

An Adventure in Flying

John Cortesy



My first trike, with a passenger, at San Juan airport where I usually go to play locally.

I started flying gliders out of Moriarty and that was fun, but I knew that I would always be at the mercy of the available lift and that there would be days that a trailer recovery would be necessary. Not only that but I felt limited to the local field. I feared wanting to stray too far. I soon decided that a Cessna 172 was the ticket for me. Lessons resumed in Santa Fe and I was on my way to a Private pilot single Engine Land Certificate. That was until I went to the Copperstate Fly-in one year.

After walking the tarmac looking at planes of every shape and size imaginable, I headed over to the ultra light strip. There, several manufacturers had their aircraft on display, and the sky above them seemed to be constantly full of buzzing two stroke motors. What intrigued me the most about the planes was how, next to the fully aerobatic professional pilots of the air show that had just ended, these guys looked like they were carving up the sky better than anyone else.

I stood in line for a demo flight on what can only be described as a powered hang glider and soon the pilot, Richard Helm, was giving me the preflight brief. Do this, don't do that, I was barely listening as the excitement of what was to come filled my thoughts, and soon we were strapped in and taxiing to the departure end of the grass strip.



The annual Magdalena gathering has lots of trikes parked off the gravel runway.

The motor screamed to life as we began rolling forward slowly, then faster, just as I expected from previous flight training, but immediately we leapt off the ground and soared skyward like a homesick angel. Caught off guard by the short ground roll and incredible climb rate I thought something was wrong, seriously wrong with the aircraft. Rich must have felt me tense up because he was assuring me through the intercom and telling me to relax. Once I did relax he let me fly from the co-pilot's position and soon I was loving it. Before we headed back I asked for a demonstration of what the trike could do.

A little background here. I have been riding and racing motorcycles since I was a little boy. The thrill of launching the bike off a jump, tearing down a twisty narrow slot canyon with barely enough room for the handlebars as fast as possible, or climbing a hill so vertical that gravity is defied in the process, represents just another Sunday out with the boys for me. Feeling the rise and fall of the land beneath me as I tear across it at breakneck speed is a rush that is hard to explain to someone who has never experienced it. The closest I can come is to tell them that it is like a roller coaster ride.

Well the ride Rich gave me in his trike that day was **exactly** like a roller coaster ride. The steep climbs, spiral dives, and skimming sagebrush at five feet AGL was so much more fun than flying straight and level at 12,000 in the 172. With an open cockpit and the wind in my face it was just like my dirt bike only in three dimensions instead of two. I had to have one!



Follow the leader in a low pass near a geyser on the playa.

Searching the internet for resources like instructors and other trike pilots, I found that there is a small but growing community of trike pilots in New Mexico. There are social networking websites devoted to trikers and several forums and billboards. I just had to plug in, get to know these guys, and find me a machine to fly. Oh yeah, and someone to teach me how to fly it.



Passing 100 feet over my wingman at Lake Powell.

Finding an instructor for such an esoteric aircraft in the small town of Los Alamos was a stroke of luck. I have since discovered there are currently 17 trike pilots between Taos and Belen. Most like me are Sport Pilot certificated. The limitations on Sport Pilot as opposed to Private Pilot don't really matter to most trike pilots. We fly day VFR only and stay below 10,000 feet anyway, so the shorter training period and reduced costs are just a bonus for those getting into the sport.

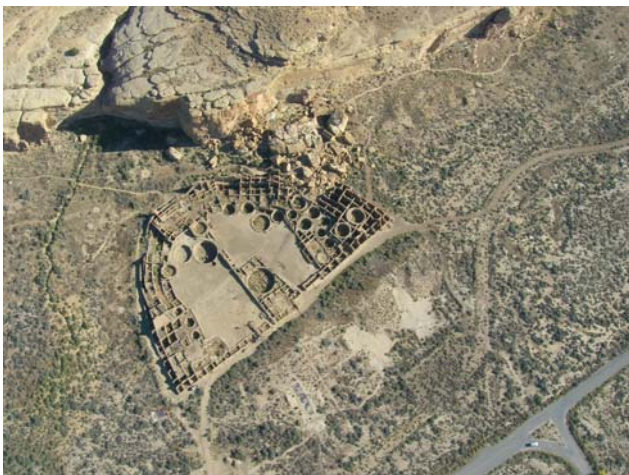
Like any other form of aviation low hour pilots make mistakes and sometimes those mistakes materialize in the form of bent metal or at least bruised egos and shaken confidence. I have had my share of all of these maladies. I have even attended the funeral of a fellow triker Pete Adams in Taos. Pete made one mistake too many in his trike and he will be missed by those who flew with him regularly. The point here is that

unlike dirt bikes that can get you hurt, any form of aviation can get you killed. As much fun as it is to fly these machines, they deserve a **HUGE** amount of respect. Start neglecting the maintenance or preflight inspections and it can bite you in the butt quickly.



A fellow triker sent me this picture and said that it was me, flying inside the Barringer Crater. I deny it of course. Look for the white dot in the center of the crater's shadow.

Local around the patch flying is a good way to build hours and learn how the weather affects the handling of your machine. Soon I was ready to head out to see some new country. My bump tolerance had gone way up from when I first started flying to the point that the afternoon turbulence no longer worried me. A 20 knot wind was nothing to be worried about either. I had regularly greased 15 knot crosswind landings. Ok I will admit that some of them were not a "greased" landing so much as they were a "no airframe damage" landing. But now I wanted to explore the southwest and see the landscape from a unique perspective. Low and slow in my trike from the air, and off the beaten path with the aid of my motorcycle.



The absolute best way to see Chaco Canyon is a combination of ground pounding and aerial low passes.

The local trikers regularly scheduled trips to various destinations and feeling confident in my abilities, I began to join them on their excursions. I kept telling myself after each trip that, "This was the best trip ever!", only to be eclipsed by saying the same thing after the following trip. The flying was fun, the landscape incredible, the companionship assuring, and every trip promised and delivered, adventure.



Flying over a mountain lake near Creede

Colorado.

I know that most general aviation pilots fly between 100 and 200 miles per hour. They also usually fly as high as possible to get better fuel economy. The scene out the window is not near as important to many of them as getting back on the ground at their destination in as short a time as possible. There is nothing wrong with that type of flying if the destination is more important than the journey. For me though, the journey is everything.



Our 400 foot runway on the beach at the annual Salton Sea gathering. Other than a Drifter, Quicksilver and a J-3 Cub, most planes opt for the SAS field further south.

This year will be my first year attending Oshkosh and I am glad that I waited. It has been said that the best way to experience Oshkosh is to fly into it. I am now ready to make that journey. With a triker from Edgewood and another from Borger Texas, we will spend four days flying to Oshkosh at the mind blowing airspeed of 55 miles per hour. Probably at 500 feet AGL the whole way. I am glad that I have a digital camera and won't have to worry about running out of exposures in flight.



Following the lead trike into Burning Man

Festival.

I'm glad that I chose a trike for my aviation interests. Some of the fourteen airfields that I will refuel at on the way to Oshkosh will no doubt have onlookers who have never seen a machine like mine before. That's part of the attraction too. When I tell people where I am from, they look amazed and ask, "You flew all the way here in that?"



Trike gathering at Riverbend.

So this year's trip to Oshkosh will be hard to top. The journey will require 17 hours in the saddle, one way. The destination, for a pilot, is hard to beat. The sheer number and variety of flying machines represented there will fuel my flying fantasies for years to come.



My current trike while still in phase one

testing.

I wish I had the time and money necessary to fly a tiny fraction of them. I wish I had the time to fly my own aircraft more than I get to. I guess I should just count myself lucky that I get to fly at all. My motorcycle in the sky has already brought me incredible memories and I can always look forward to many more.



Put to bed for the night in a field at the

edge of Palo Duro Canyon.

Thank you Richard Helm for introducing me to the sport of trike flying. And thank you John McAfee for introducing us all to the sport of Aerotrekking, but that is another story entirely.

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