

MEXICAN HACIENDA ADVENTURE

by George Campbell, TTCF Member

Alamos Sonora Mexico is a small silver mining town located in southwestern Mexico, four hours (310 time) from the Dallas Fort Worth area. Chihuahua, our Mexican port of entry, lies 190 nm to the North. To Chihuahua's south lies the expansive Copper Canyon, wandering through the Sierra Madre Mountains and Alamos. My wife and I were introduced to Alamos and the Hacienda de la Santos "Club Pilotos" while on a Baja bush pilots' trip to Cuba in 2015. One of Mexico's first luxury 'Hacienda' style resorts, Hacienda de los Santos Resort & Spa, is located in the national landmark village of Alamos. The resort was created with General Aviation as their target market.

Since 2015, each fall at October's end we have joined some 15 to 20 other pilots, including fellow TCF members, for the fall Hacienda de la Santos "Club Pilotos" reunion.

Flying south of the border to Alamos Sonora is not really difficult and presents little security risk. My wife and I have been flying in and out of Mexico since 2003. To date we have never paid a questionable fee or been asked for one. Security at each of the airports we've visited has always been good. It can be a little intimidating at first because of the military personnel that are stationed at all operating airports in Mexico. However, they just gather a few facts about your flight and passengers before wishing you a good day.

There are numerous articles that can prepare you for a south-of-the-border trip. Both the AOPA and Baja Bush pilots web sites have excellent articles. Some of the key points you will find expanded upon in these resources are:

1. An eAPIS must be filed for both entering and exiting Mexico and the US.
2. Mexico is entered and exited through an airport of entry (AOE), which has immigration, customs, and GDAC (equivalent of our FAA) offices present.
3. Mexico aircraft entry visa, customs, passport control, flight planning is done at the AOE airport(s).
4. Proof of Mexican aircraft insurance is required.
5. Mexico does not permit night time VFR and flight following doesn't exist.
6. You must have a US border custom sticker on your aircraft.
7. Re-entry to the US must be through an airport of entry.



Top: The beautiful Hacienda de los Santos Resort & Spa in Alamos, Mexico.

Bottom (L to R): Mel and Jane Holzman, my wife Linda and me.

8. Flight planning requirements for controlled and non-controlled airport should be reviewed.

Entry into Mexico can be a little time consuming, but we have always found the airport staff to be accommodating and friendly.

MMCU at Chihuahua, Mexico has been our airport of entry for the past two years. On leaving Chihuahua we head south for approximately 190 nm to Alamos (XAL). A less

direct route takes us along and through the famous and scenic Copper Canyon. This is home to Mexico's famous railroad El Pacifico, El Chepe. The Canyon, which extends from the South near El Fuente to Chihuahua, offers some outstanding views from the air. With GPS pathway coordinates provided by Jim Swickard (owner of Hacienda del la Santos) our route allowed us to experience the canyon in late fall. It is a fantastic, picturesque route with terrain elevations up to 8,000 feet.

Arriving at Alamos Sonora (XAL) airport from the West allows for a straight in approach. Our route from the Northeast is not as straight forward but still nondescript. On the ground we're met by the airport manager and one of the hotel staff. A few questions later, and we are settled in. Aircraft are parked either in the hotel's hanger or on the ramp, depending on hanger availability.

For those arriving at the start of the “Club Pilotos” reunion, a Hacienda hanger reception awaits. Fellow club members and a Margarita or two iron out your landing. Transportation to the hotel is quickly arranged and you are off to enjoy the beautiful Hacienda de la Santos.

At the resort, you’ll sense a connection to a bygone era of elegance and charm. The resort reflects the best of ‘Old Mexico’ in color, Spanish influence, and tranquility, all combined into a pristine property.

The owners, Jim and Nancy Swickard, moved to Mexico from Rancho Santa Fe, California in 1989. With a passion for Spanish colonial architecture, antiques and art, they purchased an historic 18th century silver baron’s mansion. Upon completing the initial 235,000 man-hour restoration in 1994, the Swickards then developed a vision of opening a small luxury resort which combined four mansions and a 17th century sugar mill. Just this year, the property was given

two awards by US News and World Reports as among ‘The Best Hotels of Mexico’ and ‘The Best Hotel in Northern Mexico.’

The Swickard family gives the majority of the credit for the uniqueness of the resort to the artisans who did the original construction in the 18th century. With the five buildings, which are on the national register of Mexico as a foundation, the owners have added modern conveniences for the guest’s enjoyment.

As the vision grew, so did the desire for more comforts and amenities for the guests which has earned the property numerous international awards. From day one, the resort was created with General Aviation being their target market. Jim, also a pilot and avid aviator, worked with the state and federal government to rehabilitate the local airport. In 2018, the state of Sonora, upgraded the runway, taking the surface back to a ‘better-than-new’ condition.



The airport at Alamos Sonora (XAL) is surrounded by a rugged landscape but the approaches are straightforward.

The resort is unique in Mexico having a colonial style hangar for aircraft which is located on the ‘Hacienda ranch’ adjacent to the local jet-capable airport. Up to twelve aircraft can be housed in the Hacienda’s aircraft hangar.

Hacienda de la Santos is expansive for one having only 134 suites and guest rooms. An overview of the property

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MEXICAN ADVENTURE

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The Copper Canyon located nearby makes for some fantastic aerial views. It is the home of Mexico's famous railroad El Pacifico, El Chepe.

includes: four pools, a full-service spa with a professionally trained staff, a 'gym with a view', numerous fountains, a putting green, exquisite gardens, two restaurants, as well as 'Zapata's Cantina' which contains hundreds of types of tequila as well as a 19th century Mexican bar. There is an all-stone, Andalusian theater which conceals a 'Cava' for wine and liquor. The theater building was designed by Mexican architect Felipe Almada and the stage designed by Ms. Silver Lake, Australia's top theater designer.

In 2015, I became one of four new members of the resorts "Club Pilotos". The club which has in excess of 600 pilot members, has been adding members since 1999. In a spirit of fun, the requirements for pilot membership were conceived with levity. Only three actions are required of each pilot: 1) The PIC must be able to navigate to Alamos, Sonora, Mexico 2) The PIC must make a safe landing on either Runway 31 or 13. 3) The PIC, and passenger(s) must stay at the AAA Four Diamond rated Hacienda de los Santos Resort & Spa.

With the requirements met, I became a lifetime member in Club Pilotos de Mexico. Annual dues are less than one Peso, however annual pilgrimages, by air to Hacienda de los Santos are encouraged.

As of 2018, more than 600 pilots have been given the complimentary 'Capitan' cap, (pronounced Ca-Chu-Cha) in Spanish, as well as special pricing for aviation events and regular visits. All

Club Pilotos members receive complimentary parking in the Hacienda hangar (singles & light twins only, on a space available basis) and complimentary ground transportation to and from the resort. At reunion time you will need to be early, if you would like to be parked in the hanger.

N8013M, our 310I, was not the first Twin Cessna to arrive in Alamos or for the PIC to be admitted into the elite Hacienda

de los Santos Club Pilotos. I can say, however, toasting margaritas under a severe clear sky at your induction is memorable.

Our fellow TCF friend's and 310K flyers, Jane and Mel Holzman have been traveling to Alamos since 2005 and Mel was inducted into the Club that year. Like ourselves, friends told them about the Hacienda and the Club Pilotos reunions.

Mel's 310K history is interesting. The plane originally was purchased by his uncle and cousin new in 1966 from Gunnell Aviation at the Santa Monica airport. Mel purchased it from them in 1978 when the family decided to move up to a Duke in 1978. The airplane still has the original

leather upholstery but the panel has been upgraded. Mel is also a long time TCF member, having joined the group in 1994.

The Club Pilotos reunions gives us a wonderful reason to experience another aviation outing. Flying and staying at the Hacienda is just part of this experience. Experiencing Alamos, its history, culture, and old-world charm defines flying within Mexico.

Coronado, the Spanish explorer, first explored Alamos in the 1540s and in the mid-1600s. Later, Spaniard settlers found silver near Alamos. Mining

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Mexico's Day of the Dead holiday coincides with the fall "Club Pilotos" reunions. The decorations are festive. To the left is my wife Linda with her new friend.

boomed through the 1700 and 1800s, mostly silver but also some gold. For a few years it was the highest producing silver area of Mexico with fifteen million ounces a year coming out of the ground. At the turn of the 20th century the mines all closed due to low production, a revolution with both Poncho Villa and Emiliano Zapata disrupting the country, as well as problems with the Indians. Today Alamos is once again booming with a large Canadian-owned copper mine in its 15th year of production employing about 500 miners.

Silversmithing and its artistry has coexisted throughout this mining area for centuries. The Hacienda's gallery presents some of the most fabulous silver pieces the local artists offer. My wife has slowly, year by year, been relocating it all to Dallas.

Mexico's Day of the Dead holiday celebration coincides with the fall Club Pilotos reunions. The Day of the Dead "El Dia de Muertos" is a time of celebration and remembrance of loved ones who have passed away, much like Memorial Day in the United States. During the Days of the Dead, some believe that the souls of the departed return to earth to visit with and to provide council or give advice to family and loved ones. There is a belief that this is true every day, but that November 2nd is the day set aside to remember and honor those who have

past.

While the holiday is very spiritual for the Mexican people, it also is a festive time in Alamos. Like other Mexican cities, Alamos is decorated with Catrina figures and cemeteries and graves are redressed with flowers. La Catrina, the skeleton-looking costume, is the symbol of the holiday. Skeletal painted faces and elegant costumes are commonly seen. Our walks through Alamos and cemetery ventures during the holiday have left a lasting impression.

Each year, Piloto Capitan and founder, Jim Swickard outlines the club's activities for the stay. Tours,

walks, and dinner entertainment, along with cooking classes and a Texas Hold'em poker tournament are all part of the venue. Participation is not required for those preferring to lounge, with the world's best Margarita, at one of the pools. And, like any pilot event, aviation talk is everywhere with a few south of the border terms thrown in.

We hope to see there. Adios, mi amigos.

Additional information can be found on the following websites:

Flying to Mexico – www.bajabushpilots.com

Hacienda de la Santos- www.haciendadelossantos.com
Club Pilotos- www.clubpilotos.com.

Editor's Note: George's magnificently restored and award-winning 310I was the cover story for the September 2012 issue. Back issues can be found on our online Member Forum. Check it out.



In 2012, after a seven year restoration, my 310I won the Reserve Grand Champion award in the Classic division at Airventure.