

San Francisco Bay to Reykjavik

By Mike Taylor

Mike Taylor is a former aircraft design engineer, 24-year aviation industry veteran, current marketing consultant and private pilot.

Jon Carlson owns and operates a 1979 MU-2B-40 Solitaire, a short body version of the aircraft. N52MA was one of the first of 57 built between 1979 and 1985, and marked the latest in design improvements for the model series, including updated Garrett TPE-331 engines and increased fuel capacity.

When I spoke with Jon about his use of the MU-2, he stated that he flies primarily for personal and family use, utilizing the aircraft approximately 100 hours per year. Jon's typical trip is skiing in Truckee, California. Truckee sits close to the California/Nevada border at just over one mile above sea level. It's historically a logging and ice manufacturing town, and is also a river outlet to Lake Tahoe. This destination is considered a "milk run" for the Carlson family and their MU-2.

Jon is based in the San Francisco Bay Area at San Carlos Airport (KSQL). So, flying from sea level to one mile up a scant 147 nm seems the perfect trip for the MU-2. At an optimized climb of 2,630 ft/min, the aircraft makes quick work of altitude. In two minutes, he's already ascended to Truckee's 5,817 ft elevation. Driving the trip would consume 4.5 hours across 209 road miles.

In addition to trips in the summer to Lake Tahoe, Jon and his wife, April, have family up and down the West Coast, in the state of Washington and in Southern California. Like the milk run to Truckee, an aircraft makes quick work of their travels. Now, according to Jon, with the MU-2 they have the luxury of taking "more adventurous" vacations.

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"About 18 months ago," Jon recalled, he and his family flew their MU-2 to Iceland. They spent two days crossing the U.S. and celebrated the 4th of July on Mackinac Island, Michigan. It was a trip planned with stops along the way. These began with an overnight in Ogden (KOGD), Utah, where temperatures reached the century mark at 100 °F.

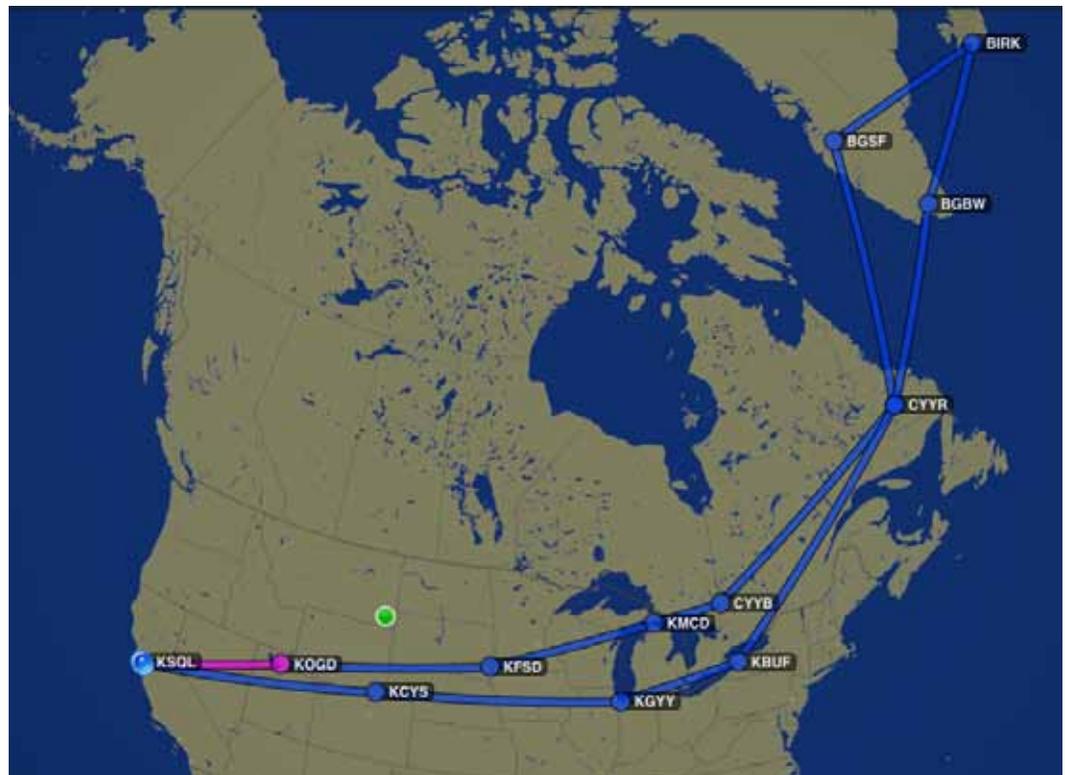
Sioux Falls (KFSD), South Dakota, was another fueling stop enroute to Mackinac. Here they spent two nights at the architecturally charming Grand Hotel. Main Street and the hotel were patriotically "decked out and the fudge shops were busy," according to Jon. In a competitive spirit, and in commemoration

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of national independence, Jon took part in the Mackinac Stone Skipping Tournament while there.

Jon's flight planning had the aircraft departing Mackinac Island Airport (KMCD) via Ontairo (CYYB) for Goose Bay Airport, a.k.a. Happy Valley-Goose Bay Newfoundland and Labrador Airport, in Canada (CYYR, not to be confused with Goose Bay Z40 in Alaska). They then made the hop to Greenland, then Iceland. While in Iceland, the family spent a week with friends on a planned tour.

Equipped with Garmin navigation, Jon recorded some of the marked locations of his MU-2, such as flying over the Davis Strait, a transitioning over-water route from Canada to Greenland.



A refueling stopover in Narsarsuaq (BGBW), a settlement in the Kujalleq municipality in southern Greenland, was made before their fourth lengthy over-water flight back into Canada. A small, remote village, but essential for aircraft refueling, Narsarsuaq recorded 158 inhabitants in 2010. "Lots of terrain and a steep final make it a tricky approach. At least the floating icebergs on short final were not tall," stressed Jon, adding, "It was warm in Narsarsuaq, but I wore my rain jacket on the ramp while watching the refueling to keep from being eaten by the giant, numerous and aggressive mosquitoes."

The Carlson's flight had them returning from Goose Bay Airport through Buffalo (KBUF) for a visit to Niagara Falls. "We got the



Geiger counter exam [for radiation] as we cleared customs,” said Jon. They stayed overnight to visit Niagara Falls in the morning taking the Maid of the Mist ride for a full-on wet experience.

Next up was Chicago for two nights as a “tourist stopover.” “We did the ‘Ferris Bueller’ tour as researched by my youngest son, including the Willis Tower, the Art Institute of Chicago, and various landmarks,” Jon jibed. “It was a long trip for the kids,” now 17 and 13, he conceded. Still, the MU-2 makes for an excellent family vehicle. Passengers plus bags, plus full fuel were at the “perfect weight for the MU-2,” he added.

Jon’s preference is to fly with full fuel for reserve’s sake. Their longest leg, with headwind, was Goose Bay to Buffalo at just over four hours. Jon mostly flies alone in the cockpit, while the family occupies the cabin.

For the trip, Jon emphasized he did a “huge amount of flight planning,” noting the planning can be very time consuming. Although “handlers” do plan filing and offer some assistance, there is still a lot of work to do. Jon noted that international airports typically have handlers who, for example, could predict routing day-to-day for their local area. But, he murmured that the service is expensive and they don’t alleviate much.

Jon started flight lessons in 1999. He



Top: Greenland sea ice, heading eastbound. Middle: Reykjavik on final. Bottom: 1979 Mitsubishi MU-2B-40 (N52MA) at Narsarsuaq for refueling.

revealed he never dreamed much about flying as a kid. Nevertheless, he went on to own a Cessna 182 for two years, then a Cessna 340 for seven years. He's owned the MU-2 since 2010.

As casually and incidentally as his desire for flying seemed, the idea for the Iceland trip began while talking with another family about their next adventure. Perhaps Jon's dreams of flying began as an adult, and the idea crossed his mind that he could fly himself there. Thus began their aerial excursion to Iceland. They met the other family there, who coincidentally flew commercially.

Thinking it couldn't possibly be smooth sailing across the U.S. and up the Eastern seaboard, I asked Jon if he'd met with any challenges with the flying. He highlighted that there are few alternate airports beyond the Canadian border. Eastbound from Mackinac they stopped in Ontario (CYYB, North Bay/Jack Garland) for fuel.

Another realization was, "From Ontario to Goose Bay it was completely IFR from FL140," Jon commented. Originally, his flight planning had shown no adverse conditions in the weather forecast. However, smoke from fires in Northern Quebec severely limited visibility. They "flew ILS minimums all the way to the runway lights," he said.

Jon calls himself a "low-use operator." I asked him what then was the appeal of



Top: Sondrestrom Fjord on descent. Middle: Jon rock-skipping in Mackinac Island. Bottom: Passengers on the ramp in Sondrestrom.



Top: N52MA panel over the Davis Strait from Canada to Greenland. Middle: Sondrestrom on final. Bottom: MU-2 at the Icelandair Hotel Reykjavik Natura.

high-performance aircraft like the MU-2. His answers included turbine reliability, a relatively small capital outlay, safe operation, and the relatively inexpensive maintenance.

While shopping for an upgrade from the Cessna 340, Jon said he got lots of “unknowledgeable” advice about flying the MU-2. He cast that aside and was convinced that the SFAR “regime” was essentially the same that his insurers had required with the Cessna 340. This was reassuring to him, and thus the capabilities of the MU-2 became widely apparent.

Additionally, talking with insiders he understood how all the owners love the plane. For my purposes, “it runs from inspection to inspection,” said Jon. Speed is over 300 knots compared to the 200-knot Cessna 340.

But rather than focus purely on speed, Jon added, “The MU-2 expands range more so than time.” He emphasized, “Our trip to Boston this summer would not have been feasible in the 340.”

Jon Carlson is a former software engineer in the financial industry. He worked for 12 years at a multinational financial data and software company that provides financial information and analytic software for investment professionals. He’s now “self-unemployed,” intimating he’s enjoying some selective time off.

Jon has approximately 2400 hours as a pilot, 1000 logged in the Cessna 340, and just shy of 500 in the MU-2.