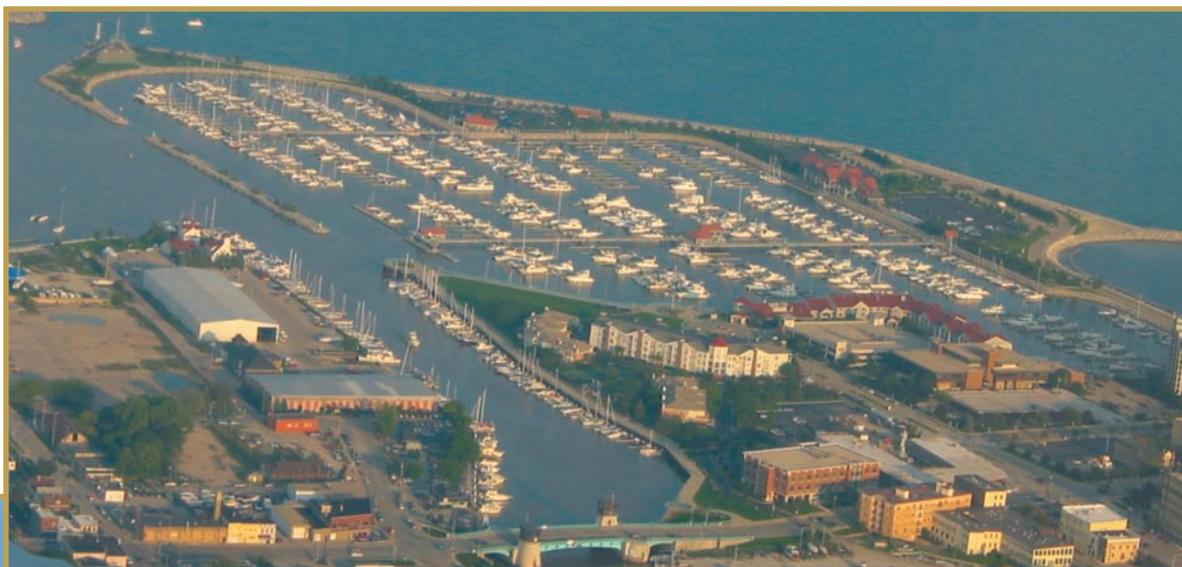


PERIMETER FLYING

The Other Kind of Go-Around

by Matt
McDaniel



The Reefpoint Marina in Racine, Wis.



The shoreline from Manitowoc to Two Rivers, Wis.

For many years I was an avid cyclist. Several years ago I was talking about cycling with my wife's cousin at a family gathering. She told me that she was going to try to set a World Perimeter Cycling Record that summer. A what? She introduced me to The Perimeter Bicycling Association of America (PBAA). She explained that they are an organization which sanctions world records and accomplishments in perimeter cycling. There are perimeter cycling categories for lakes, mountains, islands, states, cities and even entire countries. It was her intention to cycle the entire 351-mile perimeter of Lake Sakakawea in western North Dakota. She did; and still holds the record of three days, eight hours and 30 minutes.

So, what does that have to do with aviation? Well, it made me wonder why there isn't something like the PBAA in the aviation world. The National Aeronautic Association recognizes only one perimeter-flying record, the perimeter of the continental United States. To my knowledge, there is no Perimeter Flying Association.

My thought was ... such limits should not stop us intrepid aviators! So, I conceived and conducted some small-scale perimeter flights myself. They were short flights around the perimeter of local lakes and various coastal islands, like Catalina Island off the coast of southern California. While that was fun, it wasn't challenging. So, in the fall of 2002, I stepped it up a notch and flew the entire perimeter of Lake Michigan in an SR22. My route was over 715 nautical miles and six hours flying across four states.

The starting point was the Racine, Wis. airport (RAC). RAC is about 15 miles south of Milwaukee and lies within a mile of the Lake Michigan shoreline and Wind Point Lighthouse (c1880). I decided to start out heading southbound along the lakeshore. In terms of airspace, that was



The skyline of downtown Chicago.

The Racine, Wis. Airport – the beginning and end point of the Perimeter Flight.

the only section of the flight that would be busy. I had flown the entire Lake Michigan area for several years as a regional airline pilot and while instructing Cirrus pilots, so I already knew the airspace. I wanted to get a closer look at the en route sights and do so safely. There were several places to buy fuel without having to fly inland and a lunch surprise awaited my passengers.



The harbor at Manitowoc, Wis.

Departing Racine at 0700, I seated both passengers so that they could have the best view of the shoreline, as I flew the perimeter just off the shore. Flying at 3,000 feet MSL, I first got clearance to pass through the Waukegan, Ill. Class D, which extends about a mile into the lake. I contacted Chicago Approach for VFR flight following, while flying southbound below the Chicago Class B. This area is often busy with aircraft flying below the Class B to avoid vectoring and/or flight outside of gliding distance from land; so, I turned all exterior lights on and asked my passengers to call out any traffic. As we progressed closer to downtown Chicago, I descended to 2,500 feet to remain below a lower ring of the Class B. Meigs Field was still in operation then and I received clearance to transition their Class D. This route never gets old to me; in spite of the dozens of times I've flown it. The flight within spitting distance of The Sears Tower and the Hancock Building, barely above their skyscraping heights, is always a treat. As instructed, I reported south of Meigs, adjacent to "the hotels" (a group of four large hotels on the shoreline). Soon after, Chicago terminated flight following and I got clearance through the Gary, Ind. Class D. We were then free to enjoy the upcoming sights.



The Grand Hotel on Mackinaw Island, which boasts the world's longest covered porch.



One of the many beautiful Bed and Breakfasts on Mackinaw Island, Mich.

I chose to stay at 2,500 feet (roughly 1,700 feet AGL). It's good for sightseeing, yet high enough to glide inland, if necessary. Our first point of interest beyond Chicago was right below us – the steel mills and dredged industrial peninsulas of Gary. While certainly not an area of beauty, there's a certain curiosity to it. Its drab brown factories, miles of pipes, acres of parking and multiple loading docks for the huge Great Lakes iron-ore ships are rather fascinating.

In sharp contrast, an area of natural beauty lay straight ahead, between Gary and Michigan City, Ind. The Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore flows with natural sand dunes up to 200-foot tall, spanning 15 miles of shoreline and covering over 15,000 acres. We watched the park pass under our right wing and shook our heads at the hardy souls leaving the pristine beach to swim in the chilly waters. The dunes and large sandy beaches extend well into Michigan as the shoreline bends northward.

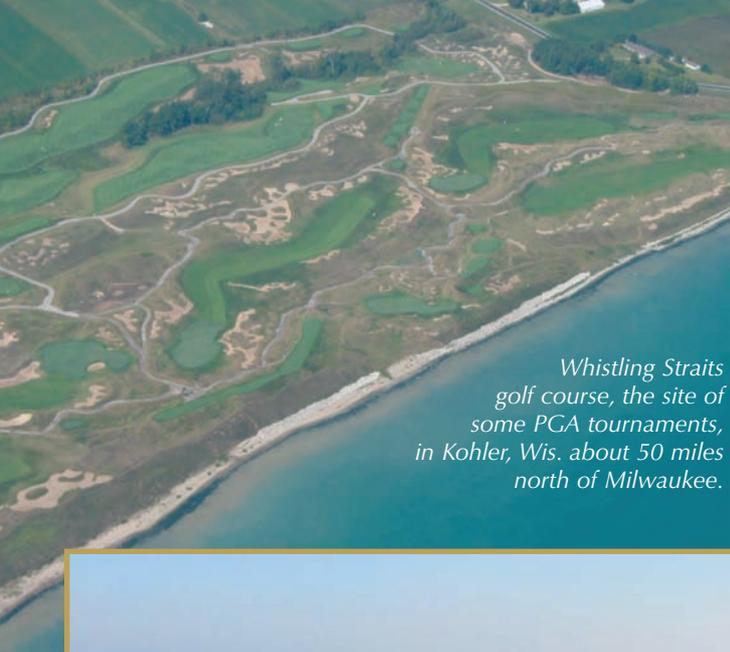
Progressing northward, I used the autopilot in HDG mode to steer the gentle curves of the beachfront. I was careful not to get distracted by the beautiful scenery as I tuned CTAF frequencies of lakeside airports that we passed, announcing our position as necessary. Soon we came upon Holland and Tulip City, Mich. Unfortunately the gorgeous fields of tulips grown there had long-since been harvested. Next was Muskegon (MKG), which made me a little nostalgic. Mere months after getting my private certificate, I had flown a 1955 Piper Tri-Pacer from southern Indiana to MKG. It was a great experience for a 19-year-old who knew nothing about lake-effect weather. I learned quickly! Years later, I would pilot repeated airline flights to and from MKG. Few airports can offer the lake-driven, howling crosswinds and blinding snow-squalls of MKG.

Passing over the many port cities of lower Michigan, we took in the scenic harbors, points, and beaches. We gazed upon the Nordhouse Dunes and Manistee National Forest north of Ludington. Flying airline flights into Traverse City, I had often seen a shipwreck at the Manitou Islands. We circled the south island for a closer look. Sunk in 1960, the 246-foot freighter *Francisco Morazon*, lies mostly exposed in 15 feet of water. Interestingly, it rests atop the wreck of *Walter L. Frost*, a wooden steamer run aground in 1905! This area of Lake Michigan contains over 50 known shipwrecks, many still visible from the air.

Back at the main shoreline, we climbed to 5,500 feet, heading directly toward Mackinaw Island Airport (MCD). We overflew the mouth of Grand Traverse Bay and then one of the world's longest suspension bridges (Mackinaw Bridge) while crossing the Straits of Mackinaw. On arrival, I paid the \$10 landing fee to the Park Service, which operates the airport.

Within minutes our horse-drawn taxi was carrying us through the woods to the clippety-clop sounds of the horses and into town to The Grand Hotel (c1887) for lunch. Afterwards, we strolled the streets and took in the sights of the quaint city before galloping back to the airport. Since Mackinaw Island does not have motorized vehicles, there is no fuel at the airport. So, we took off and circled the island for altitude and photos and within minutes were landing at Mackinaw Co. Airport (83D) at the southeast tip of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

After refueling, I flew higher along the north shore due to the dense forest and lack of sand beachfront below. The scenery at the top of Lake Michigan was still worthy of lower flying, but safety dictated otherwise. Turning



Whistling Straits golf course, the site of some PGA tournaments, in Kohler, Wis. about 50 miles north of Milwaukee.

southwest out of Manistique, we left the Upper Peninsula via an island chain bridging the gap to the Door County peninsula of Wisconsin. I climbed to 8,500 feet, staying within glide distance of an airport until safely back over hospitable terrain.

Door County has the highest concentration of lighthouses in the United States. Flying along the eastern shore, we viewed several of them, including the famous Cana Island Lighthouse (c1870). The Sturgeon Bay canal and shipyard passed under our wings and we were back over mainland Wisconsin. We winged our way south, passing the Manitowoc marina and its fine yachts. My passengers took great delight in seeing Whistling Straits golf course near Sheboygan, site of several PGA tournaments.

The time had come to call Milwaukee approach and return to Racine. Milwaukee denied my request to transition their Class C along the shoreline. Instead, I was given vectors over Milwaukee International and then direct RAC (putting us about three miles inland). We completed our perimeter flight around 5:00 p.m., after a full, exciting and tiring day.

Lake Michigan is the only great lake entirely within the United States and is, thus, the easiest to perimeter fly. Yet, the challenges of the others are certainly within reason. Eventually, I'd love to take a continental United States perimeter flight. Breaking that only recognized perimeter-flying record of 45 hours and 27 minutes set in a Citation V would be difficult, but the experience and memories gained would be reward enough.

If you are looking to spice up your next \$100 hamburger, consider a unique perimeter flight on the way to and from the restaurant. Maybe I could even suggest a good co-pilot! 



This shipyard in Sturgeon Bay, Wis. is a heavy ship building and repair port for Bay Shipbuilding Company.

About the Author: Matthew McDaniel owns Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (www.progaviation.com). He's been flight instructing for 14 years. Working with Cirrus pilots has been his specialty for 5 years – he was one of the first CSIP's certified. He also flies a Boeing 717 for a national airline and holds his ATP, Master CFII, MEI, & four turbine aircraft type ratings. He's been passionate about all-things-aviation since childhood. Matt can be reached at: matt@progaviation.com or 414-339-4990.

