

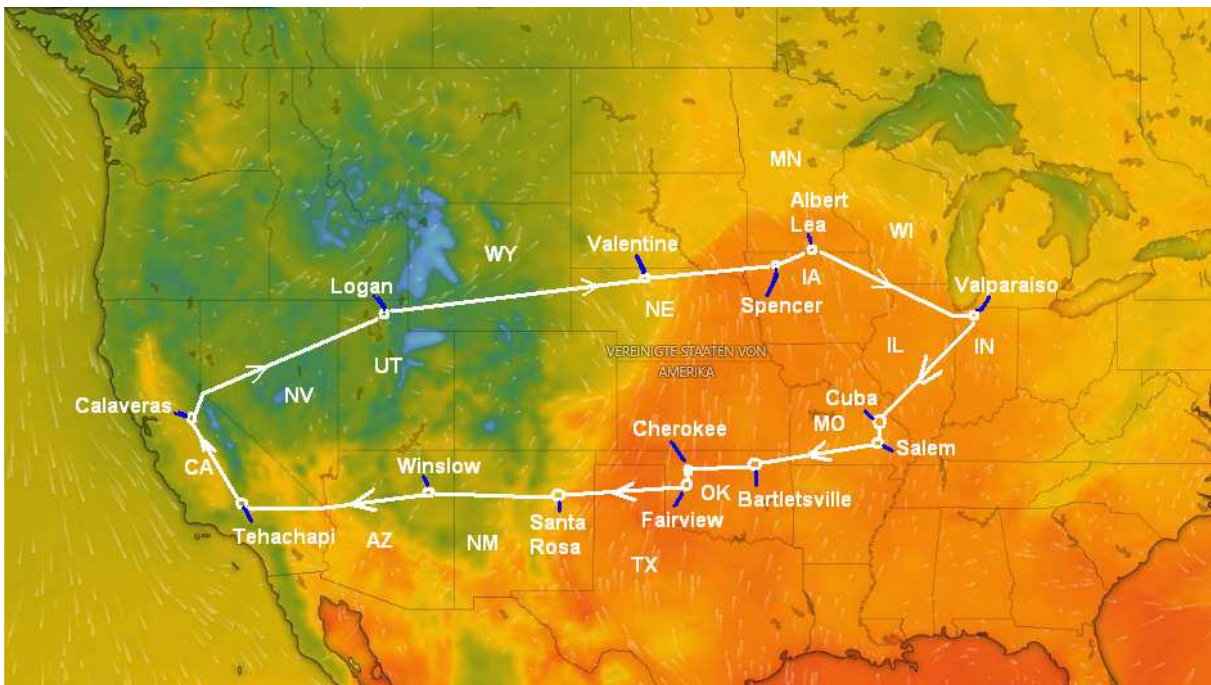
Round Trip To Indiana

Sonja Englert & Caro 1

June 2026

One of my customers asked me if I could come for a visit to evaluate their project. They are located in Indiana, and they suggested that I fly into Chicago to get there. What they meant was that I should go by airline. Naturally I suggested that I would rather fly there in my own plane, because that would be a lot more fun. I had in mind to fly my motorglider Caro 1, and visit a lot of nice places on the way. Indiana is a long way east from California, the direct line is about 1550 nm (2871 km). So it would take some planning and time to do this. And of course the weather would have to cooperate, because I fly this plane VFR only.

That everything worked out mostly as planned was possible only with the help of many people, which I met on the way, and I want to thank all of them. I also want to thank the operators of those small and often remote airports that provided facilities for this flying gypsy and made my trip easier.



Route Flight on a USA map

I managed to get everything ready in time to catch a good weather window a week later. With Caro loaded with my baggage and about 30 gal of fuel, I started the flight early in the morning from Calaveras, heading north. Of course I could not fly this distance non-stop, I had to stop in many places for fuel and rest. To reach the first stop, Logan in Utah, I first had to cross a high barrier, the Sierra Nevada. To go from almost sea level to at least 9500 ft requires a long and somewhat slow climb with a full load. I first flew parallel to the mountains until I was high enough to make the crossing, at the low spot of Lake Tahoe. The sky was clear and smooth, so the crossing went uneventful. The highest peaks still carried some snow and the blue water of the lake glittered like a mirror.



The Nevada desert greeted me with brown and tan colors. What interested me most at that point was what my ground speed would be. This first leg is one of the longest, and the more tailwind I can get, the better. On this occasion, I had a light tailwind and a ground speed of about 102 kts (189 km/h). Most of the mountains east of the Sierra are widely spaced and lower, but here and there a peak reached my cruising altitude.



As I had hoped for, this early in the day the air was smooth. I peacefully flew past the airports of Derby, Battle Mountain and Elko. All was good until I reached Wells, about three hours into the flight. All of a sudden turbulence hit me. Not gradually like thermals, it felt like flying through rotors. Caro was pushed higher, then lost altitude just as rapidly. This continued for 30-40 nm, just about to the edges of the Salt Lakes in Utah, where things finally calmed down. I am not sure what it was, possibly a change in airflow disturbed by the terrain. The Logan airport was as busy as usual, with student pilots clogging up the pattern and others trying to get in between to land. I got in trail close behind one of the flight school DA-40's, so that no one else could cut in front of me. I am always relieved when I get on the ground there, after >5 h of flight time.

I was met by a friend who gave me a ride to a car gas station, because my engine does not like leaded fuel. With 10 gal of unleaded 91 octane fuel added, Caro was happy. We used the rest of the afternoon for a hike in the mountains nearby, so I was happy too.



The next leg had to be started early in the morning because I wanted to cross Wyoming nonstop in smooth air as well. This distance was even longer than the last one, 505 nm (935 km). I was able to take off just as the sun lighted the top of the mountains. From the Logan elevation of 4450 ft (1356 m) I had to climb back to more than 9500 ft to cross the ridges just to the east of the Cache Valley. The air was cool and smooth and I noticed a good tail wind right away. Wyoming is always windy, and this time it was blowing in the right direction with 25 kts (46 km/h) from behind. Nice!

There are not many towns in this dry desolate landscape, and even fewer airports. Kemmerer and Rock Springs are the most important ones. Once I passed Rawlins, I almost felt that I had made it across. Torrington, already east of the highest terrain, was the last one before I entered Nebraska. The strong wind at my cruising altitude was nice, but strong wind can become a problem when you try to land. My next stop, Valentine, had two runways, and the wind, 20 kts gusting to 25 kts (37 km/h to 46 km/h) from the north was right between them. So either way this would be some crosswind. When I looked at the wind sock, it seemed that the direction was a little better suited for runway 3, the shorter of the two, but it would still be a challenge.



Valentine airport in Nebraska, with its two runways. Runway 3 is in the foreground.

I was tossed around by the gusts and needed a substantial crab angle on final. I fought with the controls to keep the nose pointed in the right direction for touchdown. I got the upwind wheel on the ground, then the wind lifted me up again. I touched down a second time with the left main wheel, followed seconds later by the right wheel. The tailwheel followed, but the wind still tried to shift me sideways. My ground speed was quite slow, and with those long wings things don't happen too fast, but you sort of have to keep "flying" the plane until it is tied down. The next challenge was keeping the large canopy from being ripped off when I opened it, so I had to hold onto it while getting out. My plane was the only one on the ramp. I carried one empty 5 gal (19 liter) fuel can with me, and was able to borrow a second one. With the courtesy car I drove to the car gas station close to the airport and got the fuel I needed. Everything was close by here, that's why I liked the place.

The following day, the wind continued to blow from the north. Fortunately, in the mornings it is usually less strong on the ground, so takeoff was no problem. I continued to fly east, across the Missouri River and past Sioux Falls and through a corner of South Dakota before crossing into Iowa.



Over north-western Nebraska



The Missouri River, the border between Nebraska and South Dakota, is still quite unspoiled here.

I decided to land at the Spencer airport, which is in Iowa. It also has two runways and I was surprised to actually hear a couple of airplanes making calls on the radio there. Something

was going on. I soon found out what it was. They were having a pancake fly-in and were conducting Young Eagles flight, where kids could get a free ride in airplanes. I think this is a good way to promote aviation.



Spencer airport

I managed to get the last empty parking spot on the ramp and Caro 1 attracted quite some attention among the more common production airplanes.



I had to answer a lot of questions. A few hours after the event ended, one man even came back to the airport to show Caro to his wife and we had a nice chat. I stayed for the night and left early the next morning for a relatively short flight to my favorite airport on this route, Albert Lea in Minnesota. It is my favorite because they sell unleaded fuel at the airport and I can spend my time going for walks and stocking up on food instead of hunting for fuel.



Flying over green Minnesota



Looking outside from the Albert Lea new FBO building, which has lots to offer for pilots.

During the night, a front with some rain had moved through but it had cleared up in the morning. There were no more mountains in my way this far east, so I only climbed to 5500 ft (1676 m) for the last flight to my destination in Indiana. I had 30 kts tailwind and the clear air

made the three hour flight pleasant but bumpy when thermals developed. Underneath me were mainly corn and soybean fields, until I reached the Chicago area.



It was obvious that the already huge city was spreading further to the south, and many spacious warehouses were built on the southern edge of the developments to store all the items the inhabitants might need, for rapid shipping.



I had to stay clear of the very busy Chicago airspace, and I saw several airliners passing overhead. Looking north, I could see the shore of Lake Michigan and the cluster of high rise buildings that I assume are in the center of Chicago.

I was glad that I did not have to be down there on the roads and probably get lost. Up here it was so much simpler, flying in a straight line to my destination, the Porter county airport.



Porter County airport, Valparaiso, Indiana

It has two long runways, one east-west and one at right angles to it, with a north-south orientation. I listened on the unicom frequency and heard one business jet announcing his takeoff on runway 27 with a left turn out to the south. The wind was still strong on the ground, from the south, so I landed on the smaller runway 18 after the jet was gone.



Caro 1 was allowed to take shelter in a large hangar while I was at work there.

After I finished my work for the company that had hired me and had flown their airplane to evaluate it, I departed in Caro southwest-bound. I wanted to visit another one of my customers, this one was the Bearhawk company in Oklahoma. At first I climbed to 6500 ft (1981 m), but found the headwind to strong for my taste and descended back down to 4500 ft (1372 m). I thought it would be fun to land next at an airport with an exotic name and selected Cuba, not the island in the Gulf of Mexico, but in a small airport in Missouri, southwest of St. Louis. I quickly left Indiana behind and crossed the border into Illinois. It was becoming much more humid here, and warmer. The headwind increased to 30 kts (56 km/h) and slowed my progress considerably. I had plenty of time to admire the landscape, where fields were soon replaced increasingly with trees.

The St. Louis airspace took up a lot of space and I was on the wrong side to it. After I had flown past Springfield, Illinois, I had to detour a bit to the west around The St. Louis class B circle.



Crossing the Illinois River

When I was finally I was back on course, I approached the more hilly area around Cuba. This was a smaller and unattended airport compared to the others I had landed on so far, with a single, 2900 ft (884 m) long runway oriented southwest into the wind. I was the only one landing there and had my choice of parking spots. The airport had fuel available, but only the leaded, dreaded Avgas. Because it was a weekend, nobody was around, but the airport

building which consisted of a single room had everything a traveler needed: a restroom, water, a sofa and a microwave. I made myself at home, then went for a walk to explore the local flora and fauna.



Cuba airport building and hangars



I liked the flora much better than the fauna, which consisted mainly of hungry ticks.

When I returned to the airport, a couple of other airplanes landed. One of them was a Citabria with a student and instructor (a woman), from a nearby St. Louis flight school. After they had

tied their airplane down, I found out that they were stranded because their tailwheel steering chain had broken on one side and they could not take off again. I rummaged through my tool and spare parts kit and offered them a piece of wire which they could have used to repair the issue for one more landing. They could also have taken off again by removing the chain and spring on the other side and just have a free swiveling tailwheel, like some planes have, but they did not want to do either one. Instead, they called their chief pilot to get picked up with another airplane and leave theirs behind. That is nice if you have that option, but it would not have been necessary and not what I would have done.

The other airplane landed later, a Cessna 182 with a local pilot and his wife. I decided to approach him on the matter of getting auto fuel. After we chatted for a while, he offered to drive to the closest gas station (which was not far) with my gas can, and bring it back filled. I did not have to wait long, and had the fuel I needed. It is great that the pilot community is often ready to pitch in and help when it is needed.

The next morning, I took one look at the weather and decided to try an escape. A front with densely packed thunderstorms, rain and wind which had developed during the night was heading my way.



After takeoff from Cuba

It was already quite close and the only possibility to get away was to the south. I took off, but soon realized that low clouds, at maybe 400 ft (122 m) above ground, were forming ahead of the front and were in my way. Short of turning back east, which was the completely wrong way, I quickly had to find another place to land, and wait it out. The only place within reach and not too far off course turned out to be Salem, a small, unattended airport in the middle of nowhere in Missouri.



Salem, Missouri, airport

Flying against a strong headwind and after only 30 minutes in the air, I landed there, only 30 nm (56 km) away from Cuba. I did my best to secure Caro against the potentially strong winds on the ground. There were a few old hangars in rather bad condition, a cracked ramp with only one other, probably abandoned old airplane, and a small sturdy building, without windows, for visiting pilots. The door could be opened with a code, and inside I found a bare concrete floor, a table with chairs, a restroom and water, LED lights and free WIFI. Better than what I had expected! While waiting for the storm to arrive, I went for a short walk on the road that had little traffic. A few pastures, a lot of forest, and no hiking trails. I returned to the airport and went to work on the report for my customer. When it arrived, the storm was less violent than expected and Caro was wet but fine.



After the storm

In the afternoon the weather had improved and the clouds had lifted enough for me to continue westbound, out of wet Missouri and into Oklahoma.



Westbound, at 3000 ft (915 m)

I flew another 3 hours against 20 kts of headwind until I reached Bartlesville, in northeastern Oklahoma, a fairly large airport where I was hoping to find both fuel for Caro and food for myself.



Bartlesville airport, Oklahoma

It was late in the day, and at first it looked like the airport was deserted. On the ground it was hot and humid. I taxied to the first ramp I saw, which was in front of a few large hangars. While I tied Caro down and wondered where to go next, I noticed two shirtless and very bronzed young men sprawled in plastic chairs in front of the open door of one of the hangars. Inside was a large agricultural plane (crop duster). The two guys turned out to be very bored crop duster pilots. Bored because they had been based here for the last two months, and because the weather was mostly unsuitable, they got to fly and work very little. They stirred a little when they saw me and my strange bird. I asked them about fuel, and one of them slowly rose to greet me. "Yeah, I can take you to a gas station," he offered, and was even able to procure a second gas can. We took his truck and soon my primary mission was accomplished.

He told me that they had turned one of the buildings behind the hangar into a temporary residence for the five or six ag pilots currently on duty here. He introduced me to the others and they offered to share some of their food with me. So I helped them demolish the leftovers from last's nights party. They were a friendly bunch, and shared stories about their job. Throughout most of the year, they moved through different states, for two months at a time, to treat whatever crops needed it. One of them, who was older than the rest, showed me their biggest airplane, and asked my engineering opinion on how to improve certain flight characteristics. This particular plane could carry 800 gal of nasty liquids and was powered by a single turbine. I gave him some tips on what to try to improve the issue he had with it.

Another round of strong storms moved through the area that night, and I faced low clouds in the morning. I waited for a few hours, and while the ceiling lifted a bit, it was still not great when I took off shortly after 10 am. I was hoping to reach Fairview, Oklahoma, where the Bearhawk factory was located. There were fewer trees under me now, and more wide, open grassy plains and fields. Unfortunately there also were a lot of windmills, which were halfway reaching up to my low cruising altitude.



Flying low over Oklahoma after the storm

Just to my left, to the south, things looked rather murky, but to the north, it was a bit clearer.



The small town of Cherokee, Oklahoma

When I was within 22 nm (41 km) of Fairview, the cloud base became unacceptably low and the visibility deteriorated. I made the decision to abort and did a 180° turn. I had been looking at the charts for alternate airports for a while for exactly that reason and now pointed Caro's nose to the north, to the town of Cherokee which had a small airport and a slightly higher ceiling. I landed there uneventfully. After a short wait, the clouds lifted and thinned and I was able to complete my flight to Fairview. Afterwards I learned that the storms from the night before, which I had spent in Bartlesville 130 nm (241 km) away, had caused some major damage around Fairview. It ripped the roof off a house in town, broke some large trees and derailed a train! I am glad that I did not get there earlier.



In a large hangar at the airport, several guys including the company owner Virgil Irwin were busy completing a Bearhawk 5. It was good to see the parts and assemblies I had analyzed lately in person rather than just on drawings. I even got to fly both a Bearhawk Patrol and the model 5. Both have incredible short takeoff and landing performance, even from grass, and are nice flying airplanes with good visibility from the cockpit (for a high-wing airplane). My visit was extended for another day and half because another storm system moved through, with rain and a lightning strike right at the airport. I was worried about Caro, which was parked outside, but when I looked at it, it was unaffected by the storm, and not the smoking pile of carbon fiber I had envisioned.

When the ceilings finally lifted and the clouds disappeared on the afternoon of the second day, I was eager to leave the humid conditions behind and fly into the desert of New Mexico. For a change, I had a light tailwind. It was hot and with thermals and the rising terrain, I climbed from my initial 6500 ft (1981 m) cruising altitude to above 8000 ft (2438 m). After leaving Oklahoma, I entered a corner of Texas and flew north of Amarillo towards the New Mexico border.



The green fields disappeared and gave way to dry desert shrubs. Tucumcari was the first airport there where I could have landed, but I decided to press on a bit further to Santa Rosa, for a distance of 312 nm (578 km).

The airport there lies at an elevation of 4782 ft (1458 m), and with the high temperature, the density altitude was probably at 7000 ft (2134 m). This is already quite high and affects the engine power. Especially for take off one has to plan for a lot more distance needed to get airborne. Clouds had appeared to the west and the wind on the ground was quite strong with about 20 kts from the east. I picked the shorter east-west runway into the wind and landed on the large airport.

There was only one other airplane parked on the small ramp and I was glad to find a good tiedown spot. Other than that there were fuel tanks, a small airport building, a new looking camper parked right next to it and a fence around the whole airport without a way to get out for pedestrians.



Santa Rosa airport, New Mexico, behind the highway. The runways are barely visible.

This ramp was on the east side, far away from the highway on the north side. The airport is somewhat famous for its proximity to Route 66.



A police car entered through the gate and parked next to the camper. I used the opportunity to ask a local about the distance of the closest car gas station. The young police officer, alone in the car, turned out to be interested in aviation and actually lived in that camper. He was very helpful and friendly and offered to drive me and my gas can to get unleaded fuel when I explained what I needed. The gas stations were near the highway, too far for a walk. He even let me fill his own 2 gal gas can, so that I could add a bit more range to the next flight.

The clouds were turning into thunderstorms and I heard thunder to the northwest. Apparently I had not yet escaped the humid, unstable weather. An Army helicopter landed noisily some distance away from me (thank you for not blowing my plane away with the rotor wash), on the taxiway, and their crew came over to the building to take shelter. They were headed towards Santa Fe and found their way blocked by the now well developed thunderstorm.



The main storm cell passed just north of the airport, but I saw lightning on three sides of it. It rained and the wind picked up, but we were spared the worst of it. Only late in the evening things calmed down again. The helicopter crew took off, I stayed.

There was almost no wind the next morning, and I launched before 7 am on the long runway 19. As soon as I climbed on course, to 10500 ft (3200 m), the headwind was back. It would take a while to fly the 300 nm (555 km), the distance to my next stop.

There were high clouds that dropped some rain, which did not reach the ground, but some of it reached me. I flew towards Albuquerque, staying just south of it. A high ridge extended straight across my flight path, and I needed all my altitude to get across it. The elevation of the terrain now increased to more than 7000 ft (2134 m), so that I was not all that high above the ground.



Early morning over New Mexico

For a long stretch there was no airport where I could have landed. Only about 50 nm before reaching Winslow in Arizona, there were a couple other airports which I could have used, but I wanted the extra distance. Winslow with its two long runways seemed like a good choice, but when I got closer, a rain shower just drifted over the airport.



The rain keeps following me, almost obscuring the Winslow airport in Arizona

I heard a couple other airplanes on the radio, so at least there was something going on. Based on the AWOS weather broadcast, the wind on the ground was from the east and I was aiming for the downwind of runway 11. But once the shower moved, the wind suddenly switched to southwest, and I had to re-plan for runway 24. Because the wind was strong, I was glad to have a runway pointed in the right direction, into the wind.

The large ramp was empty, but a cart drove over from the airport building with “Follow Me” printed on its tail end. We will see about that, I thought, and selected my own parking spot so that Caro’s tail was pointed into the wind. That was the most stable direction for the conditions. The driver, looking a bit sullen, asked me if I needed anything. I told him that I did not like Avgas and asked where I could get unleaded fuel. He informed me that they had a courtesy car available, but refused to let me use it because they did not want me to take a gas can with me for the 1.5 mile distance. I declined and decided to look for other options first.

Shortly after my arrival, five large Army helicopters in a row touched down on the other, western ramp. Were these guys following me? I later learned that they were headed east, probably on some training exercise, and got stopped by weather. The FBO sold plenty of jet fuel to them and the crews crowded into the FBO building for the rest of the day.

While exploring the airport, I found a tanker base with firefighting crews that had nothing to do that day. I asked one guy about how to get auto fuel for Caro, and complained about how unhelpful the FBO guys were. Unfortunately he could not help out either. Maybe this large airport, which catered more to the business flyers and larger airplanes, was not such a good choice as a stop after all. But on the plus side, there was a restaurant on the field and comfortable seats on the patio of the FBO.

Eventually the lady from the FBO offered me and my gas can a ride in a truck, with the gas can in the open, but wanted to charge me so much it would have doubled my fuel bill. I did not like that and it was not practical from another standpoint. For the next flight, I needed 10 gal, and only had a 5 gal can. So I accepted that I had to use Avgas from the airport pump, for the first time on this trip.

I left at sunrise the next day, when it was cooler and the density altitude at this 5000 ft elevation lower. The scenery on this flight was spectacular in many places.



First I flew low past the famous meteor crater a few miles west of Winslow in the dry desert. Then the area turned dark green from the multitude of trees covering the Mogollon Plateau.



My course led me right between Flagstaff and Sedona, where the colorful cliffs were resplendent in the bright sun. Smoke came from a wildfire in a valley near Sedona, and a temporary flight restriction had been created around it. I skirted the edge of it, but saw no aerial firefighting activity.



Looking towards Sedona, Arizona, with Phoenix way to the south

With 20-30 kts headwind, I was only making slow progress, sometimes with less than 70 kts (130 km/h) ground speed. With 379 nm (702 km) to fly, I would spend a lot of time in the air. At 10500 ft (3200 m), the air was pretty smooth, but a front with some rain that pushed in from the south created wave effects. For a while I would descend with the airflow at 200 fpm (1 m/s), then it would go up for a while by the same amount, but I had to go look for the lifting part while the downdraft always seemed to find me on its own. I passed south of Kingman, and continued on towards Bullhead City.

I could see the northern end of the front for a long time before actually reaching it, near the Colorado River, which is the border to California. Here there were no more trees; sand and rocks were the only things I could see for 50 nm in all directions. The valley floors were now much lower, below 2000 ft (610 m) elevation. The large restricted areas of Southern California forced me into the corridor between them, with the Barstow-Daggett airport as a good landmark. Finally I arrived at the corner of the airspace at Edwards Air Force Base, where I could turn northwest towards my destination Tehachapi. When I started my descent, the ride got very bumpy from thermals and the wake of the mountains to the west. I landed into the strong gusty wind at Tehachapi and had to hang onto the canopy when I opened it to get out after 5.5 hours flight time. That was enough flying for the day and I looked forward to the short walk to a restaurant near the airport.



The next morning looked like this in Tehachapi, California. It is rare to see such low clouds here, coupled with 20-25 kts wind blowing through the pass. I had to wait half a day for them to lift.

But finally I reached the California central valley again, a 2.5 h flight to home. It was sunny, dry, with a few well behaved thermals and little wind, what a relief. Caro touched down uneventfully in Calaveras, after almost 40 hours in the air during this trip, which covered 3474 nm (6434 km), my longest trip in this plane so far.

