining account of flight from New York to enchanting islands of Caribbean is given by one who enjoyed every minute of it. He describes trip as 'nicest ever created for private plane'*

by W. D. STROHMEIER • AOPA 52032

If you have a little faith in your Lycoming—or Continental—and a good supply of General Declarations (gladly supplied by AOPA's Flight and Travel Department) plus a few WAC charts that cover the area, you can take yourself on the nicest trip ever created for a private airplane—the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and places even farther down the Caribbean—Antigua, Guadeloupe, Barbados, to name just a few.

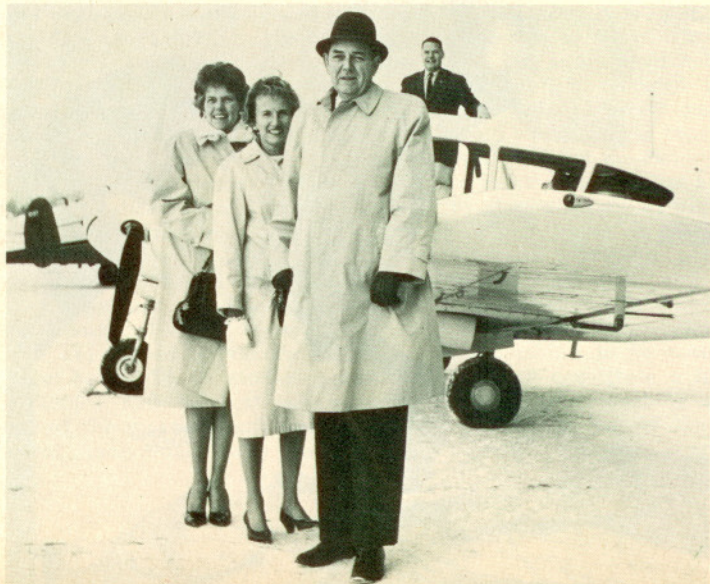
A few embellishments help, but aren't necessary. Such as two Lycomings, which we had in Piper *Aztec* N 4807 P, an ADF, an automatic pilot, and Jeppesen radio charts, both for the area and the individual airports. A Shell International Credit Card helps, too. It wasn't until a month or so later that we found out other nice things about Shell

Service. When the bills finally came home to roost, only then did we realize what Shell 100/130 gasoline costs per U.S. gallon—25 to 26 cents!

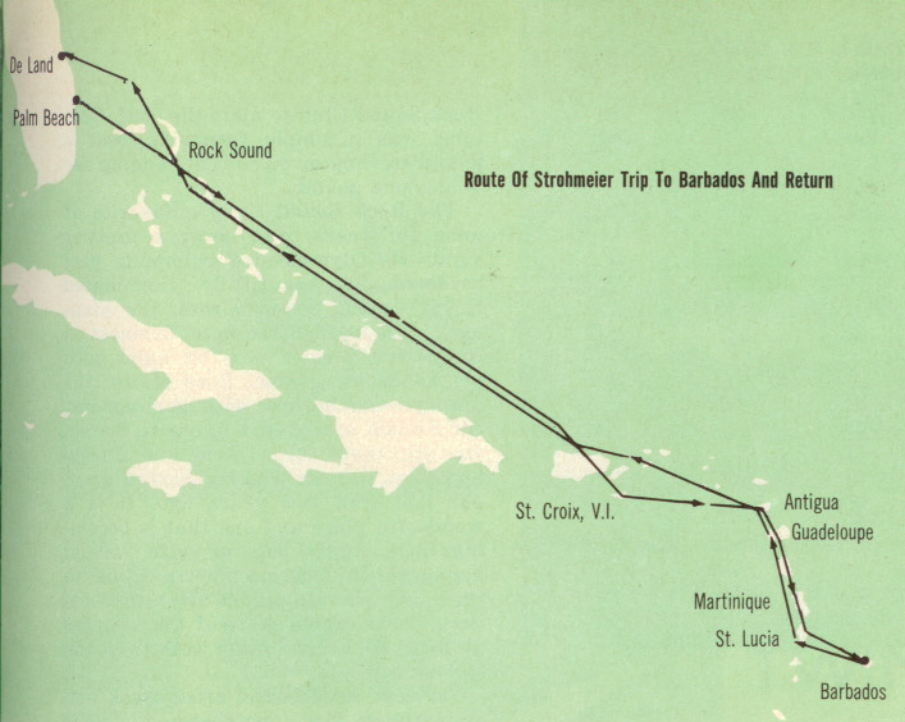
Add to that another genial couple—in our case Shelton and Louise Fisher, also from our hometown of Darien, Conn.—and you have the ingredients of a really wonderful flight.

For us, the trip started as a germ of an idea last fall, and sprouted into a two and a half week trip that covered nearly 6,000 miles from Westchester County Airport near New York City, about 32 hours of automatic flight in a straight line from omni to omni or beacon to beacon by ADF. Past Florida, this latter method of navigation took on added aspects of ease and simplicity since everything down there, with the exception of a few omnis, is ADF. The

Barbados-bound and eager to leave 5°-above-0° weather at Westchester County Airport are (left to right) Louise Fisher, Bea Strohmeier and Shelton Fisher. Bill Strohmeier, in background, is preparing to enter the *Aztec*







southbound over Guantanamo in a 707—on 126.2 mc. Incidentally, this and 118.1—plus 121.5 the emergency frequency—will get you anywhere in the Caribbean. And 118.1 is the universal tower frequency.

Getting back to single-engine considerations, the only variation from "Yankee Route" which is the direct line from Florida to San Juan would be more southerly routing with a fueling stop at Great Inagua rather than South Caicos. Then after Inagua, you can head southeasterly and pick up the shore of Haiti just 60 miles across. From there you skirt the Haitian and Dominican coasts, hop the 60-mile Mona Passage to the west tip of Puerto Rico. Flight over Haiti or the Dominican Republic is seriously frowned on and 48 hours advance notice must be given before landing. Nonetheless, it is dry land and would provide a suitable refuge for a limping single-engine airplane.

Emergency equipment, of course, is a must, single- or twin-engine. This should consist of inflatable life rafts, a Mae West for each person, a little food and water for sustenance. It's wise, too, to have die marker which makes a big yellow spot on the water, some shark repellent, flares and a flashlight. I also took along a Narco VT-4 battery-powered VHF transmitter for good measure.

So much for some basic considerations. Now for some specific details. The trip of Zero Seven Papa started fittingly in five above zero weather the last day of January from Westchester Airport. As we left home, the Opel station wagon was not only overloaded inside but had four suitcases on the luggage rack above. Someone should have said "tilt" right then and there, because too much baggage proved to be the only drawback on the whole trip. We later found we could just comfortably get everything and ourselves into a standard size Chevy station wagon. We once had to use two taxis to get everything from airport to hotel.

beacons are strong and powerful and reception is generally better. It's true of VHF communications, too. You seem to be able to talk a lot farther. For instance, we made reservations with the Rock Sound Club on their airport's Unicom while more than 100 miles out and while at 3,000 feet, but that's near the end of the story. We're getting ahead of ourselves.

Our route covered, after Florida, Eleuthera in the Bahamas; South Caicos, half-way to San Juan for fuel; St. Croix in the American Virgin Islands; Guadeloupe, the French West Indies; Barbados; Antigua; St. Thomas, Virgin Islands; South Caicos and Eleuthera on the way back.

In between, we had nothing but routine flights—10 of them international from one country to another—and any-

thing but routine scenery.

While we enjoyed the serenity of two purring 250 h.p. Lycomings out either side, it proved to be a trip I wouldn't hesitate to make single engine. If you've ever flown to West End on Grand Bahama or to Nassau, you've flown water stretches about as long as the legs required anywhere else down the line. In other words, no hop between islands is much more than 25 minutes in a *Comanche* or *Bonanza*—or about 80 miles. There are a fair number of boats and you usually have something always in sight. In most situations too, you're within VHF range of some ground station or within shouting distance of another airplane aloft. For instance, a friend of mine who flies with Pan American heard us working Grand Turk Air Force Base while he was

Partially cloud-obscured peaks, such as this volcanic mountain, on Saba Island, are frequently found in the Caribbean. The 1,200-foot landing strip, shown in the foreground, has no expansion possibilities. This photograph was made from the Strohmeier Aztec



Strohmeier party breakfasting on the Caribbean Beach Club patio at Antigua. The dining area overlooks St. John harbor and mountains in the background





Distance, Time And Fuel Cost Of Flight In Aztec N4807P  
From White Plains, N.Y., to Barbados And Return

Date (1963)	Leg	Statute* Miles	Time	Fuel Cost
Jan. 31	White Plains, N.Y. to Rock Sound, Bahamas Stops at Greensboro, N.C., Vero Beach, W. Palm Beach, Fla.	1460	8:20	\$ 93.81
Feb. 1	Rock Sound-St. Croix, V.I. Stop at South Caicos	890	5:20	77.33
Feb. 5	St. Croix-Guadeloupe FWI via Saba Is.	230	1:50	13.50**
Feb. 8	Guadeloupe-Barbados via Martinique	265	1:45	12.41**
Feb. 12	Barbados-Antigua via St. Lucia	320	1:50	15.85**
Feb. 14	Antigua-Rock Sound Stops at St. Thomas and South Caicos	1077	6:15	76.65
Feb. 15	Rock Sound-DeLand, Fla. Stop at Ft. Lauderdale	490	2:25	39.52
Feb. 16	DeLand-White Plains Stop at Raleigh-Durham	972	5:30	61.05
	Totals	5704	33:15	\$390.12

\*Distances are via shortest airways or direct island to island. Additional mileage actually flown sightseeing not calculated.

\*\*Fuel in Guadeloupe, Barbados and Antigua is priced at approximately 25¢ per gallon. Fuel at Rock Sound and South Caicos was highest—48¢ per gallon.

Moral: don't let the baggage load of an Aztec lure you into using it all. Keep your "going ashore" requirements to one suitcase per person plus the usual camera case, etc.

While I took an extra long time (purposely) to recheck weather and file IFR to Raleigh-Durham, the crew finally found a place for everything—and everyone was mumbling that it was too bad we didn't have an Aztec B with those big baggage compartments. We were airborne at 8:30 a.m. with the clear crisp sun sparkling on the winter snow.

We cleared Customs at Palm Beach—just a simple case of having a copy of your General Declaration stamped for presentation to Bahamas Customs. [This is not a U.S. Customs requirement but is required by Bahamas.—Ed.] This serves the purpose of proving to the Bahamas where you came from—and not from Cuba. Our first "over-

seas" destination was Rock Sound on Eleuthera, 260 miles out the 115° radial of the West Palm Beach VOR. We'd be getting there an hour after dark, hoped they'd still be holding our reservations and hoped, especially, that their field lights would be on. If not, we'd go back to Nassau, 80 miles west of Rock Sound.

Right off Palm Beach we tuned the ADF to Rock Sound's own private homer and it came in loud and clear. Soon after total dark, the moon made its presence known straight above us, by reflections off the nacelles and we could even see bright and clear the white sand in the shallow Bahamian waters. The lights of Nassau passed quickly by our right wing tip and we soon left them astern. Now a few lights on Eleuthera showed and to our great relief we saw the single 6,000-foot runway beautifully outlined with lights. We buzzed the little village of Rock Sound to alert Customs and then the

Rock Sound Club to alert the chef. Customs was a simple formality, cost a pound sterling or \$2.80. The landing fee is also one pound.

The Rock Sound Club, a favorite of mine for years, was never a prettier sight—its Olympic-size swimming pool bordered by beautifully illuminated Royal Palms. Franz Gross, the manager, who learned the hotel business in his native Vienna, was on hand with his handsome goatee. Rose Maire, the dining room hostess with her wonderful French accent and figure to match, was still there. Also David, and Harold and Sam, waiters who had served us on our last visit two years ago. It is a wonderful place and one that is becoming increasingly popular with "island hoppers". In fact, people travelling in their own private planes are representing a considerable share of the business at Rock Sound and other resorts in the Bahamas.

To leave Rock Sound after breakfast, as if it were just a motel stop along the road, seemed a crime but we had a fair bit of travelling to do this day, 900 miles, and would lose an hour since St. Croix, our destination, is on Atlantic Standard Time.

By now our system of assigned crew duties was working beautifully. I had appointed Shelton Fisher our "chief of protocol" which put him in charge of all Customs formalities and other similar details. This left me free to handle fueling, parking, airport fees, and flight plan filing. It left my good wife, Bea, and Louise with the job of packing. Couldn't have worked out better—for either Shelton or me.

Assigning one person, other than the "captain," to Customs duties is a very practical idea. If you do it yourself, as I've always done previously, you're pretty busy at every landing. Filling out forms, waiting for Customs to appear, then fueling, then parking. With our system Shelton had all the papers in order before landing. He saw to it that the baggage was taken to Customs, the papers cleared and a taxi secured. This took about the same amount of time as refueling (service was exceptional, I might add, except in the U.S. Virgin Islands) and parking. Thus our group was headed for the hotel in about half the time it would take if you as the captain handled everything alone.

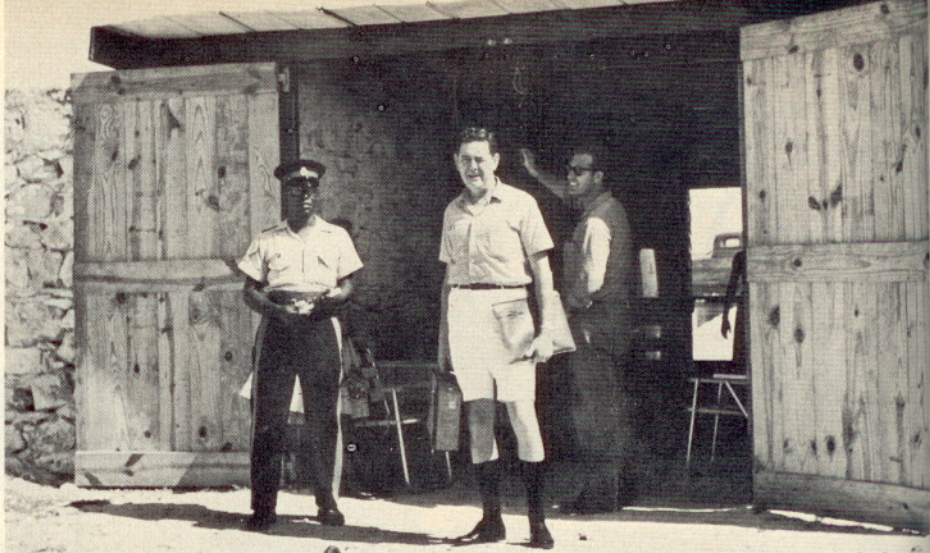
This seems to give the impression that there's a lot of paper work. To the contrary, there is only one form you need—the General Declaration. You prepare about five of these prior to each flight, using carbon paper, of course. This document merely details basic data on the airplane, owner, date, flight route, crew and passenger list. I had typed up about 50 forms with basic data prior to the trip so that simplified things even further. Customs everywhere (except in the Virgin Islands) was business-like and efficient. A smile and patience seem to solve all problems, but watch your holidays. We went to Nassau once on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, and it cost \$20 over-

(Continued on page 54)

Aztec delivers vacationers to Barbados, 2,925 miles from Westchester County, N.Y., Airport, starting point for the Caribbean flight. Standing beside the plane at the Barbados Airport are (left to right) Shelton and Louise Fisher, Bea and W. D. (Bill) Strohmeier. Fisher was designated "chief of protocol," whose duties were to handle Customs, immigration and similar details with local officials along the route. Strohmeier was chief pilot and master of the plane







Aztec's "chief of protocol," Shelton Fisher, poses with Customs officers at South Caicos "terminal," where cold Cokes and snacks are available. Putting one crew member in charge of Customs details is highly recommended by Author Strohmeier for foreign flights

(Continued from page 52)

time. I cleared out of Mexico on Good Friday last year for a \$28 overtime charge.

There is usually no charge for customs during regular hours. At some places, such as the Bahamas, however, there is a departure tax or airport tax on passengers — around \$2. For this reason, always sign on one of your group as copilot since crew members aren't taxed. Used to be you could name everyone aboard as a crew member from navigator down to stewardess, but they've caught on to this and I believe the rule now allows only two crew members for the average four to six passenger aircraft.

We've had a lot of delays getting this story off the ground out of Eleuthera. It took us an extra, unexpected stop to get the flight on to the day's destination, St. Croix. The unexpected stop was on Cat Island, 70 miles down the Bahamas from Rock Sound. Cause: Fr. Murillo Bonaby, an Angelican priest, who showed up at the airport just as our lovely lady baggage handlers had finished their job, miraculously leaving the four seats uncluttered with baggage. Brion Leary, the handy man at the airport, introduced the Father and explained his plight. It seems the Father had missed the Bahamas Airways flight the day before to Cat Island and there wouldn't be another trip for three days. The good Father had a church service to conduct that night on Cat Island at one of 13 churches he served. Could we take him? We pondered the Lord's work vs. FAA and decided Mr. Halaby wouldn't mind three people occupying the two middle Aztec seats for a cause such as this, so Shelton, Bea, and Louise took up a position aft and Father Bonaby sat up with me. And a very interesting man he proved to be. Born in the islands, educated for the ministry first in Barbados and then in England. While we couldn't bring any of the Father's baggage, he did carry on his lap a tape

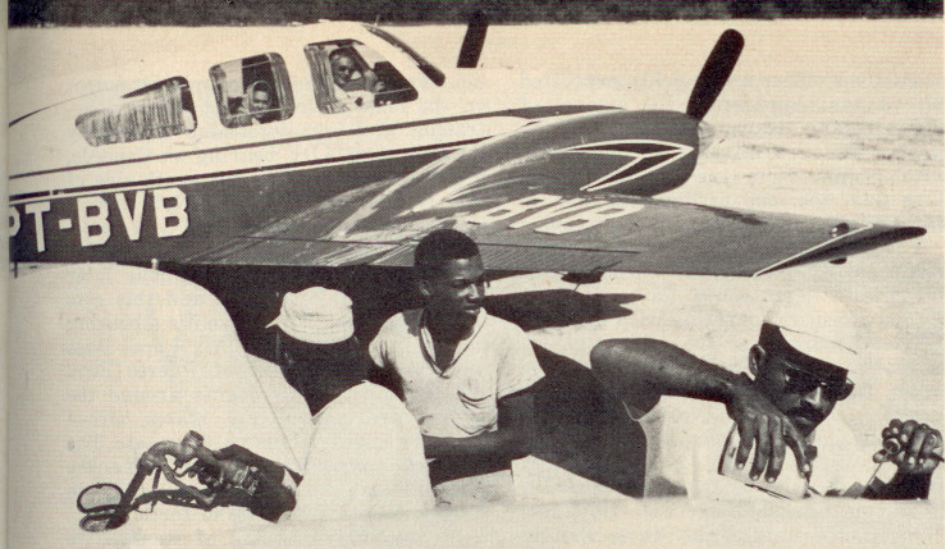
recorder which was one of the Lord's most potent tools as used by Father Bonaby. It seems he had trouble getting his parishioners to choir practice until he got the tape recorder. Now attendance is no problem at all, he said. "We record the singing on the tape recorder, then I promise the people that I'll have the tape developed in time for them to hear themselves sing at next week's choir practice."

The Cat Island strip was typical of the many new ones cropping up all over the Bahamas. About 4,000 feet long, paved, period. Nothing else. We dropped the Father off, engines still running, paused until we were sure he could get his Land Rover started, then took off—and for me this was the real beginning of the trip because I'd never been south-east of the Bahamas before.

You're supposed to fly by flight plan down these areas, so I filed with San Salvador which soon was abeam of us to the left. This is a U.S. missile tracking site on the island, where Columbus made his initial discovery in 1492. The U.S. Air Force has other bases, with landing strips, at Grand Turk, Eleuthera (north of Rock Sound) and at Grand Bahama. They can be contacted on 126.2 mc and you address them as "San Salvador Radio" rather than "San Salvador Tower." San Salvador "rog-ered" the flight plan info, and after a five-minute pause while apparently contacting San Juan direct, came up with San Juan weather and winds aloft. Apparently these way stations don't have teletype weather at hand but can, under most circumstances, get the weather for you.

The South Caicos beacon came in loud and clear with a distinctive high pitched tone for its "CM" identifying code. The beacon, incidentally, is owned and operated by Pan American World Airways. On this route, you're seldom out of sight of an island of some sort, although with the typical scattered cumulus it's hard to distinguish between an island and a cloud shadow. That's why it's always important to





Fast service is given aircraft on South Caicos. The Brazilian-bound plane prepares to depart for San Juan as the local service crew turns its attention to the visiting Aztec

make an estimate for your next landfall and to believe your watch. Don't get lured to one side or the other by what appears to be your destination only to find it's a cloud shadow which your watch would have told you was appearing much too soon.

South Caicos, 320 miles out of Cat Island, was one hour 40 minutes, our 170 m.p.h. ground speed bearing out the almost automatic 20-25 m.p.h. winds aloft which prevail out of the southeast. South Caicos is really an "Out Out Island"—isolated, remote. It has a 6,500-foot strip left over from World War II and a salt industry of sorts. It has now come to life under the aegis of Caicos Holdings Ltd., who are expanding their salt production, planning eventual home building and tourism. In

the meantime, they've set out to make the airport the best, most efficient fueling spot between Florida and San Juan, a monopoly previously enjoyed by Great Inagua. A live wire Englishman by the name of Ian McGuire runs everything and it's a pleasure to see him operate. Max Karant of AOPA and Gil Quinby (AOPA 37841) of Narco had spent a night there in South Caicos in November, and this heightened my curiosity as we circled town to get someone to come to the airport.

This was not necessary. The airport was agog with a dozen people and a new *Baron* in Brazilian markings at the fuel pump. Our "reception committee" consisted of the missionary, his wife, several children, the doctor's wife and a nattily attired policeman who doubled

Under the division of work on the Strohmeier-Fisher expedition to Barbados the ladies, Bea Strohmeier (left) and Louise Fisher, were elected to handle the baggage. It is reported that they did not have to carry all this baggage themselves—merely see to it that someone did that chore





as customs officer and quickly expedited our papers. Apparently the arrival of any airplane draws a number of the locals, who are anxious to come talk with people from the outside world. This day, too, the airline was due in from Nassau and points in between.

The service at South Caicos is really excellent. We were on the ground just 35 minutes and could have made it sooner except for chatting with the local people. Customs is the simplest formality but does exist even if you come from the Bahamas, because South Caicos is so far from Nassau that they have elected to be independent and do business directly with London. We had understood earlier that they were under Jamaican jurisdiction, but this has changed, too. Oddly, the whole British Islands in the Caribbean are currently in a state of confusion as to which direction they will head in their efforts to get out from under colonial rule. Most of them are in a Federation whose seat of government is at Trinidad, but even so they require Customs inspection even on inter-island hops.

Fuel at South Caicos is on a cash or cheque (pardon our British influence!) basis, since they apparently don't have a bank through which to handle credit cards. Fuel was 59 cents a gallon and there was a \$4 Customs charge. No landing fee. They have a very clean restroom and a little canteen where cold Cokes and snacks are available. Since we had brought box lunches from Rock Sound we enjoyed lunch aloft with cold South Caicos Coke en route to San Juan.

We filed our flight plan, after takeoff, with Grand Turk, the USAF missile tracking base about 20 miles east, and the last bit of island until you reach San Juan, unless you veer to the south and pick up Haiti.

It's 410 miles from Caicos to the powerful San Juan homing beacon—SJU—which is west of San Juan International, but we picked it up loud and clear. The winds, as nearly as we could determine were straight on the nose. So much so that the compass agreed precisely with the prescribed course. It showed 129° magnetic on the chart for Route Yankee, and with the ADF pointing dead ahead, the *Aztec's* compass read precisely 129° and stayed that way for the entire two hours. It's when you're on a long overwater haul aiming at an ADF that you really appreciate an automatic pilot with heading lock, because it holds a course so much better than you can do manually and gives you much better indication of there's any drift at work.

For two hours it was hard to stay awake. So little possibility of traffic at 7,500 feet that you didn't feel very alert. The others took naps and I let the seat back in maximum recline position and just watched the clock. Cloud condition was typical and beautiful, just scattered, harmless baby cumulus with tops around 6,500 feet or so. The water was so very blue below and with good reason because as you approach Puerto Rico you pass near the Brownson Deep, over 30,000 feet down. The first check point is Y-3, or Yankee Three, about an

hour from South Caicos and just a spot on the map. It comes just before penetrating and you determine it roughly by taking an ADF bearing on Caucedo, a powerful beacon on the south side of the Dominican Republic. Not that it does much more than give you something to do. You're too far out to report to anyone. Half an hour later comes Idaho intersection and this gets a little more positive since it's a bearing on the omni at Ramey Air Force Base on the northwest tip of Puerto Rico. All the other check points around the island are named for states also—Ohio, Vermont, Alabama, Iowa, etc. The airways are all "routes"—Yankee Route, which we were following, Route X-Ray, Route Two and so forth.

As we passed abeam of Ramey, we were getting into rain and had an upper deck of broken cloud. In fact it looked pretty thick ahead of VFR at 7,500 feet so we started a slow descent and finally wound up at 1,000 feet going through a series of solid lines of rain which lasted two or three minutes. This, we understand, is typical mid-afternoon weather.

In the meantime, I had pondered the necessity of landing at San Juan at all. Why not proceed direct to St. Croix. A call to San Juan FAA produced assurance that St. Croix had Customs. Because of the rain and cloud formation at all levels it looked as if Puerto Rico could best be traversed IFR. San Juan ATC came back with a clearance, routing us at 3,000 feet from the SJU beacon to the San Juan VOR on the airport. We just broke out in time to catch a beautiful rainbow with our color camera. From there it was climb to 5,000, turn south on Route Seven to Point Tuna, on the south side of the island, then east on Route Yankee to St. Croix, 75 miles out.

We broke out of the clouds just east of Puerto Rico and the islands to the northeast were beautiful—Vieques, St. Thomas, St. John and others. Just before we could see St. Croix we had to go through another rain cloud and this produced a beautiful setting for our first glimpse of the island. Suddenly we popped out of the overcast and there below us and ahead was St. Croix, very green and very beautiful.

We cancelled IFR, swung wide to let a Caribair *Convair* at 3,000 feet land first and came in behind, landing east as always anywhere in the Caribbean. It was 6 p.m. local time and a very flustered Customs man could only speak of "complications." He talked so much about the "complications" of his job that there was little wonder he was overloaded. He wouldn't start processing us or our baggage until the health officer came eight miles from Christenstad. Finally a phone call settled things and we were on our way. It is important to remember, however, that especially in the Virgin Islands, the U. S. Department of Health has to be notified well in advance so they can send a man out from town to look at you and your International Health Certificate. We had similar delays in St.

(Continued on page 58)



(Continued from page 56)

Thomas. Be sure, therefore, to get in a request for Public Health to meet you in your original flight plan or at your earliest radio contact.

St. Croix for four days was wonderful. The Fishers had been there before so knew places and people. We had good fun, got too much sun, of course, and did much of our shopping thinking, for instance, that Beefeaters would never be cheaper anywhere else—\$1.50 a fifth instead of \$2.25 at Nassau which I always thought was a real bargain. Scotch, good standard brands like Black and White and Dewars is \$2.75—same price whether you use it locally or take it with you, in contrast to Barbados, for instance, where you can only get the tax-free price if it's delivered to your airplane out of bond. Cigarettes were \$1.20 a carton!

We loaded down therefore with our legal gallon per passenger and took it with us for the rest of the trip.

St. Croix retains much of its charm when it was a Danish Island. It is mountainous to the west and north, quite flat along the southern shore and very dry, like Arizona, on the eastern or windy end, which also is the eastern most part of the United States.

There's a smattering of private flying evident, but most of the flying is charter. Bill Bohlke (AOPA 67416), well-known former operator of the Spring Valley, N. Y., Airport, operates several *Apaches* and *Commanders*. There's a *Tri-Pacer* and *Cherokee* there, too. Fuel was 45 cents a gallon—100 octane, landing fee was \$1 (collected before I even had a chance to get off the wing walk) and tiedown was a buck a night, too. Typical of the inexpensive prices we paid everywhere, much to my surprise.

There's a wide variety of places to stay at St. Croix, from new luxury hotels to small guest houses. Standard rates everywhere in the Caribbean seem to be \$20-\$25 per person, with meals. One could probably do much better at guest houses, and the rates after April 15 and until around mid-December are considerably lower.

Our next leg out of St. Croix proved to be perhaps the most interesting. It took us over Saba—an immensely awe-inspiring island that juts up from the

ocean 90 miles east of St. Croix. From a distance it looks almost like a perfect volcano, stretching up some 2,800 feet. As you get closer you see the sides of the island go straight down into the ocean. There's no harbor, only a few very rocky beaches—yet three villages exist high up the slopes. Friends who had cruised these parts had told us to be certain to fly around it. They had gone ashore on native whale boats through the surf onto the rocky shore. The islanders main livelihood comes from fishing and building boats. One town is called Bottom, yet it's high up the mountain in what was once a volcanic crater. The very top was obscured by cloud, as was the case in all volcanic mountains on the whole trip. We circled, taking pictures and were suddenly surprised as we rounded the eastern edge to see a landing strip carved out of a shoulder on the northeast side.

We went down a little lower to take a closer look and saw that construction was apparently still in progress. We made a note that on some future trip we'd land and visit Saba. Upon my return, I ran into Bob Gift, a Piper service technical representative who had recently landed on that strip from nearby Dutch St. Maartin with a *Cherokee* 180. He said the strip is 1,200 feet long and that's all they'll ever be able to stretch it. Both ends are sheer cliffs down to the water.

From Saba you head more southerly and start down the chain of islands which eventually take you all the way to Trinidad. First come St. Eustatius (called Statia), then St. Christopher (St. Kitts), Nevis, then Montserrat. Each has its DC-3-size strip and is served by BWIA or Leeward Islands Air Transport using anything from *Apaches* to four-engine *Hérons*. These islands are very similar. Each has a left-over volcano, perennially shrouded in cloud. The mountain sides slope off gradually to the shore and all land that's anywhere near level is planted with sugar cane. Many of the islands even have narrow gauge railroads to haul the cane to the sugar mills.

South of Nevis looms the French island of Guadeloupe. It's really two islands barely connected at the midriff.

Grand Terre, the eastern island, is shaped roughly in a triangle about 25 miles on each side and is relatively flat. The west island, Basse Terre, runs about 30 miles from north to south. It is most inappropriately named, since Basse in French means "low" and the island is anything but, with one peak going up to 4,800 feet. Pointe au Pitre, the main city, bustling with some 40,000 black French people, and the nearby airport, are centrally located at the narrow waist which connects the two islands.

Guadeloupe has two homing beacons and an omni, the only one south of St. Croix. It was probably installed after an Air France 707 several years ago strayed during an ADF approach in a violent thunderstorm and drilled a hole in one of the mountains.

You wonder what kind of a French reply you'll get when you call the tower, but the English instructions with strong French accent came back clearly to land, as always, to the east "cleared straight in." We had no trouble landing—the runway is 10,184 feet long. As we parked in front of the *Douane* (French for Customs), a Shell service crew was there pronto to take care of our fueling.

In two small French taxis we were off to La Caravelle, 16 miles away, through Pointe au Pitre which is certainly every bit what you'd expect to see in Central America . . . thousands of natives, many carrying bundles on their heads, milling through the narrow streets . . . open gutters, and a smell that didn't quite border on a stench. The main roads were good but narrow and full of curves. And the driving was 100% French. Never use the brakes, just blow the horn. Ultimately, we turned off onto a fine new road which curved round a low hill and revealed La Caravelle—an \$8,000,000 monument in cast concrete to some way-out French architect. It would be best not to try to describe it, and only hope there's room to publish a picture of the big, completely open main lobby area with flowing concrete roof. The place had been open only two weeks and was really just getting started.

But not the chefs—they were in good

(Continued on page 60)

Louise Fisher and Bea Strohmeier enjoy the first touch of sun on Pelican Cove beach at St. Croix



Town of Castries on mountainous St. Lucia Island, its land-locked harbor and airport are all close together. Beach alongside airport is reported to be one of the best in the Caribbean





(Continued from page 58)

form. Five of them were brought straight from Paris by the Parisian owners who are determined to make La Caravelle's reputation on its French cuisine. They have not failed. The food was superb and our only complaint was its abundance and richness. The rooms were super modern, each with a balcony overlooking the excellent beach and beautiful surroundings.

We were there three nights and the weather was "standard." Ideal temperature, beautiful scattered cumulus that has a special softness to it from the Bahamas south. You look up at them, especially near sunset, and have a tremendous urge to go fly through them and over them.

While most of the clientele was straight out of Paris, we ran into another fellow American air tourist—albeit with a French name, Jacques Istel (AOPA 74361)—the parachute impresario who had made it single-engine. It was he who pointed out to me the observations mentioned earlier about the relative ease of doing the trip on one engine if you skirt the Dominican coast to Puerto Rico.

Jacques suggested we try snorkeling at a nearby spot where there are some cannon from an old galleon. Next morning with Alex Sabattier, our breakfast waiter and former French Navy frogman, we set forth in an outboard several miles down the coast, couldn't find the cannon but saw some lovely underwater scenes. That afternoon we had a real adventure. We took a bus into Pointe au Pitre and this wasn't just any ordinary kind of a bus ride. As on many Caribbean islands the buses are owned by individual drivers—small buses that carry around 20 people. As a result there's a bus about every five minutes and what a ride! Like the cab drivers, they rely on their horn instead of their brakes. On the way back to the hotel, Shelton said, "We're sure knocking them off." I asked what he meant and he said, "Knocking off the things we don't have to do again."

Incidentally, Hertz cars are available at Guadeloupe and are highly recommended. The mountainous part of Guadeloupe is very picturesque and would most certainly make an interesting all-day drive.

All currency on Guadeloupe is, of course, French—filthy French paper money—worse than you see even in Italy. While France has gone to New Francs (worth 20 cents each), Guadeloupe still operates mainly on old Francs. It takes 500 to equal a dollar. That meant our landing fee and parking for three nights came to 29,120 francs or just over \$5.90.

The flight plan you must file at all these spots is the world standard ICAO form which looks especially formidable in French. However, the lady in the air-drome office gladly put in the numbers as I explained in my fractured French that we were going to Barbados next, 260 miles away. With a little sightseeing we'd take 1:30 hours. I might add that a little French is almost essential on Guadeloupe, at least to avoid delay

of trying to find an interpreter. Virtually no one speaks English with the exception of the hotel clerk and the tower people.

The flight plan also brought out another curious fact. Nowhere in the ICAO flight-plan form is there any place whatsoever where your home address, whereabouts, or "next of kin" can be entered. Typical ICAO thinking that assumes all aircraft are airline-type and the owners readily known, should a search and rescue operation be required. If you have any concern on this score on such a trip, you'll have to write your name and home address down on a piece of paper and give it to the clerk.

South out of Guadeloupe, you pass over flat sugar-planted Marie Galante, then shortly pick up big, black, forbidding Dominica, heavily forested with wild jungle-like vegetation, high water falls, primitive villages, narrow tortuous roads and rain and no sugar cane at all, quite in contrast to the sister British islands just north. These may be harsh words for an interesting and intriguing island. No doubt it would be a fascinating place to roam and explore. On a future trip I would most certainly want to do just this.

Thirty miles south of Dominica you're back over French territory—over the island of Martinique guarded at the northern tip by 4,800-foot Mount Pele which in 1902 erupted, wiping out the city of Saint Pierre with a loss of 40,000 lives—one of the worst disasters in world history. Curiously none of the travel books we took with us mention a thing about this.

We skirted the eastern shore of Martinique admiring its coast line which looks quite like Maine. The booming surf appeared extra white as it foamed onto the shore in the bright tropical sun. Already, of course, we had our ADF locked on our destination which lay 30° to the left—some 100 miles across "on the diagonal". Barbados, if you look at the chart, stands aloof from the other islands, farther to the east, alone, well out in the Atlantic Ocean. It has not, however, been bypassed. On the contrary, it is perhaps the most developed, the most British, the most established of all the islands in the Caribbean. It prospered long ago on the slave trade and rum. It is today the most thickly populated of all the islands. Its main city of Bridgetown is almost a "metropolis." Newly-marrieds from other islands come to Barbados for their honeymoon. It is a favorite vacation spot for people from Venezuela. Its south shore between the airport and Bridgetown boasts dozens of hotels and guest houses of all sizes, shoulder to shoulder facing on the excellent beach.

We were, all in all, amazed at the number and excellence of the places to stay in Barbados. Our reservation was at the Colony Club on St. James Beach on the western side of the island. If you like surf, this is not the side to stay on, as the water is very placid and quite a few boats are permanently moored off shore even though there are

(Continued on page 62)



(Continued from page 60)

100 miles of open ocean to the west. Another example of the fact that the trade winds blow steadily and forever from the east or southeast.

We took a drive through the countryside and everywhere you went the roads were walled on either side with sugar cane which reaches up, something like corn, well over ten feet high. While we were there the harvesting got underway and the whole island turns out to do the job. Some of the cane is converted into a marvelous liquid known as Mount Gay Rum which sells for 80 cents a bottle, in bond delivered to your plane, and is really good. Other prices were considerably lower than in the Virgin Islands, too.

It was tempting to continue southward to other islands with exotic names—Grenada, Tobago, Trinidad—but we were now out ten days and the inevitable northbound trek had to start. We were glad we saved Antigua for the end because this proved to be another gem. It's located just 30 miles north of Guadeloupe so we were retracing our steps. However, we altered our route slightly, heading from Barbados more to the west to take a look at St. Lucia. The main town of Castries on the north end of the island is on a beautiful harbor and there's a fine looking airport on the north side. We didn't land, but circled several times, making a mental note that here, too, would be a place not to miss "the next time."

Our guide book said one of the Caribbean's finest beaches is located right alongside the runway and it looked just so from the air. South we could see really spectacular mountain scenery with two twin peaks which led to a discussion on board about the origin of the Spanish word "Teton."

Northbound out of St. Lucia we chose to pass by the western side of Martinique and confirmed what I suspected, that the air is much rougher on this, the leeward side. If you have no reason to the contrary, therefore, plan to go by these islands on the east or windward side for a smoother ride. We did that, very close and low, going by Dominica and further confirmed the impression of primitiveness and raw nature which sets Dominica apart. The beaches were black, the foliage on the hillsides had a genuine jungle look. Everywhere except right along the shore, it was overcast and raining.

We climbed on top and passed over Guadeloupe at 9,500 feet enjoying a tailwind for the first time in over 3,000 miles. Through the always beautiful scattered cu we picked up Antigua ahead and as we passed the south shore were impressed more than ever with the amazing variety of topography which you see from one island to the next. Antigua has many inlets and harbors and a very irregular shore line. This explains why Lord Nelson chose English Harbor as his base of operations from which the British Fleet sailed to win the famous battle of Trafalgar. The dockyards, as they existed during Nelson's time, have been restored and now constitute one of Antigua's main

attractions. The well-protected harbor is a haven for private and charter yachts.

A new 7,500-foot jet strip makes the old original USAF WW II runway look like a taxiway, and we were cleared to make a right turn in—working the tower, as always, on 118.1. One of the nice things about planning your trip, from Puerto Rico south, is that the islands are so close together that you can get all your travelling done in an hour or so after a leisurely breakfast and be all checked in at the next place before lunch. This, of course, is one of the big advantages of operating with your own airplane. It's trouble enough getting hotel accommodations without having to worry about airline schedules, too. Generally, we were airborne around 10 a.m. and were on the ground before noon.

Antigua surprised me with its very dry, Arizona-like landscape. Lots of sugar cane, of course, and lots of cactus, too. Our taxi driver was an affable West Indian by the name of George. He took us in his slightly tired Chevrolet to the Caribbean Beach Hotel and wouldn't accept our money. We could pay him when he took us back to the airport, thus assuring himself of a fare two days hence. The CBC—as the Beach Club is known—has a unique setup. The rooms are in motel type arrangement on the very beautiful beach. The dining terrace and office are on a bluff several hundred feet above the beach, affording a magnificent view of the approaches to the harbor at St. John's, two miles away, and the higher hilly part of the island farther south. To get up and down, they have a little funicular cab which runs up and down on tracks and is self-operated like an automatic elevator.

Here, as at Barbados, the Club maintains reciprocal dining privileges with other establishments and this permits you to eat meals at a variety of places all for the same standard \$25 a day, approximately, per person.

St. John's, the main town on Antigua, isn't any great tourist attraction and nothing to waste any film on. It did have, however, the finest shop we saw on the whole trip with a wide variety of fine dresses at ridiculously low prices and other excellent items. It was called the Coco Shop. Bea bought several dresses, muu-muus and other items for presents. I felt I had lost my shirt in the process.

We were at Antigua just two days and two nights when we decided that, much as we liked it, we'd be better off making the long haul back to the environs of Florida on Thursday, have Friday as a final day in the sun, then make the long haul back to Connecticut on Saturday thus avoiding two 1,000 mile days back to back.

George was there on the dot to take us to the airport and collect his money which was \$6 "Beewee" each way. "Beewee" money is what you use in all the British West Indies, from which the name was derived. A "Beewee" dollar is worth about 60 American cents

(Continued on page 67)



and they have 100 cents to the dollar, the same as we.

George, and we found this true of all our cab drivers, served as a great source of information on local facts and customs. In fact, you should be sure to spend a lot of time in cabs just to talk to the drivers and find out about the islands. Their native lingo and manner of speech are fascinating. George, for instance, explained that a Pan-Am DC-8 on the ramp that morning "sleeps here."

We left Antigua with the intention of getting to Rock Sound on the off chance they might have a couple of rooms still available. If not, we'd try Grand Bahama or go on to Florida. To "collect" one more island we landed at St. Thomas, 225 miles from Antigua, passing Saba again to settle a bet Shelton and I had, as to the location of the air strip. He said it was southeast. The dollar bill you might have seen hanging from the ceiling of the *Aztec* on our approach to St. Thomas, was won by me. The strip's on the northeast tip!

Public Health was late coming out to the airport and we had an irritating delay of 20 minutes until the man arrived, looked at our International Health Cards, said okay. Why it takes a special person to inspect four yellow pieces of paper beats me.

We had to be airborne by 1300 local time to make Grand Bahama before dark if necessary. I elected to stay at the airport and refuel whilst the crew went in town on a quick one hour sight-seeing/shopping excursion. It took nearly an hour to gas the airplane—from five gallon buckets through a chamois yet! Such primitive facilities, in comparison with such modern ones at such far-out places as Rock Sound and South Caicos, are beyond my comprehension. And on this airport at St. Thomas were the first signs of big private flying activity, too: 15 or 20 airplanes from an *Ercoupe* to a *Twin Beech* parked there.

I had a quick sandwich with Jack Chapman (AOPA 97614) a refugee from Teterboro who now operates a couple of *Apaches* in charter service, and heard woesome tales about the slow-motion Customs people on just a simple flight from St. Thomas to San Juan.

The take-off from St. Thomas into the prevailing wind is interesting and I understood why the Caribair *Convairs* are Jato-equipped. There's a ridge a couple of hundred feet high right at the east end of the runway. With 4700 feet of runway, of course, it's no real problem, but it just doesn't look right to stare at this obstruction as you wait for V2. Some pilots handle it differently. I saw a DC-3 and a Cessna 170 take off west, down wind.

We were now headed back to South Caicos and made it in two hours and a half, a distance of 486 miles. It was beautifully clear, so we had a good view of San Juan which is a really large city and built up along the shore line like Miami Beach. Going northwest on Yankee Route, we could clearly see the

Dominican Republic and Haiti off to our left even though we were never closer than 55 miles. We got Nassau and Florida weather from Grand Turk Radio, pre-filed for our next leg, cancelled our existing flight plan out of St. Thomas just before letting down to South Caicos. We were barely out of the airplane when a pick-up truck arrived with the refueling crew and Mr. Liam MaGuire himself, a very pleasant, energetic type who was most charming. This time he had two officials—customs and health—and they quickly took care of our papers, then had a Coke. The poor health officer had a terrible headache so we turned tables and administered a little health to him in the form of a couple of aspirin. With a double crew we figured we'd be paying double the \$4 for customs service we paid on the trip down. "No charge at all" explained MaGuire. The reason we paid \$4 before was because it was during lunch hour! The more you ponder Customs customs the less you understand it.

MaGuire said business was picking up quite nicely, that they averaged three or four airplanes a day, and they'd rapidly gone from 200 gallons a week to over 2,000. "Great Inagua is not very happy about this," he chuckled.

We finished our Cokes, shook hands all around, including the missionary and his wife who showed up, and charged on northwest bound up Yankee Route to Yankee land. We passed through what apparently was the leftover of a weak front, which involved steady rain for 30 minutes and in-and-out IFR at 1,000 feet. It was about this time we experienced the excellent range of VHF communications out here over the water. As mentioned in the beginning, we raised Rock Sound over 100 miles out at 3000 feet. And the word was good. They had room for us.

Next day, our final one in the sun, was perfect and we didn't leave until late in the afternoon for Ft. Lauderdale, filing with Nassau Radio (126.9) as we passed Nassau. They really were busy with private aircraft arrivals and departures. As we tracked outbound from Nassau with one of our omnis, our second omni tuned to Bimini and the ADF on Bimini, too, for good measure, I couldn't help but think of the first trip eight years ago to Nassau by *Tri-Pacer*, with no ADF, no omni on Bimini (no airport there then either) nor at Nassau. Only eight years ago, but a century of progress in between. Airports everywhere, radio facilities everywhere. Even the engines don't seem to go into "automatic rough" like they used to. If you can make Bimini you can make Barbados. You ought to try it sometime. ●

## THE AUTHOR

William D. Strohmeier (AOPA 52032), author of *Aztec To Barbados*, is executive vice president of Davis, Parsons and Strohmeier, Inc., New York City advertising and public relations agency. He resides in Darien, Conn.