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Gone flying
Caribbean
by
Skyknight

**A spendthrift's tour
of the
Islands**

Text and photos by
James Gilbert / *senior editor*

DECEMBER DAWN at La Guardia: frosty cold sears the skin. Our Skyknight is a spidery silhouette against the low sun, whose milky morning light gleams on the greasy apron as though it were a cobwebbed meadow. We sign for gas, load up, start up, taxi, join the line of waiting airplanes, for this is the start of the morning rush hour. There is an angry Gulfstream breathing and howling down our exhaust stacks, adding to the muted drumming of our own engines, and the sudden roar of a DC-9 at the head of the line as he is cleared to go; it is a mad cacophony. A big Mohawk FH-227 hurries past and turns into the run-up area, where the captain's storm window opens to emit a shirt-sleeved arm and the unwanted remains of a cup of coffee, which spatters to the concrete below... If only all Mohawk's airplanes were really flown by Indians...

Our Cessna crew fidgets with unaccustomed impatience; there's no waiting in Wichita. Like divers on a springboard we edge up slowly, waiting to make our leap into the air. Our turn at last, and the Skyknight drones down the runway, its impatience at having to wait for safety speed made very clear. Once airborne, it climbs like a towering pheasant.

Manhattan still lies dreaming in its smoky morning halitosis. The blue of the winter morning envelopes us as a blanket does a baby. Level at six. Soon we pass Solberg vortac. A light frosting of snow covers New Jersey, as though a giant had been busy with a gargantuan sprinkler of icing sugar. The sun gleams bright and pale on the wing, and we sit seemingly motionless, like a fly preserved in the palest azure amber. The Skyknight is supremely comfortable, and for an airplane quite quiet. (Will airplanes, Cadillac-costly,



ever be Cadillac-quiet?) I ask Peter the pilot to turn up the speaker, so we can follow the progress of the flight. It is entirely a matter of radar traffic advisories, for the transponder seems to have done away with old-fashioned nonsenses like reporting, and estimating, and Where-the-hell next.

We descend at Charleston to refuel. At lunch, conversation, as conversation will between aviation people who do not know each other well, works remorselessly round to Vietnam. Afterwards, and suitably, we take off next behind an Air Force F-101, waiting only for the shock waves of his afterburner to subside. South of Charleston the entire landscape appears no more than three soggy inches above sea level. We land for the night at Fort Lauderdale, dismounting stupidly into the 80-degree warmth in our northern pallor and overcoats.

The taxi ride into town offers us a first-ever glimpse of Florida. It is drably disappointing: shacks got up as night clubs advertising neon-pink GIRLS!!! The highway lined with garish advertisements for nothing one could ever want. Florida is only New Jersey with palm trees. Even the gaiety at the Sheraton Yankee Clipper seems a little forced; with the approach of dusk the beach is deserted, and we join all the chattering matrons in the Wreck Bar, a stygian cavern lit only by the submarine lighting of the swimming pool that forms one wall, and the mauve flickerings of the color television set. By the light of the commercials we sip beer and try to get to know one another better: Peter the pilot and his Cessna colleague, public relations, a solid young Georgian called Walter who is a travel writer for the now-extinct *New York World Journal Tribune*, and I, an Englishman far from home. A Korean choir in full national dress appears on the purple screen and sings "Coming Through the Rye," an act of great courage (if little wisdom). We leave, and march in line down the highway to Tony's Fish Market, unpredictably a restaurant, and a good one, offering red snapper *bonne femme* and *pouilly tuissé* accurately chilled.

Next morning, to our intense delight, the air still smells of summer. We had half expected it wouldn't, that the warmth of our arrival was contrived specially, or imagined, or dreamed. And the moist green smell of things growing is delicious; wintery New York had smelled only of cold death and dirty air.

At the airport a flock of marvelous white egrets bespeckle the neat lawns, motionless and beautiful. Are they real? Only when one moves can you be sure.

This morning the flying problems are all man-made: cameras must be laboriously registered with Customs, and a sheaf of useless forms completed documenting the aircraft. (Nation shall speak unto nation, but only in triplicate.)

Hours pass, but at last we are taxiing for departure. There are a suspicious number of B-25s about, for a field so near turbulent Cuba, Haiti and Dominica; is *plotting* still a local industry? Radar has us *contact* almost before the gear has banged up for its long sleep till Eleuthera, and we climb confidently into rain clouds long as an old lady's skirts . . . mere showers, and in between we see that famous island sea, deep inky blue where the water is deep, sky-pale and bright over the coral shallows. There's vivid sunlight over Bimini, and we catch a tantalizing glimpse of runways and a swimming pool. Soon the cumulus turns to gray stratus and rain, for there is a stationary front somewhere hereabouts. But these islands seem able to burn a hole in any clouds, for Eleuthera is clear of low cloud. "Rock Sound International Airport," grandly announces the chart, preparing you for something more than a low-powered NDB, one wet and wavy runway, an indeterminate area of crushed coral and a low wooden bungalow for a terminal building. But it's enough for our purposes, and, it seems, even for Pan American, who happily goes in and out of here twice a day with 707s.

Unsuccessful attempts are made to bring the Customs inspector out from town to the airport, while we wait, enjoying the wind in the palms and the antics of a hummingbird shyly plundering the airport's flowers. Once customized, we take off in a taxi. Eleuthera is flat and, today, cloudy, and covered with a mean and hungry scrub. (Eleuthera is Montauk Point, with palm trees.)

Soon there appear tall trees, flowering shrubs and cultivation, and we turn into the Rock Sound Club, an oasis, a garden of Eden and a miracle of civilized cleanliness and efficiency. From the office we walk down a flowery path to discover a superb pool framed in palms and flowers, a cool and quiet restaurant, and other jungly paths leading to our bungalows. We are loaded into the station wagon of the manager, Franz Gross, for a tour of inspection of the area. We hurtle for miles through gray dust and gray skies down a ruler-straight road that compensates for its absence of bends by bounding up and down like a switchback, and are shown cottages on a magical beach that also belong to the Club, and further on a crumbling village, rich only in those two indices of poverty, goats and wrecked motor cars, a frightening slum of rotting wooden houses and rusty iron.

That night we dine comfortably back at the Club, in its reassuring dining room, which has parquet floors, dark curtains, candles in jugs, plants in pots and extraordinarily obsequious and efficient waiters. The menu offers reassuring American dishes and some European wines. After dinner we sit in the tropical night

CARIBBEAN BY SKYKNIGHT

You saw her at rest at St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands on the previous page; here she is in flight, skirting Jamaica's northern shore. The postcard scenes above show a pirate parade in Guadeloupe, and the ice-blue sea beyond the hotel La Caravelle; a sailboat at sunset crossing Jamaica's Montego Bay, and a still-life of fruit and peppers in a Nassau dock-side market.

and gossip with Mr. Gross, who has a piratical black beard, comes from Austria, and is the very soul of efficiency. The Club, we learn, is owned by Pan American's Juan Trippe and some associates (which explains the two daily Boeings) and is 10 years old. The Club has four Swiss chefs and can accommodate about a hundred people. Last year 192 of its customers came in their own planes, making about 10 percent of its total business.

Mr. Gross has a poor opinion of the reliability of what he calls "island hoppers"; it seems we are vague about keeping reservations, and prone to call up on the unicom out of the blue, inquire about rooms, then haggle over the price, circling erratically around the airport while waiting for an answer. Yet Mr. Gross values our custom, so much so that he advertises in FLYING, under the apt Miltonian title *paradise found!* and with the equally apt cable address, *Hibiscus*. He deserves that we island hoppers should treat him better.

Next morning's journey is the longest of our trip, so we are at breakfast early, disdaining the grilled kippers, ordering our eggs up and over easy, American style, then shaking Mr. Gross's hand (does he never sleep?) and driving out to the airport. Here we encounter for the first time what is almost the only bane of island flying: no weather information, no communications with anywhere. So we take the air coincident with the arrival of a monster rain shower, and try to raise Nassau from 500 feet. Silence. We try and try again, to no avail. After 30 minutes we are forced to climb VFR through a hole in the heavy mountainous clouds, till at 5,000 feet Nassau can hear us. Two lazy controllers refer us to each other's frequency, but we persist, and eventually our IFR plan is filed.

We maintain 5,000, sunshine and showers, cruising at 27 inches and 2,300 rpm, turbos on, that being a shade over 65 percent, and giving (you like figures?) a nifty 180 knots true (207 mph, if you insist). By about San Salvador the clouds break apart, and things begin to look much more cheerful (as they also did at this point for Columbus) and we thereafter fly in the clearest blue, only lightly speckled with white cumulus and below, convoys of coral cays.

The flying hereabouts is lone, and not a little primitive: no omnis or DME or radar or weather reports, just a good ADF and a handy alternate. The LF beacons are mostly good and strong, though for long periods of time you can raise nobody on the VHF. HF would be a boon. But the West Indies aloft is a friendly place, and there is usually some Clipper way up there at FL 370, high enough to be in touch with land, who will be happy to relay your position report for you. Thank you, sir.

Our lunchtime stop for fuel is a dis-

tant outpost of the British raj called South Caicos, all salt and sunshine, whose one runway of crushed coral offers (besides a fierce crosswind) an unusual hazard: heaps of donkey droppings down the center line. But the Union Jack blows clear and true from the flagpole. South Caicos is a handful of natives, a beacon (260 CM) operated by Pan Am, and an Irishman called Liam Maguire who is trying to develop the place with American money, having presently got as far as the Admiral's Arms, all 11 rooms of it.

Her Majesty's Government, profoundly suspicious of progress in any form, has lately put in a district commissioner, a retired RAF group captain who asked that we mention not his name, to ensure that in all this lust for modernity things do not get out of hand. The Commissioner, charming behind his terror of putting a foot wrong before the press, tells us that his government is boldly planning to install communications and a hard-surfaced runway, after which they will put the operation of the airfield out to tender. Maguire's Caicos Holdings is expected to be the only bidder for this not-unprofitable concession (presently they are selling gas to 120 itinerant aircraft a month at 54 cents a U.S. gallon). The Commissioner's sad complaint is that he cannot get any money from home to do anything for his island; that its development should have to be left to American private enterprise clearly seems to him most lamentable.

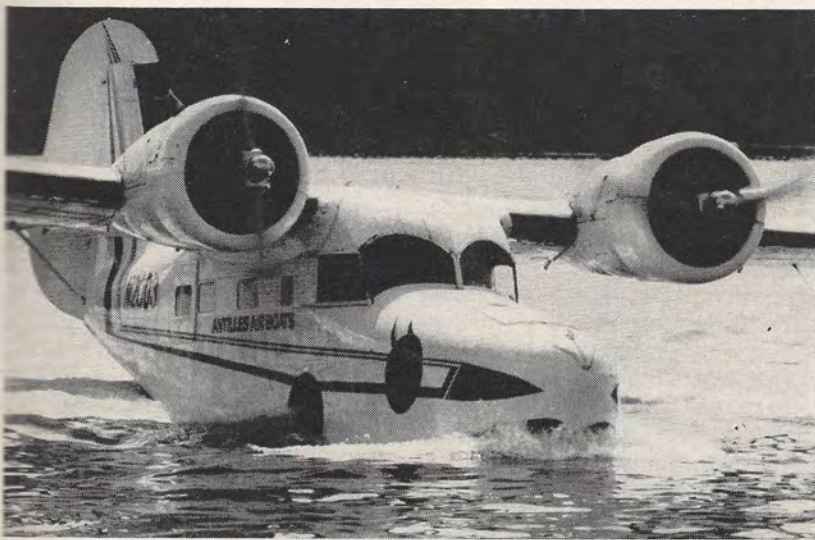
Bahamas Airways makes two visits a week to South Caicos, and one of these is due as we arrive, and explains the little crowd of travelers waiting in the shade of the lean-to that serves as terminal. Half are children, exquisitely dressed in gorgeous vivid shades of sky blue, scarlet or crimson. Excitement mounts, till in the distance appears, on long finals, a venerable DC-3, which pulls off an excellent crosswind landing and lumbers to a stop. Its captain is a very young Englishman, happy to stretch his legs and smoke a cigarette with us visitors. There is a moment's hiatus during the loading of his ancient "Dakota"—there are six children and only five seats. Could one, the stewardess inquires, be squeezed in somewhere? Absolutely not, the captain declares: rules are rules, at least as long as he is captain. Thus was the British Empire built.

Onward: the NASA moon-chasers on Grand Turk will file our plan and off-time. Some guy VFR in a single-engine light-plane is requesting South Caicos' weather. Before we can tell him, a friendly Clipper captain chips in to say that, from where he sits at 31,000 feet, it is clear as a bell. "Thank you very much indeed," says the grateful puddle-jumper; who knows, he may one day be a six-mile-high jet captain himself, helping other puddle jumpers.

(continued)

CARIBBEAN BY SKYKNIGHT:

Grotesque white-face masks are worn by Negro youths in Guadeloupe's Basse Terre. Above you see a Grumman Goose of Antilles Air Boats docking at St. Thomas; flags streaming from a Nassau church; the Skyknight at Rock Sound International airport (which is rather less imposing than it sounds) and a cruise ship glittering at anchor off St. Thomas.



CARIBBEAN BY SKYKNIGHT

A dark shadow appears at the far threshold of perception in the distant right, and takes on solid form as the island of Hispaniola, gray and unknown, lurking under the heavy cumulus. It is our first glimpse of mountains, for every island we have seen so far has been flat coral reef. Seen from here Hispaniola looks more than a little like the coast of northern Spain. Elsewhere the sky is filled with tiny cumulus in strange Walt Disney shapes, each with its attendant shadow darkening the sea below. Inside the bigger clouds we get a bumping and a hosing with rain, rain that must evaporate before it reaches the sea, for the clouds are clear underneath. Then for a while we fly just under a layer of gray stratus, like a fly skimming a room's ceiling. A rainbow springs up on our left.

For navigation today we have had only NDBs to serve us, but as we near America's little Caribbean kingdom of Puerto Rico and the Virgins the ether begins once more to show signs of civilization: omni needles start to dance, the DME gives a silent *click!* and wakes up from its day-long sleep and begins rolling its digital eyes at us, and the transponder begins its winking flirtation with San Juan Center. Soon we are in radar contact and receiving traffic advisories for all the world as though we had never left home. The San Juan controller clears us for descent, but he has read our flight plan wrong, for St. Thomas is our destination. He apologizes, and we continue past clustered rocks with impossible Spanish labels on the chart, on to our destination.

Here we land and find ourselves very much back in the United States, for all the jungly mountains that surround us, as we park amid rows of familiar N-numbered shapes. Planes come and go in profusion, and from the taxi as we drive into the town with the beautiful name, Charlotte Amalie, we see, as well as the inevitable Caribbean shantytown, signs of progress such as a little industry, a traffic jam, commercials on the radio.

We are staying at Bluebeard's Castle, a hotel right up the top of an impossibly steep hill, with an arresting view and some of the worst service in hotel history. We arrive as the sun is setting across the bay, behind the cloud bank that covers Puerto Rico, and one of those fabulous tropical sunsets it is, as though presented exclusively for our benefit. Waves of brilliant color, orange, crimson, lemon and mauve slowly flood across the sky in turn. We stand, surrounded by our baggage, and watch in silent astonishment.

Charlotte Amalie boasts something rare in the West Indies—night life—and after dinner we set off in pursuit of it. First an upstairs bar, open to the cool night winds, with bare wooden furniture and a group of hippies, sunk in some private psychedelic trance; then a steel band joint, redolent with rum and softly struck oil drums. We end up at McClever-

ty's Fallen Angel (*Showcase of the Stars*) to hear Zena Foster (*Exciting Queen of Blues, Jazz and Pop*). The Fallen Angel is great: it has beautiful twisted iron chairs, and is lit by globes of red, green, blue and purple that hang like exotic sea grapes over the bar. Miss Foster is a large coffee-colored lady who exudes sexuality like a cut tree in spring exudes sap. We soak up her act like blotting paper and return to Bluebeard's Castle full of rum and the happy satiation that comes from having Properly Done the Town.

Up, next morning, not too betimes, and down to the town again for sight-seeing. The tidy Danes ruled this land till 1917, and Charlotte Amalie is still Danish-tidy, and in a very European way, beautiful. The pastel-colored houses that crowd the steep slopes behind the harbor are close to drowning in tropical flowers. Up between them climbs a steep and narrow stone stairway, with at its halfway point a tiny lawn and stone-rimmed lily pond. The Virgin Islands legislature building down on the waterfront is long, lime-green picked out in white, tree-shaded, cool, guarded by cannons and air-conditioning, perhaps the most beautiful building in the Caribbean.

At the end of the waterfront is Antilles Air Boats, operating a flock of Grumman Geese on a busy schedule between St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John and Tortola. We fall into idle conversation with Captain Bill Sorren, operations manager and chief pilot; he employs 40 people including six pilots and thinks the Goose "the finest rough-water airplane ever built."

We also fall into conversation with a colorful gentleman from the British island of Anguilla, proprietor of an ancient schooner carrying general cargo between the islands, by sail mostly, though he has auxiliary power. He is impressed by fast-developing St. Thomas, and sad that the British Government does so little to help his island, and unimpressed by recent changes in his status from, as he put it, "British object, to British subject, to British citizen." (You lot back in London, wake up.)

In the early afternoon we are airborne again, still heading southeast. You take off from St. Thomas pointed straight at that famous mountain, and the bumps over it are horrendous. Soon we are plunging in and out of big showers, which often have a hollow center and almost spiral form, as though each one aspired to grow up and be a hurricane, not just a gentle tropical shower.

Our destination today is the French island of Guadeloupe; two islands, really, facing each other across a mangrove swamp, one island low as a crepe suzette, the other a tall volcanic mountain ridge. One coral, one granite, both object-lessons in schoolboy geography. No snakes, says the guidebook, and only a little ma-

laria down by the mangroves. Pointe-à-Pitre Aerodrome even boasts an omni, put in a year or two ago after an Air France 707 turned the wrong way from a missed ADF approach and disappeared into the jungle that covers the volcano.

We land and find ourselves suddenly and almost miraculously in France: Guadeloupe is no colony but a *département* of France in its own right. The airport has all the appurtenances of the French way of life—tricolors, unintelligible loud-speaker announcements, uniforms, garlic and Gauloises, inquisitive dogs and some madman buzzing the tower in a police Alouette helicopter loaded with giggling girls.

We rent a car from the local agent of Hertz, in a shade under an hour, and drive into town. First a four-lane highway that might be anywhere in metropolitan France, were it not for the profusion of tropical greenery and black faces that line it. Then suddenly the highway ends, and we crawl through an ant-heap shantytown, a moist and muddy slum of wooden sheds. Then, just as suddenly, we come upon areas where slums have been cleared and beautiful modern French apartment blocks are a-building, clean gorgeous buildings such as you might see in the suburbs of Paris, Bordeaux or Lyons.

We drive on, into a sudden tropical downpour that washes the streets clean of people. Without warning the street ends at a sea front; under the gray curtains of falling water we can see a flat sea, a curving coastline with sandy beaches and the distant fantastic mountains of Basse Terre. The car fills with a moist steam; we turn south and flounder through another muddy staring slum till the road emerges into a clean countryside of banana groves and cow pastures. It is not unlike Brittany—Brittany with palm trees. The road swoops and dives across the landscape as French roads do, and so do we, till we come at last to our hotel, La Caravelle.

In this ancient, far-away landscape of tropical neglect and sleepiness nothing has prepared us for our first sight of La Caravelle. Imagine the TWA building at Kennedy Airport spirited away and set down a propos of nothing by a jungly beach, great soaring curves of white concrete devoid of glass, open at every side to the rushing trade winds, a fabulous exercise of modern architecture. The roof is like some great irregularly curved seashell balanced precariously on spindly legs of concrete, and the main body of the hotel, the public rooms, is one great area on two levels quite open to the four winds, if they should choose to blow, though in fact only the eternal trade wind ever does, sighing gently but relentlessly through the palm trees and around the concrete pillars, rustling the papers on the hotel desk. That old trade wind is king of Guadeloupe, and he knows it.

Stumbling on La Caravelle is a little like stumbling on the Garden of Eden, so out of context and unexpected is it. For example, lunch: as all over the Caribbean, a cold buffet set out on a help-yourself table. But a French cold buffet, all imagination and flavor, great wagon-wheel patterns of sliced roasts and whole shrimp, of giant lobsters and shining mayonnaises tinted green or pink. Behind the long table stand four chefs, explaining their complex handiwork and basking happily in the reflected glory of their achievement.

Beyond the dining area, parading the hot sand, is a half-circle of Caribbean blackbirds, beautiful clowns, gossiping and chirruping their impatience for us to finish so they can start on their own buffet of our crumbs. Beyond the blackbirds is an azure pool and a narrow concrete rampway climbing light as a vapor trail up to the hotel's second floor, its railing slowly surrendering to the bear-hug of a mauve morning-glory. Beyond that, palm trees and sea-grapes drooping with tropical noon languor clear down to the hot sand, and past them, the ice-blue glittering sea. It is like one of those childhood memories of a scene so superb you firmly decide you will stay there forever.

After a day, guilty at our indolence, we decide on an afternoon drive as far as Basse Terre, Guadeloupe's capital town situated just across the volcanos and mountains of the other island. The road is perilous, and the locals all drive as though possessed by devils, with a total Gallic abandon and recklessness of the odds. In consequence the landscape is littered with the rusting corpses of dead motor-cars, mostly left forever exactly where they came to rest as they hurtled off the corner into the sugar cane or somebody's banana grove. Other hazards of the way are urchins, chickens, wandering mountain streams and even the car we are driving, which in typical French fashion has all the controls so oddly placed that you half expect to have to steer with the gear shift and change cogs with the steering wheel.

It is Sunday, and each village has a wandering minstrel band blocking the highway, negro youths in pirate headscarves and sailor shirts, with hideous white masks covering their velvet-black faces, whooping and strumming their way through some festival about whose pagan origins even they are vague. Basse Terre is a dull little town laid out up a steep hill, such a maze of one-way streets it takes an hour to figure out how to escape from it, up an unbelievably narrow road that plunges and rears like an untamed horse through the rain forest up in the mountains. Back on the main road, the never-ending Grand Prix de Guadeloupe, open to all, is still in full progress. Round one cruelly deceptive corner two cars have collided head on, at the in-

evitable full speed, but to no one but us is it any kind of warning.

Nor is aviation immune to this Guadeloupean mania. When we come to leave we find the airport has its share of wrecks too, though these are mostly light airplanes rolled over by the wind, but there is in the hangar a beautiful new Centurion, American-registered, with its nose-wheel wrenched off and propeller twisted into scrap. "*Il a quitté la piste, m'sieur,*" explains a mechanic.

Our departure involves a visit to the "meteo," a stoical Frenchman whose idea of giving a weather briefing is to roll the stub of his Gauloise to the corner of his mouth with the tip of his tongue, wave his arms expansively and point to the sunshine and cumulus outside. "*Comme ici, m'sieur.*" Pressed for greater detail, he tells us the tops are at 6,500 feet, in which he is no more than 3,500 feet out.

Our climb-out is interrupted by a sudden roughness in one engine. It jerks us instantly out of our post-breakfast torpor, but Peter the pilot juggles the mixture levers and the vibration disappears. It is the only moment of less-than-perfect behavior from our beautiful Skyknight during the whole trip.

We refuel at San Juan, and face a new Spanish Inquisition from the Customs, though we are only in transit. We are bound for Jamaica, by a route that skirts the northern shore of Puerto Rico, then goes south of Hispaniola, past the mysterious republics of Dominica and Haiti. We fly at flight level 80 (anywhere else in the world other than the USA, flight levels start as low as 35), engines turning a comfortable 2,200 rpm, pulling 27 inches, warbling pleasantly as we speed along over a bubbling sea of strato-cu.

Eastern Dominica is clear, and lovely, forested, flat and empty of people. We talk to the Caucedo controller, but he is almost unintelligibly Spanish, though his beacon is clear. Santo Domingo is not much better; the controller there sounds as though he has a mouth full of bananas. The sea of cloud below us reappears, thickens and begins to slope up toward our altitude, and soon we are bumping in and out of the top of it. Somewhere way off to our right is a 10,000-foot mountain, though invisible to us. Sinister Haiti appears in the distance, gray and evil. They do not even pretend to exercise control over their IFR, and our Jepp chart has a note that if you fly over the president's fortress palace in Port-au-Prince you will be summarily fired on, which is not encouraging. We keep our distance.

The Port-au-Prince NDB comes and goes, and our ADF tracks it along the murk and mainland off to our right. Then Kingston comes in on the nose, and in an hour the controller there can hear us, and sends us up to flight level 105; there's a largish mountain on Jamaica

too. When the island appears it is almost underneath us, bearing a heavy canopy of cumulus clouds, which prove to contain, when we are cleared to descend into them, some really fearful bumps.

We land at Montego Bay and stretch and yawn and drink a rum drink, courtesy the Jamaican Tourist Board. Says the Shell man, examining our credit cards, "Shell domestic, that's for use in the U.S. only, mon . . . but I dare say we can use our discretion. You can't go through life without discretion . . . it's the better part of valor . . ."—a friendliness of welcome that warms us to the place at once. He puts 102 gallons in our 140 gallon tanks: this was our longest leg, some four hours, and at 26 gph that was nicely judged, Pete.

Montego Bay, playground of the rich, darling of the jet set . . . and there's a rushing and hushing of jets all day long, bringing them in. We decide to photograph our Skyknight against this beautiful backdrop, and borrow a Skylane to serve as camera plane from the local friendly Cessna dealer, who turns out to be an American called Rudy Mantel. In the limpid, pellucid, late-afternoon air we float up and down Jamaica's northern coast, and the Skyknight swims up alongside us like a friendly aerial dolphin, its huge propellers cleaving the air like great steel flippers. From tip-tilted tanks to aft-leaning fin, it is a machine of extraordinary power and beauty; everything in its appearance breathes quietly the one word, *speed*.

Have you flown a Skyknight? It's a beautiful airplane to fly, just beautiful. It's around \$115,000, fully equipped, and you do get your money's worth. For a start, the whole feel of the airplane is almost more like a jet than a piston. The turbos are all automatic, so you can set cruise power straight after takeoff and go on up to 20,000 feet without touching the engine levers. And on the approach you fly it like a jet, setting say 16 or 17 inches and leaving it, adjusting your speed and descent rate with just the right amount of flaps, and gear when you need it . . . close the throttles as you cross the fence, and delicately lower your \$115,000 onto the runway, all with a feeling of tremendous precision. The controls are just fabulous, sensitive and superbly balanced. The rudder is good and powerful: kick it and you'll be surprised to find that you get a roll rather than a yaw; and you'll find you need a bit of rudder going into a turn, which is as it should be. Stability is good too, with just a bit of Dutch roll in turbulence, though not at all unpleasant.

As for single-engine flight, we didn't try any on this journey, but I did later on. On one fan the Skyknight feels kind of uncomfortable, loose and unhappy, but it performs well enough. You've got so

(continued)

CARIBBEAN BY SKYKNIGHT

much power there that establishing a rate of climb is hardly a problem. With cruise power on the good one, you'll more likely stall the airplane before you run out of rudder power, it's that effective. The stall itself is definitely a hot-airplane type stall, with all sorts of buffeting and pitching, but I couldn't get a wing to drop, and that powerful aerodynamic buffet should be warning enough.

In flying twins, there's this useful dodge that not everybody knows for comparing the drag of various items, just so you know what they are in case you ever have to make a single-engine go-around in anger. What you do is find the power setting, both engines, that will keep you at best single-engine climb rate in level flight. Then you give yourself the various configurations, and stuff the nose down to maintain that best single-engine rate speed: the rate of descent that you get is equivalent to the drag of that configuration. Now best single-engine rate on the Skyknight is around 104 knots (120 mph): to hold that in level flight you are very well throttled back indeed. Now give yourself full flap; about 1,000 fpm down is required to maintain 104 knots. Raise the flaps, climb back up to the same altitude and lower the gear: 450 fpm. Zero thrust on one engine gives around 650 fpm, and a windmilling prop all of 1,000 fpm. And at 104 knots a windmilling prop really needs a bootful of rudder to hold. So the drag from full flap is about the same as a windmilling prop; feather the prop and you reduce its drag 35 percent. And drag from the gear is less than half the drag from full flaps. This information may sound esoteric, but it does give you a good picture of what to expect during single-engine work, and it also gives you an idea of what to expect when dirtying the airplane up for landing.

(I should like to add that there is only the smallest pitch change with flap movement.)

Are you one of those pilots fond of descending VFR through holes on occasion? Then the Skyknight is for you, for you can put everything down and close the throttles and put the nose down down down till you're descending at around 45 degrees angle, and the sort of angle you haven't seen since you last did aerobatics, and you can watch the needle hover between 4,000 and 6,000 fpm descent without going over the full flap limit speed—a generous 140 knots (160 mph). Very impressive indeed. And no doubt useful in an airplane that can cruise nudging the stratosphere, though it could make inexperienced passengers wonder what in heaven was happening.

But on this occasion, when our photographic sortie is complete, we make only the gentlest of descents to land back at Montego Bay, wondering meanwhile how the pictures will come out.

In the heat of the next day we stum-

ble along to Doctor's Cove, the tiny sheltered beach that made Montego Bay, and doze happily under the sea-grape trees till roasted hot, then rent goggles and flipper feet and go snorkeling into the slow green sea, floating like pink watery blimps over the rich coral, a realm more strange and far more fantastic than the back side of the moon. Spiny black sea urchins lurk in every crevice, waiting to stab a careless limb; these we avoid, as do the iridescent fish. One of these is clearly the Falstaff of the fishy world, a fat dark-eyed joker who stands on his tail to return our floating surface gaze, and makes it clear that he has the time to play, if we do.

A mild adventure is on the flight plan for the next day: We are to fly across Cuba. But we have our telegraphed permission and expect no problems, nor are there any, except that we must fly VFR because we have no HF. Cuba's southern coast is no distance from Jamaica, and on two occasions defectors from Castro's socialist paradise have sought capitalistic freedom by flying to Montego Bay in stolen Russian An-2 biplanes.

The controller at Camarguey is quite unexcited by our passage, and only concerned to know our company name and home base. "Cessna" he manages, but the spelling of "Wichita" flummoxes him altogether. Eventually he and Peter the pilot agree to settle for a rough approximation. An airliner passes quickly on an opposite heading; it is a Russian-built Ilyushin IL 14, very far from its Moscow birthplace. Eight thousand feet below us, Cuba looks strangely peaceful.

A couple of hours, sunshine and showers, brings us to Nassau. The airport is a busy jumble of general aviation aircraft, including a surprising number of bizjets. One would not have guessed there was so much American business conducted here.

When we take off, our island vacation is all but over. Comparing experiences, we rate Montego Bay the best. We stop briefly at Fort Lauderdale to return rented life jackets, and then head grimly north. It is 81 degrees when we leave Fort Lauderdale, and 25 and snowing when we crawl down out of the gloom to land at Raleigh-Durham a few hours later.

A true spendthrift would not stop to count the cost of such a tour, yet we did. We flew 31 hours, in an airplane whose direct operating cost is reckoned by its owners at \$32 per hour, all in but excluding depreciation, which is of the order of \$58 an hour. Say \$2,800 for the flying. (Airline, we four would have spent \$1,801.60 for the same traveling, tourist class, or \$2,463.80 first class, and there is no doubt that in the Skyknight we went first class.) Fuel prices charged varied from 39 cents a gallon at Rock Sound to 54 cents at South Caicos. Highest landing fee was \$7.50 at Montego Bay, next highest, Nassau's \$6.42. Rock Sound charged both a landing and a departure fee, plus a poll tax on each passenger, a complicated way of doing it.

On hotels, meals, entertainment, Planter's Punch and the like I spent \$330 over the nine days. That's staying in all the best hotels, and surprisingly little for it. †

Cessna Executive Skyknight

Specifications	Airframe Basic Price:
	\$82,500
Engines	2 Continental, six cylinder, 285 hp each
Propellers	2 constant speed feathering, 81-in. dia.
Wing span	36.9 ft.
Length	29.5 ft.
Height	10.3 ft.
Wing area	179 sq. ft.
Wing loading	29.6 lb./sq. ft.
Passenger and crew	up to six
Empty weight	3,266 lbs.
Useful load	2,034 lbs.
Gross weight	5,300 lbs.
Power loading	9.3 lbs./hp.
Fuel capacity (std.)	102 gals.
Fuel capacity (with reserve)	143 gals.
Oil capacity	6.7 gals.
Baggage capacity	600 lbs.

Performance

Takeoff distance	1,190 ft.
Takeoff distance over 50 ft.	1,513 ft.
Rate of climb	1,924 fpm
Single-engine rate of climb	475 fpm
Service ceiling	29,000 ft.
Single-engine service ceiling	18,800 ft.
Maximum speed (at 16,000 ft)	239 kts.
	(275 mph)

Cruise speed (75% power at 10,000 ft)	202 kts. (233 mph)
Cruise speed (75% power at 20,000 ft.)	226 kts. (260 mph)
Range (at 75% and 10,000 ft., 100 gallons)	663 nm (763 sm)
Range (at 75% and 20,000 ft., 140 gallons)	1,027 nm (1,182 sm)
Stall speed (clean)	74 kts. (85 mph)
Stall speed (gear & full flaps) ..	64 kts. (74 mph)
Landing distance	614 ft.
Landing distance over 50 ft.	1,734 ft.

Flight characteristics

Control response (cruise)	Superb
Control response (slow flight)	Good
Hands-off stability	Excellent
Stall recovery	Excellent
Runway handling	Good

Pilot utility

Visibility	Superb
Seat adjustment & comfort	Excellent
Accessibility of switches, etc.	Good
Panel layout	Good

Cabin comfort

Entry-exit ease	Good
Front seat room	Excellent
Rear seat room	Excellent
Ventilation (in flight)	Good
Ventilation (during taxi)	Fair
Noise level	Good