
WHERE COULD I GO?

Along with the updated weather information comes the question of where we could go if the weather at our destination — or along the way — becomes less than desirable. Again, our GPS may give us some good options in a readily usable format, and it's not a bad idea to use that feature occasionally as we play the "what if?" game. Otherwise, a sectional chart and *Chart Supplement* (formerly called the *Airport/Facility Directory*) can give us the information we need to keep our contingency plans up to date.

WHERE AM I NOW?

Once again, a GPS with a moving map makes keeping track of our position a snap, but even without that electronic wizardry, we need to maintain awareness of our location. Pull out the sectional or World Aeronautical Chart (WAC), and match up the key features to the outside terrain. The objective is to not become disoriented even if our route of flight changes. When transitioning Class B or Class C airspace, we sometimes get sent along a route we didn't expect, and may find ourselves spit out of the airspace somewhere we weren't expecting. Likewise, weather conditions can cause us to alter course while in flight. By keeping close tabs on our location, we have a much better chance of maintaining a constant state of situational awareness.

The cruise portion of any flight can be enjoyable, relaxing, and scenic, but if we become complacent, we could easily find ourselves behind the airplane and under pressure.

WHERE SHOULD I NOT GO?

These days, temporary flight restrictions (TFRs) pop up like thunderstorms on a mid-August afternoon, and the last thing we need is to violate their boundaries unwittingly. Even if we make a diligent check for TFRs before flight, it's a good idea to check with ATC occasionally to find out if anything new has popped up. We should also be on the lookout for military training routes and other special use airspace that could hold unexpected hazards.

HOW'S MY FUEL?

It's surprising how many pilots trip over this obstacle. Especially when weather changes result in deviations and increased headwinds, we need to make certain we have plenty of fuel to get to our destination or to an alternate. Switching fuel tanks can be important for some aircraft to keep the load in balance and ensure we don't run a tank dry or inadvertently lose fuel overboard, so keeping track of the time and knowing when to switch tanks can be important. Beyond knowing how our fuel is holding up, we need to factor that information into our overall planning process and make fuel stops along the way if needed.

HOW ARE THE AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS?

Although maintaining a vigilant lookout for other aircraft is a prime objective for VFR flight, that panel full of gauges should be part of our scan as well. Whether we're flying VFR or IFR, we need to keep our fingers on the pulse of the aircraft systems. Oil pressure, cylinder head temperature, exhaust gas temperature, and fuel pressure all give us the details we need about engine health and happiness, so make it a habit to keep an eye on their status. Remember too that decreasing manifold pressure or rpm can be a sure sign of carburetor ice accumulation. Electrical power loss can also throw a monkey wrench in our plans, so keep an eye on voltage and amperage as key indicators of electrical system health.

WHAT IF MY ENGINE QUILTS?

This question gets us to focus on our immediate environment. By always having an idea of where we could put down in an emergency, we can help keep our minds at ease. One way to do this is to constantly observe the terrain beneath us in a roughly 30-degree cone. In most cases, we can glide power-off to locations within this area to make an emergency landing. Remember, we're not looking for a perfect field or runway, just a location where a survivable landing could be made.

WHY IS IT SO QUIET?

We've probably all had the experience of the radio being just a bit too quiet, and that can be a sign that something is amiss. A stuck mic, incorrect frequency, or power loss can all cause our radio to give us the silent treatment, but don't overlook the obvious. We should always check the volume and comm selector settings, and verify the headset cords are properly plugged in.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

A good pilot is always several steps ahead of the airplane, so we need to constantly ask ourselves what is coming up next, and what we can do to prepare. Depending on our altitude and the conditions, we might be starting a descent 20 miles or more from our destination, and that signals the need for changing gears and preparing for an approach and landing. Getting the updated weather conditions via ASOS/AWOS or ATIS, and completing the descent checklist are good starters.

WHERE IS HELP?

When things go wrong during a flight, we don't always have time to sort out the pieces of the puzzle, so it's always good to know where we could turn to get the information we need or report our situation. One way to pre-empt such a concern is to use ATC flight following services.

The cruise portion of any flight can be enjoyable, relaxing, and scenic, but if we become complacent, we could easily find ourselves behind the airplane and under pressure. By keeping in mind these key questions, we can stay on top of the situation and ahead of the airplane. *EAA*



ROBERT N. ROSSIER
COMMENTARY / STICK AND RUDDER

Staying Ahead of the Game

Ten questions to ask in cruise

BY ROBERT N. ROSSIER

FOR MANY PILOTS, the most exciting parts of a flight are the takeoff and the landing. The time spent in between those two phases — the cruise segment of the flight — can be a bit less engaging or even downright boring at times. It's easy to become complacent, just kicking back and scanning for traffic as we admire the scenery. The problem is, if we fail to do the right things during cruise, we could be in for a lot of unanticipated excitement. While scanning for traffic is critical in all phases of flight, there is much more to getting from point A to point B than collision avoidance. So, here are 10 questions we can ask to pass the time and, more importantly, to stay ahead of the game.

WHAT IS THE WEATHER DOING?

If there's one thing that can paint us into a corner, it's changing weather conditions. For those with uplink weather capability, it's easy to stay on top of the situation. But even without that benefit, we have plenty of sources that can keep us well informed. Automated weather observations are readily available, and they give us a snapshot of the weather at the moment. Transcribed weather en route broadcasts (TWEBs), indicated by a T in a solid circle in a VOR information box, provide up-to-date weather forecasts for selected routes. Likewise, hazardous in-flight weather advisory service (HIWAS) recordings are available through select VORs as indicated by an H in a solid circle in a VOR information box. To talk with a human, we can use the en route flight advisory service (EFAS) available in most areas on 122.2. Another strategy is to listen in on the local approach control frequency, which can be found on sectional charts in the *Class B, Class C, TRSA, and Selected Radar Approach Control Frequencies* table. As our flight progresses, we should take special note of changes in cloud heights and visibilities, and regularly update our altimeter setting.

