Cross Border Adventure 2025

- Bernie Weiss

When you own a Bonanza and have a wife who fully supports the airplane provided, she gets to travel, you travel. Deb and I have shared many adventures coast to coast visiting friends and exploring new places, but we had never ventured cross- border. All that changed this year with a trip from our base in the Twin Cities of Minnesota to the glorious scenery, people and experiences in Victoria and Vancouver BC, Canada. When you fly a Bonanza, the pleasure is not just at the destination but the entire journey.

One of our frequent trips is to Steamboat Springs Colorado, so we have had some mountain flying experience. Prior to flying the mountains, I took a BPPP mountain flying course. Although such a course is not necessary, it gave me a better understanding of flying around those cumulo-granite structures.

Deb and Bernie motoring via Beechcraft

To me, half the fun of any long-distance journey in a Bonanza is in the planning. While Deb handled plans for once we got to our destination such as activities and accommodations, I focused on the travel. Sometimes I think we take for granted the reliability and capabilities of our airplanes, so I always like to have a few back doors on any long-distance travel. By that I specifically mean having a few airports where we could land as well as a route through the mountains that avoids the highest terrain. I like the extra pair of eyes and well-traveled pathways of low-altitude IFR routes.

As we all do, I was watching the weather a week out and each day I looked the forecast got better (like that ever happens to pilots!). Following articles in the ABS and AOPA magazines I have learned a lot more about weather and feel more confident in my ability to look ahead. Specifically, I have been using Pivotalweather.com and Aviationweather.gov. I would describe both websites as professional quality with a lot of true science being displayed. As the flight was getting closer I also added the weather tools available on Garmin Pilot.

The route from KANE (north of Minneapolis) to Great Falls, MT was straightforward. GPS direct to Fargo ND, then Bismark ND and finally Great Falls MT. The plan was to get an early start, say 7:00 and continue from Great Falls to Bellingham WA where we would cross the border early the next day. General aviation travel affords us many luxuries and options. Our start was a bit late and head winds at 41 knots were much greater than forecast. It seems that headwinds are always greater than forecast and tail winds always less. We landed in Great Falls and decided that 790 miles was enough for one day and we did not want to get to Bellingham at dusk.

The team at Holman Aviation were great and provided us with wonderful service, including a discounted hotel room and a courtesy car for the evening. On top of that we were given two tickets to the Charles Russell Museum. We did not know that one of the most famous western artists had settled in Great Falls and collectors world-wide decided to erect a wonderful museum. We decided to take advantage of the opportunity and were so glad that we

did. I think we spent more than 2 hours there and could have stayed another 2 hours at least. Dinner was a fun place downtown in an old foundry, again a recommendation of the fine people at Holman Aviation.

Our plan now was to fly direct to Victoria airport (CYYJ). The procedure to leave the US and enter Canada is to file our flight plan, file our trip and associated passport information via eAPIS (Electronic Advance Passenger Information System), and call CanPass to give them passport and flight information and obtain permission to enter the country. CanPass personnel were very professional and a pleasure to work with. Other than filing the eAPIS form, there was no other involvement with US customs. That changes on the flight back into the US. eAPIS is designed to be easy to use and several of the pilots who I talked to who have flown across the border have used the government website. However, I was recommended to use Flashpass, an app that makes the eAPIS filing very easy. Easy it was, particularly in loading passport and aircraft information and the filing was a snap. Before you head north, check out requirements to fly into Canada including insurance liability, radio license, weight and balance, original pilots license, medical and of course aircraft registration. AOPA has a brochure that walks you through all the requirements and procedures which I found very useful.

The flight plan from Great Falls to Victoria consisted of segments from the Low IFR charts. We left Great Falls (3680 ft) and started our climb to 12,000 ft. As we headed west to our first fix Mullan Pass (MLP), Deb was watching the terrain page on our GPS and as we climbed the "red" terrain obstacles started to disappear which gave both of us relief. Next fix was Spokane (GEG) where we started following T268 airway which took us through the low spots in the Cascade's and around most of the Seattle airspace until center cleared us direct to CYYJ. The scenery was gorgeous, we were awed by the sharp peaks, deep valleys, and wild rivers. As we passed Seattle and headed to Victoria, the sea and many islands took our focus and that too was awe inspiring.

As we had read in preparing for our landing at Victoria we knew that the "customs box" was located at the end of runway 9 co-located near the Shell FBO. Our instructions were to go to the customs box and call Canadian Customs on the number we were provided. The customs agent asked a few questions, confirmed that nothing changed from the information that we gave them early this morning and ended with a friendly "Welcome to Canada". Everything was done over the phone. We started back up and taxied next door to the Victoria Flying Club where we could park for $25 CAD/night.

Our original plan was to use Uber to get around as we naively thought that we could walk everywhere. We were wrong. We met Colin, a fellow pilot and member of the Victoria Flying Club and started talking and he advised strongly that we rent a car as the distances were greater than we thought. He then offered to take us to the main terminal in his beautifully restored 1965 Mustang convertible. We piled in and off we went. Colin also provided us with many recommendations of places to see and activities that he thought we would enjoy.
Rental car in hand, we headed toward the world famous Butchart Gardens. Words cannot describe the size, imagination and beauty of these gardens. Just to walk the gardens took us about 2 hours and we enjoyed everything immensely.

By now it was time to check into our Airbnb. The place was spacious and perfect. Due to laws in Victoria, there are not a lot of non-hotel accommodations, and we were lucky to snag this spot on short notice (fly by air, one needs to be flexible). The only downside was when we went to extend another night, no flexibility as it was already booked.

Day two we decided to go whale watching. Browsing the internet, we found several highly recommended places and chose the one that was family owned. Turned out to be a great choice. We chose the early booking which was fortunate as the seas were calmer. We saw a lot of wildlife including an elephant seal warming itself on the pavement near a light house and of course, whales. Although no humpback whales we were fortunate to see and follow a group of three orcas. We spent about 10 minutes with the group and then we were off searching other sights. Although I thought we came prepared with polar tech jackets, we were provided full waterproof jackets and pants along with hats. All were required to keep us dry as we moved around from place to place in search of wildlife.

Our visit coincided with Canada Day (when Canada was given their independence from England.) Lots of celebrations and fireworks downtown and we enjoyed all the activities. Our Airbnb host gave us the name of a local fish restaurant downtown and we quickly made reservations. Concerned about the crowds on the holiday we eat early and then walked around and enjoyed all the revelers.

Since our Airbnb was only available for two nights, we decided to move on to Vancouver. Our original plan was to fly there but after finding such wonderful and affordable accommodations at the Victoria Flying Club we decided to take the ferry over to Vancouver. The process could not have been easier. We Ubered to the bus station where we caught a bus that took us onto the ferry. We left our luggage on the bus and caught the same bus off the ferry into Vancouver. Easy-peasy.
The ferry was wonderful and the scenery was again magnificent. On board, the time went fast as we watched the many islands drift by and enjoyed a nice lunch. Since we are experienced GA vacationers we make last minute reservations as we never know our exact schedule. Deb got on the internet and found us a room, reasonably priced in the heart of downtown. The bus from the ferry dropped us off bout 5 blocks from the hotel and we walked there no problem (we have learned to travel light.)

Vancouver is a beautiful city, surrounded by ocean and mountains that fall directly in the sea. It is also a very walkable city, and we put on over 16,000 steps that afternoon exploring. The next day it was off to Granville Island which is a huge farmers market and artisan community. We caught a water taxi for the 7-minute commute. Our advice is do not miss this treasure if you are in Vancouver. Take some time and stroll around before you decide on your breakfast or lunch options. Each stall offered something great. You will not be disappointed. Speaking of food, yum, there are lots of choices in Vancouver, including various Chinese cuisines, Nepalese, Indian and of course Italian and Canadian.

The journey back to Victoria was the reverse of the ride over except upon arrival we caught a taxi to the Victoria Flying Club for our return to the US. The first thing I did was file my eAPIS form and then called Bellingham WA CBP office to request permission to land. This must be done a minimum of 2 hours before arrival, and you are given a 30-minute window to arrive. Even I thought I had a chance of meeting this window as it was only a 36-mile trip, I was told in no uncertain terms, if I was going to miss my scheduled arrival (my window was 15 minutes early

or 15 minutes late) I must contact them and let them know. That does present a problem as the only way to contact them is via cell phone.

Next step was to file an IFR flight plan to Bellingham with Canadian Flight Service. Per the CPB documentation they prefer an IFR flight plan. Now we waited for our departure time. Although an international airport, Victoria is also a busy training airport which made the controllers very familiar with small GA aircraft. Clearance and departure follow the same procedures as in the U.S. and soon we were on our way across the bay to Bellingham. Upon arrival we were directed to the "customs box" and told to wait for an agent. Quickly an agent appeared with a "Geiger counter" and told us to gather our documents and head into the building. Documents required were passports, pilots license, medical and aircraft registration. Inside we were met by a very "efficient" officer who reviewed our documents, asked a series of questions and told we could now move our plane. We were never "welcomed back home" which I found disappointing.

The FBO, Bellingham Aviation Services was located next door to the CBP offices, and we tied up and stayed the night. The FBO helped us find a hotel (25% discount) and we arranged to meet a friend for dinner.

The weather the next day showed some mountain obscuration, so we delayed a day and explored Bellingham. The flight home was every bit as enjoyable as it was coming out and Bismark our only stop. The first leg was about 5 hours (finally a small tailwind). We borrowed the courtesy car in Bismark and found a nice place to eat and then the final push home.

This trip taught us that it is not difficult to cross the border and, on the way home, we talked about future trips to Montreal, Banff and Quebec among others. Lots to explore and we intend to be busy enjoying the freedom and convenience of our Bonanza as much as possible.