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### Features

## Island Hopping

By: Julie Summers Walker

#### Fly to places only a few can get to

In the Chesapeake Bay off the coast of Virginia is an island lost in time. Tangier Island is barely three miles long and one mile wide. It sits 12 miles off the lower Eastern Shore of Virginia and is only accessible by boat or aircraft. Some of its 600 inhabitants still speak with the Elizabethan English accent of the island's founders. There are few cars. The 2,426-foot runway parallels the bay. It's the sort of place general aviation was made for.

"Island hopping" may bring to mind Caribbean blue water, but in the United States, there are a number of island escapes, each with its own personality and hue, best visited in a small airplane. Your newly minted private pilot certificate can get you access to places few people get to see.

1. Tangier Island Airport (TGI), Tangier, Virginia. Its runway is behind Mrs. Brown's B&B and next to the beach. You land and place your \$10 landing fee in a box, then put \$2 in another box to rent a bike to pedal the short distance into the town center (it's close enough that you can walk). This is the soft crab capital of the world, so eating a



crab cake is probably going to be your main activity on this quiet island. There are just five tourist shops and a museum, and eco tours through the wetlands, or you can borrow a free kayak or canoe and paddle your way along one of the four designated water trails. The airport is open dawn to dusk. The 2,426-foot runway has a reputation for being dinged and bumpy but it was recently resurfaced (and was shortened in the process). Check Patuxent Approach (127.95 MHz) for the status of nearby military operation areas (MOAs) and restricted areas that may be active.

2. Mackinac Island Airport (MCD), Mackinac Island, Michigan. Operated by the Mackinac (pronounced mack-en-awe) State Historic Park, which comprises 80 percent of the 2,200-acre island, the airport has a 3,500-foot runway. Landing fees start at \$9 a day, and during the season (May through October) the airport is open 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. No motor vehicles here; contact unicom 10 minutes prior to your landing to have a horse-drawn carriage waiting to take you into town (\$5). Opulent Victorian homes line the city streets. The weather is always unpredictable, and the runway is subject to a low-level wind shear; pilots should get weather briefings en route.

3. CATALINA Airport (AVX), Catalina Island, California. Known as the "Airport in the Sky" because the

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3,000-foot runway is at an elevation of 1,602 feet, atop a series of mountain peaks overlooking the seaside town of Avalon. This nontowered airport can be shrouded in Pacific fog. The airport is privately owned, there is a \$20 landing fee, and the runway is slightly higher in the middle. Shuttle buses can take you into town where the mode of transportation is golf carts or bicycles.

4. Nantucket Memorial Airport (ACK), Nantucket Island, Massachusetts. In the summer, this is the second busiest airport in Massachusetts. The island is located 30 miles off the coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and is nicknamed "The Gray Lady" because it is often covered in mist and fog. But on beautiful summer days, no sky is more incredibly blue. Taxis take you into town (three miles). Once there, enjoy cobblestone streets, numerous tourist shops and galleries along the wharf and, of course, seafood at the many historic restaurants and inns. The airport terminal building was made famous in the 1980s television series *Wings*.

5. Put in Bay Airport (3W2), South Bass Island, Ohio. This is the "Key West of the North," a two-mile-by-four-mile island in western Lake Erie. Just 630 residents live in the village of Put in Bay, which has a busy tourist season beginning in June. The 2,870-foot runway is not lighted and operations are from dawn to dusk in the summer season. Since overwater conditions change rapidly, there may be sudden haze and fog. There are rarely days without wind, and landing aircraft will experience moderate turbulence when the wind is above 10 knots. Golf carts are the mode of transportation around the island, which is known for walleye and perch fishing.

6. Ocracoke Island Airport (W95), Ocracoke, North Carolina. Ocracoke Island is located at the southernmost tip of North Carolina's Outer Banks. It is a 16-mile-long barrier island, which is served by a single two-lane paved road and is a part of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. The airport is located one mile from the small town of 800 year-round residents. The 3,000-foot runway is situated along the shore; tie down and walk your beach chairs across the road to a windswept white sand beach. Check the winds; they can make it hard to land here.

7. George T. Lewis Airport (CDK), Cedar Key, Florida. The better-known key in Florida may be Key West, but for a taste of "Old Florida," Cedar Key is the place to land. This is pre-theme-park Florida where you'll still find beach cottages, roadside stands, and 1950s-style hamburger joints. Cedar Key is located in Florida's "Nature Coast" about three miles out in the Gulf of Mexico. The airport is unattended. Pilots prefer not to take off to the southwest from the 2,355-foot runway at night as it becomes a black hole over the water. It does get gusty and can be subject to high density altitude conditions.

8. Friday Harbor Airport (FHR), Friday Harbor, San Juan Island, Washington. The largest of the San Juan Islands--in the so-called "Banana Belt" because of the mild temperatures--Friday Harbor has a 3,400-foot runway near the edge of the island and is within walking distance of town. When it is rainy and damp in Seattle, chances are the sun is shining in Friday Harbor. Watch for orca whales, visit pebbly beaches, hike mountain trails, and visit restaurants and shops. At the airport, Ernie's Cafe (named for aviator and author Ernest Gann, who lived on the island) offers breakfast and lunch. The airport is open from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. There is a noise sensitivity issue in the community.

9. Jekyll Island Airport (09J), Jekyll Island, Georgia. This 10-mile barrier island is located off the Georgia coast. It was once the summer retreat of some of America's elite families such as the Rockefellers, Pulitzers, and Vanderbilts until it was designated a national preservation area; the Jekyll Club is now a public hotel. The airport's 3,715-foot runway runs along Jekyll Creek. The airport is open from dawn to dusk.

10. Katama Airpark (1B2), Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. After landing here you can actually taxi right to the beach. Katama is at the southern end of Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Cape Cod. Landing on one of the three well-maintained, intersecting grass runways, ranging in length from 2,600 feet to 4,000 feet, you taxi to a parking area, which is 100 feet from the ocean. Biplanes and gliders offer rides here, and there is a small restaurant. The airpark is not lighted.

### Before You Fly:



Going "feet wet" and flying to an island is one of aviation's great pleasures. It's a not-so-subtle way of reminding yourself that flying offers easy access to places that land-lovers only dream about. But conditions on islands are often different than the



mainland, so it's  
important to do  
your homework

before the flight. Here are some of the many considerations:

**Knowledge**--There's no substitute for local knowledge when it comes to island flying. Call ahead to the airport operator or FBO to find out about typical local conditions and things such as transportation and aircraft parking.

**Wind**--Because of the land mass shape and heating effect, wind is often a major factor on islands. Usually winds around an island are stronger and more uneven than on land.

**Fog**--Sure, that island runway has a great dinner spot, but are you sure you can eat and run before the fog comes in? Coastal areas can mean coastal fog, something you don't want to try taking off or landing in.

**Approach**--Many island airport approaches are overwater. Although not necessarily more hazardous than a land approach, flying down final over water has a unique set of challenges, from glare off the water to an unusual sight picture. Increased bird activity can also be a factor. Circle high overhead if you've never been there before.

**Takeoff**--In general, island takeoffs are nothing unusual. That is, unless you try it after dark. Because taking off over water at night means no lights, it becomes an instruments-only affair. If you're not current or comfortable with night flying, be smart and bring a CFI or leave earlier.

**Money**--Bring some cash along on your trip. Islands can sometimes be sparse on services, and there's sometimes a landing fee. Also many taxis, restaurants, and other amenities are often cash-only.

### **Watch out for that approach**

The approach end of Catalina Island's Runway 22 begins at the edge of a 1,500-foot cliff. There's a strong downdraft at the approach end caused by prevailing winds there, so be prepared. A 20-minute walk from Mackinac Island Airport brings you to the downtown area, where horse-drawn carriages await. Other than a few areas (including the runway), all of Ocracoke Island is part of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. Flying into Put in Bay Airport gives you or your passenger an opportunity to photograph all of the Bass Islands from the air. Cedar Key retains its 1950s style relaxed seaside village feel. Rent a two- or four-seat electric car at Jekyll Island Airport for a novel way to tour the island and see the island's famous Jekyll Island Beach Club. When you land at Friday Harbor Airport, it's a short six-minute walk from the transient parking area to the town. Tangier Island is a favorite destination of Mid-Atlantic pilots. You'll love the crabcakes, but watch out for the crosswinds.

*Julie Summers Walker is managing editor of AOPA Flight Training and AOPA Pilot. A student pilot, she's slowly working toward her first solo (65 hours and counting).*

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