

## Utah Backcountry Airstrips

May 2016

The hangar door opens; Yet another adventure begins!



This time a friend, Chuck Kopelson, and I are headed to visit and camp at a number of backcountry airstrips West of Moab, Utah. Most pictures Chuck took—Thank you!

But first we have to get over the Continental Divide. We were expecting a bluebird clear morning after several days of stormy weather. Alas, it was not to be. Clouds hugged the Divide.

Though we weren't that close together, another friend was along in his 150 Hp Cub. We were on the radio discussing how to get over the Divide. We discussed perhaps going over "the top." I estimated "the top" was up at over 14,500' or more. My friend Curt opted for Weston Pass (North of Buena Vista; South of Leadville). I started heading that way.

I saw a window over Boreas Pass (11,481' N of Fairplay). I figured I'd take a look. I was able to sneak over at just under 12,000'.



**CLOUDS OVER THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE**



**OVER BOREAS PASS AT CLOSE TO 12,000'**

Once over Boreas Pass things started to open up. We were able to follow I-70 through the canyon between Frisco & Copper Mountain.



**INTERSTATE 70 BETWEEN FRISCO & COPPER MTN SKI AREA (VISIBLE)**

We were home free at this point, with only Vail Pass to cross before hitting the “low” lands towards Eagle, Rifle and ultimately Mack Mesa (private strip just W of Grand Junction).



**OVER VAIL PASS**

Another friend, Hap, joined up with us over Eagle and the three of us headed over Grand Mesa toward a private field just West of Grand Junction (Mack Mesa) to fuel up.



**Grand Mesa (Nat'l Gas Well on top!)**

After fueling up, we headed for Mexican Mountain. The Mexican Mountain airstrip is about 13 miles W of Green River Utah—there are no roads to this airstrip. Mexican Mountain strip was constructed by an oil company that drilled a test well in the area in 1975, but was quickly abandoned in that same year after the company hit a dry hole and capped the well. The airstrip had not been formally maintained since until the [Utah Backcountry Pilot's Association](#), in cooperation with the BLM, undertook to perform basic maintenance in 2014.



**TED'S EXPERIMENTAL SUPER CUB @ MEXICAN MTN**

Here is a video I took from my Cub landing at Mexican Mountain:

<https://youtu.be/L7xIHe0rqpE>

Another pilot happened to be camping there. He took some great pictures (see above) as well as an awesome video: <https://youtu.be/a1Oi9BIZRU8>

On the way to Mineral Canyon, we flew down the Green River in the canyon. We passed by numerous rafts, kayaks and paddle boarders. 4 ½ min video here of canyon flying: <https://youtu.be/lcnVq5oNXrU>

From there we flew to the Mineral Canyon airstrip. Here's a video of me landing:

<https://youtu.be/xwng2VZfZ5Q>

The Mineral Canyon Landing Strip was built by the Excalibur Uranium Company in 1950 or '51. Excalibur discovered a small area of uranium mineralization in the lower Chile Formation a few hundred yards northeast of the present landing strip. Not much ore was removed and the mine was closed a short time later.

The next morning I did a quick takeoff and landing to shoot video in the calm air. Here are a couple of videos of this. My friend has a top-of-the-line Nikon camera, but he couldn't see me in his LED screen due to the bright light—hence him moving the camera around a bit while shooting my landing.

Aircraft view: <https://youtu.be/k1E4xHStg2s>

Ground view shot with Nikon: <https://youtu.be/hieneJEWTVU>

We headed for Hidden Splendor to visit that area—about an hour W of Mineral Canyon.

The Hidden Splendor airstrip was originally built for the Delta mine, which was later purchased by the Atlas mining company. Though Hidden Splendor was one of 5 extensive Uranium mines in the San Rafael Swell, it was notable for producing the most pure ore. Where most mines produced ore .1 – 1% in purity, Hidden Splendor produced ore with nearly 28% purity straight out of the ground. This created heavy interest in the mine, and convinced Atlas Mining Corporation to purchase it from a prospector for \$9 million dollars. During the most active mining period from 1954 – 57, when the Atlas put down the airstrip, it is estimated that between 500 – 1000 people lived in the area surrounding the airstrip and mines. Small cabins, rowhouses, and other structure covered the area, including a schoolhouse large enough to educate a few dozen children. After they pulled out in the late 50s, Atlas bulldozed or burned down most of the structures.



### HIDDEN SPLENDOR AIRSTRIP

We shot video from the aircraft of our landing: [https://youtu.be/Lp5pjZaJi\\_M](https://youtu.be/Lp5pjZaJi_M)

Met some folks there that had hiked in along the San Rafael Swell. One can also drive into this area—though finding the correct dirt road would seem to be a real challenge!

On takeoff, I took off in the same direction as shown above. Rather than fly the serpentine canyon, I elected to make a hard right immediately after liftoff, fly toward the canyon wall, then do a 180° climbing turn to exit out towards the wide open desert. Totally safe & great fun! Here's the takeoff: <https://youtu.be/VS6nu95y-O0> Notice the awesome rock formations about 1:15 into the video.

By now it was getting quite warm and the air was fairly turbulent. We flew back to Canyonlands airport (a real airport <g>) to get fuel. Hap departed for home. Curt stayed and we headed for Angel Point airstrip. There are “kind of” two strips, but they are really roads. N-S has some good ups and downs!

As the airport description on the Utah Backcountry Pilot's Association (UBCP) website says, it is a long hike to anywhere. One can drive here, though once again it would be a serious challenge to take all the correct turns on various and multiple dirt roads to get there!



**ANGEL POINT**



**ANOTHER VIEW OF ANGEL POINT**

From Angel Point the plan was to head to Dirty Devil. It was getting quite warm by this point—mid afternoon. Winds were swirling and the thermals were bouncing us around a fair amount. Density altitude had to be in the 9,000'+ range.



**DIRTY DEVIL**

Here is the description of Dirty Devil from the UBCP website:

“Very isolated. Sandy, soft and short, usable by STOL-equipped, high-performance aircraft with experienced pilots.”

Well, we are both experienced enough to know that with the high density altitude and squirrely winds, we didn't want to land there, especially with one of us in a 150Hp Cub.

We thought we'd head over to Happy Canyon and perhaps camp there. Alas, Happy Canyon didn't have a tree within miles. We opted to return to Mineral Canyon with its long runway, beautiful scenery and trees.



Even with the weather, the scenery continued to captivate us!



**AMAZING DESERT COLORS**

The next morning we departed Mineral Canyon bound for Glenwood Springs (fuel). Weather was absolutely perfect! We even had about a 15 mph tailwind.

More pictures below...on the next page...



**Delicate Arch: Arches Nat'l Park (center of photo)**



**GORE RANGE N OF VAIL FROM 12,400'**



**ABANDONED RAILROAD TRESTLES OVER ROLLINS PASS**

Here's a slideshow of many of the best photos of the trip:

<http://eaerofab.com/utah2016/index.html>