

Flight Planning Information -- Mexico

Flying into Mexico can be an exciting, rewarding experience. To help insure that your excursion is both pleasurable and one you wish to repeat, I have constructed this simple brief¹. If you have questions or comments regarding your trip, feel free to contact me, Craig Albright at: e-mail = FCAlbright@qwest.net, phone = 480-892-9380 (home) or 480-776-9358 (cell).

Bear in mind that this brief is a "guide". Although I may update it from time to time, requirements and procedures sometimes change. Take your good humor and patience with you...

ENTERING MEXICO

Required Paperwork

Pilots:

- ✓ Pilot license and current medical certificate
- ✓ Proof of citizenship -- passport
- ✓ Pilot logbook

Passengers:

- ✓ Proof of citizenship -- passport
- ✓ Minor children -- If both parents are not present, bring a notarized letter from the absent parent(s) giving permission to take the children out of the United States. This even applies to your own children...
- ✓ Pets must be more than three months old with papers/immunizations.

Aircraft:

Airworthiness certificate

Registration

Radio license²

Operators' handbook

Weight & balance

- ✓ 2-way radio
- ✓ Mexican liability insurance -- This can be purchased by the trip or by the year³. If you believe that your existing insurance provides liability coverage for flights into Mexico, make sure that it's *clearly* spelled out in the policy for later review by Mexican authorities.

¹ This brief is based on my personal experience as well as information from Jack McCormick of Baja Bush Pilots, Phoenix Flyers' member Randy Helm, and Don Downey of Flying Samaritans. Their valuable advice results from numerous flights into Mexico. Any errors are mine...

² Although having a radio station license is a formal requirement, I don't know of anyone who has ever been asked to produce the document.

³ I happen to use Baja Bush Pilots in Mesa, AZ. Their phone number is 480-730-3250. Insurance costs about \$40 for a 3-day weekend or \$110 for an entire year.

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- ✓ If you are not the registered owner, you'll need a notarized letter from the actual aircraft owner granting you permission to fly into Mexico. If you are in a partnership, I suggest that you treat the aircraft like a "minor child" and have a letter granting permission from your absentee partners.
- ✓ N numbers must be at least 12 inches high. Temporary numbers applied with tape or water-soluble paint are quite acceptable.

Planning - Southbound

- U.S. Flight Plan (Southbound) -- File a flight plan from your departure airport (i.e., any U.S. Airport) to an Airport of Entry (AOE) in Mexico. You must select an AOE for your first Mexican landing. You won't need to cancel this plan with FSS since the U.S. merely uses it to track you across the border, and (theoretically) Mexican authorities close it for you. The Mexican authorities don't require advance notification prior to landing other than standard position reporting and landing request via radio.
- U.S. Flight Plan (Northbound) -- Pre-file a flight plan for your return back into U.S. Airspace. It should be from your (anticipated) last Mexican airport, which must be an AOE. FSS will notify U.S. Customs of your intended arrival time.
- No night VFR in Mexico.
- Money -- U.S. Currency is almost always accepted. However, change will usually be in pesos. It's wise to determine the exchange rate prior to departure.⁴ Plan on paying cash for flying expenses; only a few airports accept credit cards for fuel. And, when you pay in cash, don't expect exact change. Have \$1 bills available for tips... (Note: Tipping is no different than in the U.S. Only tip for a service after that service is complete. And, I recommend that you do not tip Mexican officials for doing their jobs!)
- Available airport data for U.S. Pilots traveling to Mexico is minimal. World Aeronautical Charts (WACs) yield some information. However, detailed information is available from private, special interest groups in the U.S. like Baja Bush Pilots (480-730-3250 or www.bajabushpilots.com). They have an excellent, 500+ page book describing many of the Mexican airports/landing strips in detail.

Flying South-Of-The-Border

- Although you are already on an open flight plan, consider giving FSS a position report prior to crossing the border into Mexico.
- After crossing the border from the U.S. into Mexico, your first landing must be at an AOE; follow ATC/tower instructions regarding where to park the plane. You will go through Mexican Immigration and Customs, present your aircraft and personal paperwork, possibly have your luggage/cargo examined, and fill out a variety of Mexican paperwork at several, different stations. (If the paperwork system appears redundant and inefficient, relax. It's all part of your south-of-the-border experience...) The paperwork will include a flight plan to your next landing point (towered or non-towered), a General Declaration form for the aircraft, and a Tourist Permit (i.e., visa) for yourself and each passenger. In addition, if this is your first trip during a calendar year, you can apply for (and immediately receive) a Multi-Entrance Authorization⁵ for your

⁴ For the last several years, the exchange rate has hovered around 9.5 pesos to 1 U.S. dollar. 10:1 is a good rule-of-thumb.

⁵ To apply for the Multi-Entrance Authorization, you must submit the original plus two copies of the following documents: pilot license, pilot medical, aircraft registration, airworthiness certificate, and Mexican aircraft insurance policy.

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aircraft. Having this authorization expedites future AOE processing as well as saves money if you anticipate making multiple trips into Mexico during a single calendar year.

- All flights from controlled (i.e., towered) Mexican airports require flight plans. Unlike U.S. Flight plans, you file them at the airport prior to departure. If you flew into a towered airport from an uncontrolled (i.e., non-towered) airstrip, you won't be on a flight plan. And, flights between uncontrolled strips don't require flight plans. Flight plans are closed somewhat casually by checking in after landing. They appear to be an administrative tracking and fee collection tool, having nothing to do with flight safety... Mexico doesn't have a service equivalent to our FSS.
- Fees - You will pay a variety of fees that are somewhat inconsistently administered from airport to airport. (Some airports in Mexico have been privatized; some are owned by the local government.) A few years ago, Mexico instituted a \$52/year airspace tax⁶ on aircraft entering the country. And, everyone will need a visa⁷ at about \$21/person. Most airports also have landing fees and overnight tie-down fees. Sometimes these fees are lumped together; sometimes they are separate. The cost depends upon aircraft weight, number of engines, phase of the moon, and attitude of the agent. Expect landing fees in the \$7-\$12 range; overnight tie-down fees are in the \$5-\$7 range. Some airports also charge a departure tax (northbound aircraft heading back to the States) of about \$20; it's assessed against the airplane (rather than the passengers). All fees are paid in cash, and you'll receive a receipt. *Be flexible and keep smiling...*
- Fuel purchases will be measured in liters. Useful conversions: liters x 0.2642 = gallons; gallons x 3.785 = liters. As of this writing, fuel is about \$3.50/gallon depending upon location. In addition, Mexico has recently collapsed several fuel-related taxes into a single "wing tax"⁸ of about \$10-\$15 each time you purchase fuel. Although some airports accept credit cards for fuel, plan to pay cash to avoid unanticipated (and uncontrollable) delays.
- The ATCs will answer your radio calls in English. However, Mexican pilots call and are answered in Spanish. Hence, you may not understand other traffic communications. If you are concerned about relative aircraft positions, ask ATC. Be alert...
- I find flying in Mexico to be a great VFR adventure! Radio navigation aids are sparse but adequate. ATIS is usually unavailable. To my knowledge, no one has an AWOS. And, there is no FSS to call for weather. (I did say "adventure"...). At controlled airports, expect to get wind and altimeter info from the Tower. Many resorts and small communities are serviced by an adjacent, dirt strip with a faded windsock. Probably, most of your landings will be near sea level so density altitude isn't a problem. However, many of the unimproved, dirt strips may be shorter (and narrower) than you usually use; it might be wise to brush up on your soft-field technique...
- Don't be surprised if armed military personnel greet you when you land at non-towered strips! They aren't a threat provided you aren't doing something *incredibly* stupid like carrying drugs or guns! They will probably record the aircraft "N" number as well as the pilot's name and point of departure. If you departed from a towered airport, they'll probably ask to see your flight plan.

⁶ If you obtain the Multi-Entrance Authorization, you'll pay this tax only once per calendar year. Otherwise, you'll pay \$52 each time you receive a General Declaration (i.e., each time you enter the country).

⁷ The rules surrounding visas are often enforced differently, depending upon the administrative personnel at the airport. Some officials collect tourist permits when you leave the country, saying that the permits are not "reentrant". (Hence, you'll have to purchase another one on your next trip into Mexico.) Other officials allow you to keep the visas; when you present the permit on your next trip, they check the expiration date. If it hasn't expired (and won't expire during your stay), you save \$21 per person. I recommend always asking for a 180-day visa each time you purchase one.

⁸ The tax amount is based on the wing span of your aircraft. Most SEL aircraft will pay between 100-150 pesos.

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In most cases, the military personnel speak no English, and you'll converse with hand gestures, smiles, and writing.

REENTERING U.S.

Required Paperwork

- ✓ If you met the "southbound" requirements, you already have everything you need!

Planning - Northbound

- Your last airport in Mexico must be a Mexican AOE. Here, you will turn in your General Declaration form (but not your Multi-Entrance Authorization) and file a Mexican flight plan out of the country to a U.S. AOE. (Since you will be landing outside of Mexico, you don't have to close this plan.) Depending upon airport personnel, you may also relinquish your Tourist Permits.
- U.S. Flight Plan (Northbound) -- You must be on a U.S. flight plan to cross into our country. You cannot depend upon the Mexican officials at the AOE to forward the Mexican flight plan. This is why you pre-filed a return flight plan prior to leaving the U.S. (This flight plan has to be canceled like any other flight plan that terminates in the U.S.) After crossing the border, your first U.S. Landing must be at an AOE to go through U.S. Customs.

Flying - Northbound

- Flight plan activation -- Contact FSS after departing your Mexican AOE prior to crossing the U.S. border to activate your previously filed flight plan. As a rule-of-thumb, amend your flight plan in the air so that you land within 15 minutes after your estimated arrival; don't arrive early. (Don't arrive late either! There could be a small overtime fee if you arrive after Customs is closed.) **If you amend an existing flight plan, FSS (actually Customs) requires 30 minutes advance notice before you cross the border. If you file a new flight plane, they need a 60-minute notice prior to border crossing.** Be punctual! Otherwise, stiff fines could be imposed...
- Squawk code -- Besides activating your return flight plan (with an updated ETA), FSS will assign a squawk code for use prior to your border crossing. After landing in the U.S. and clearing Customs, you can use 1200 or whatever is assigned by ATC.
- When you land at the U.S. AOE, taxi up to the Customs office and wait at the plane until the Customs officer gives you permission to leave the immediate area. (This includes all passengers; don't wander off for a bathroom break without obtaining permission!) You must fill out a Customs form #178 (Private Aircraft Enforcement Systems Arrival Report). The Customs officer will ask to see everyone's passports. And, the officer may ask for aircraft and pilot documentation. Sometimes, they are very thorough! I suggest patience and courtesy...
- If the aircraft has not been into Mexico during this calendar year (i.e., January 1 to December 31), you must purchase a Customs sticker for \$25, and affix it to the aircraft. Although the Customs agent may be able to sell one to you "on the spot", I suggest purchasing the required sticker prior to your trip via the internet at <https://tradelinks4.mellon.com/cbp/Dispatcher> .