

Florida to Caribbean Trip

FAQ:

Q: Who are you guys?

A: We are Galin Hernandez and Anthony Perea, a couple of pilots that enjoy taking interesting Caribbean flying trips. Most importantly we are NOT a commercial operation.

Galin is a Single Engine Land/Multi Engine Land, Instrument rated Commercial Pilot with more than 2,200 flight hours. Galin is retired from the U.S. Customs Service and the U.S. Air Force Reserves, where he held the rank of Lt Colonel.

Anthony is a Single Engine Land, Private Pilot with over 2,000 flight hours. He is an international banking executive and works for a British financial services firm in Miami, Florida.

Galin's wife Millie accompanies us and documents the trip. You can read about our [2010](#), [2011](#) and [2013](#) trips at their [web page](#) since Millie wrote about those trips. There is also a very nice YouTube video about our [2013 side trip to San Juan](#) made by Rick Longworth, one of the pilots of the 2013 trip and [one covering our 5th annual trip](#).

Q: Is the trip as easy to make as a cross country in the states, (availability of fuel, food and motel)?

A: Yes. We help out with recommendations on where to fuel and where to stay, where to eat, etc. You will probably stay, eat and fuel at the same places we do. We sometimes get a slightly better rate as a group. The most challenging flying will be from your home airport to south Florida and back.

Q: What is the estimated cost?

A: Your biggest expense, by far, will be fuel. Fuel in the Caribbean currently averages about \$8.00/gal but we make arrangements for a better rate with a local FBO which really helps out. Last year we were able to get fuel at \$6.75/gal which was not bad at all. We normally arrange a fuel discount at [Borinquen Airport \(TJBQ\)](#) which is only an 8-10min flight away. TJBQ will also be the US Customs airport to use when flying in to PR from nearby "foreign" islands. We will be based at the [Mayaguez Airport \(TJMZ\)](#) but there is no fuel at the airport. There is a group of local GA pilots at Mayaguez Airport that will be waiting for us from their private FBO until we arrive.

Your second biggest expenses will be your hotel and additional activities you want to partake in. You can stay at a B&B ranging from \$75.00 a day to a 4 star hotel with casino for well over \$400.00 a day depending on what you like. In the past everyone has had a different budget so there have been different options for hotels. The hotels we have used in the past include:

a) Hotel Colonial in Mayaguez, PR - A low budget hotel but very clean, simple and includes breakfast, WIFI and parking. Located in the middle of the city and it's a converted old church. Rates are about \$75 double beds. We have had pilots stay there and they liked it. It's very simple, no luxury, no pool but works fine for those on a budget. For others they prefer the other two options for hotels that have pools, beach access, etc.

b) Rincon of Seas Caribbean Resort - More upscale hotel with pool and in front of beach located in the town of Rincon, PR. Prices are about \$108 per room for our dates of arrival. About 20 min drive from airport. Nice option for those that wish more of a hotel and Caribbean feeling.

c) Holiday Inn Hotel in Mayaguez - located next to airport. Rates are about \$142 per room for dates of arrival.

You can also use Trip Advisor for other nearby hotels. We can provide recommendations but it is ultimately up to you, your budget and your preference where you stay. Now, we will be going just before the start of tourist season to keep hotel costs lower but they also sell out quicker so we recommend making reservations as early as possible, but no later than October 30th.

For meals there are many local relatively inexpensive restaurants in the area. You also have the typical McDonalds, KFC, Applebees, BK, etc.

Q: What do we do for transportation back and forth from the airport?

A: We recommend renting a car or teaming up with some other pilots staying in the same hotel to share a car to get to and from the airport and/or any local driving. Thrifty Car Rental has a rental office at the Mayaguez Airport terminal. We normally help coordinate this for the group. Again, we will be going just before the start of tourist season to keep costs lower and cars also sell out quick so we recommend making reservations as early as possible, but no later than October 30th. In the past some pilots have not found a car to rent because they waited too late. Since many of the roads in Puerto Rico are not well identified we recommend you bring along a portable car GPS that has Puerto Rico roads in the database.

Q: What kind of clothing should we bring with us?

A: During your stay in the Caribbean you will mostly be in Shorts, T-shirts and sandals. There will be some days you would prefer to be in slacks and Polo shirts. However, it is a good idea to bring a small back-pack with winter clothes for your trip back home.

Q: Hopefully some couples (not just a bunch of fellows)?

A: There are always a few couples in the group and Galin's wife always goes.

Q: Do I need to carry a large amount of cash?

A: We personally pay about 99% of all expenses during the trip with American Express cards but VISA and MC are more accepted. It is important to notify your credit card company of your intended days of travel and islands you will be visiting and possibly using your credit cards. Otherwise you could have an authorization declined while buying fuel in the Bahamas or elsewhere. We carry some cash (about \$300.00) in case we encounter some unforeseen circumstance. We have yet to use that cash on any of the trips we have done but you never know.

Q: Will we need an International Cell phone plan?

A: Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands are part of the US so any US cell phone plan (ATT, VERIZON, T-Mobile, Sprint, etc.) will work. No international plan needed. For cell phone use while in the Bahamas, The Dominican Republic, Tortola and St. Martin it is best to check with your particular carrier to be sure.

Q: How difficult to get through customs the first time (never done it)?

A: Not hard at all. We help with the paperwork and other requirements well before we even leave the US. Now, you will need the [US Customs sticker \(\\$27.50\)](#) and passports ahead of time. A passport card is not valid for GA flights within the Caribbean so you are required to have a passport. Give at least 8 weeks for these to be done. An EAPIS account with US Customs is required but that can be done in a few days at the most. We basically all go through Customs together as a group anyways. It is important to note that while flying from Puerto Rico the US Customs requirements are different depending on the destination. Failure to comply can result in a fine of up to \$5,000.00.

Culebra & Vieques: No US Customs requirement.

US Virgin Islands: Although the US Virgin Islands are part of the US you must clear US Customs upon landing back in Puerto Rico even if you only overfly the island and do not land. This also includes providing US Customs advanced notice of arrival at your intended Puerto Rico arrival airport. EAPIS is not required.

All other Caribbean destinations: EAPIS is required both outbound and inbound. You must clear US Customs upon landing back in Puerto Rico. This also includes providing US Customs advanced notice of arrival at your intended Puerto Rico arrival airport.

Q: Do we need to apply for permits or forms ahead of time? How far in advance that we need to do?

A: You don't HAVE to have Bahamas/T&C/Dom Rep forms ahead of time but it makes getting in and out a lot quicker. We normally get them done 1-2 weeks before the departure date.

Q: Do we need 12" N Number for the trip?

A: Yes, but they do not have to be permanent. Duct Tape or Temporary Vinyl will do just fine.

Q: Are there any restrictions with flying an experimental aircraft in the Caribbean?

A: The government of the Bahamas has a [blanket authorization for US and Canadian registered experimental aircraft](#) that we recommend you carry with you. The other Caribbean nations do not have this requirement or anything similar. As long as you have a valid airworthiness certificate, you can fly your aircraft into the different Caribbean nations. Over the years Galin has flown his KIS4 experimental aircraft to many of these islands and has never had a problem.

Q: Do I need to be instrument rated? Can we expect to fly VFR from Florida to PR?

A: An Instrument rating is NOT required. Even if you are IFR rated, most crews go VFR to enjoy the views. The hardest flying will be between your home airport and south Florida. The Caribbean portion is normally in severe VFR conditions. Except for Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, most Caribbean islands do not authorize night VFR flights.

Q: Do I need to fly a fast or long range airplane for the trip?

A: No. A fast or long range airplane is not needed for the trip. The longest leg of the trip (MYEF – MDPP) is 397Nm. Others that have completed the trip in past years have flown airplanes as diverse as an LSA, a Grumman Traveler, a Beech Sierra, a Cirrus SR20 and several experimental aircraft.

Q: What charts do we need?

A: We recommend getting the [Bahamas Red & Blue VFR charts](#) even if you are planning to go IFR. Going VFR is how most of the pilots go. It is by far the most enjoyable. Some of us also carry the [L5/L6 Caribbean Low Level IFR charts](#). You can get all the charts/maps in south Florida the day before we start the trip.

Q: What digital charts are you using?

A: We use the FltPlanGo app and Foreflight. They both cover the entire Caribbean. However for planning you can use SkyVector.com. It has the entire Caribbean on-line. For a Garmin 430, you would want the Americas Database but it is not an absolute requirement.

Q: What survival equipment should we carry?

A: FWIW: Galin flew for US Customs in the Caribbean and with the Civil Air Patrol on over water patrols for many years. He has done many trips to the Caribbean, Key West, Cozumel and Cancun and recommends the following:

Take water survival training (dunker) if you can. With Customs I took mandatory water survival training every year so I have a good idea of what to expect. There were a few things I learned about water survival that opened my eyes.

The 1st thing is that if you have to ditch, you will probably want to get out of the airplane as soon as possible. That means that if the survival gear isn't strapped to your body you probably won't have it when you leave the airplane. I know I will not go back into a possibly sinking airplane to remove anything once I am out. So if the airplane sinks, that mandatory expensive ELT installed in the airplane and your raft will go down with it. Once under water the ELT signal will not be picked up by anybody. That is why I have my survival gear, to include a personal ELT with GPS capability and a Marine VHF Radio strapped to my life vest. You want to minimize the amount of time it takes rescuers to find you, hopefully within 24hrs. Remember, if it is strapped to your body it is survival gear. Everything else is camping gear.

Another thing is that it is extremely difficult to climb into a life raft in open waters. If you do not continuously practice this, you will probably run out of energy trying to get in and not be able to stay afloat. If you don't believe me, try getting into a small raft in the deep end of a swimming pool. It will open your eyes on how hard it really is. Now add wind, waves, adrenaline and possibly an injury and you will see what I mean. Each person should determine how much survival gear they feel comfortable with bringing. There is no right or wrong answer. In the past pilots have used sophisticated life vests, six person life rafts, portable ELT's, portable PLB's (personal locator beacons), track me gadgets for having relatives follow your flight online, etc, etc. This is a personal choice and each person should determine what

they are comfortable with. We will not provide you with a minimum or maximum list of equipment you'll need. But if you have questions feel free to ask.

Galin personally wears a [high quality life vest](#) whenever he flies a significant distance from land with a [GPS-PLB](#) and a [Marine VHF Radio](#) strapped to it from the time he gets in to the airplane until he has landed and shut the engine down. Again, you want to minimize the amount of time it takes rescuers to find you. If Galin is flying over the warm waters of the Caribbean he is not overly concerned with hypothermia setting in quickly, but not the same if overflying the North Atlantic.

Other things we recommend are a non-breakable signal mirror, sea dye/marker streamer, rope, knife, water bottle, emergency blanket and a good strobe light. ALL of these strapped to the life preserver.

Finally, no matter how shallow the water is, if you can't stand up with your head out of the water you might as well be in 1,000 feet of water. Don't get lulled in to a false sense of security just because the water isn't very deep.

Q: What airport stops will we make flying down to Puerto Rico?

A: Each pilot should determine the range of their airplane and flight plan accordingly. We recommend stops in Exuma, Bahamas (MYEF) and Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic (MDPP) for those that require two stops and just MDPP for those that require only one stop. In the past we used Providenciales, Turks and Caicos Islands (MBPV) as our second fuel stop but don't recommend them anymore due to the excessive fees averaging \$250 for a simple fuel stop. Puerto Plata (MDPP) has no landing / ramp fees but we are exploring the idea of having a handler manage all the paperwork for those landing at this location. If we use a handler there will be a fee that we hope to share among all pilots. We will update you with the info once we have it. Here is a link to our recommended route:

<http://skyvector.com/?ll=22.96243968173122,-77.03173827484855&chart=301&zoom=11&plan=A.K7.KHWO:V.MY.ZBV:A.MY.MYEF:V.MB.PVN:A.MD.MDPP:F.MD.ANT EX:A.TJ.TJBQ>

Q: Are there FAA overflight fees in the Caribbean?

A: [By law the FAA must charge overflight fees](#) to operators of aircraft that fly in U.S. controlled airspace but neither take off nor land in the United States. There is a lot of confusion regarding this issue so, no matter what you have heard, we want to make sure you understand the procedure and are not "blindsided" by this.

The fees are based on three variables:

- 1: Total nautical miles flown (great earth distance) between foreign airports during the preceding calendar month.
- 2: Type of airspace services used (Enroute or Oceanic).
- 3: The calendar month billable amount exceeds \$250.00.

The actual fees and where they apply are found at:

https://www.faa.gov/air_traffic/international_aviation/overflight_fees/

Notice that the fees increase effective 1 October 2014. Flights that in other years were not billed may now be billable.

With our planned route, the fees do not apply to the KHWO-MYEF leg or to the MDPP-TJBQ leg, but they do apply for the MYEF-MDPP (747.5Nm round trip) portion. So if you use FAA services (flight following, contacting flight service, IFR flight, etc.) for the MYEF-MDPP portion the billable amount will be \$424.18 (747.5nM * .5686 = \$424.18). For many pilots paying the fee is not an issue at all. But if it is an issue for you, there are ways to mitigate the fee.

IF YOUR AIRCRAFT HAS THE RANGE:

Method #1: Fly non-stop from KHWO to TJBQ. (Both are US airports so variable #1 is not met)

Method #2: Only make one stop (KHWO- MYEF-TJBQ or KHWO-MDPP-TJBQ). You took off or landed in the US on both legs so overflight fees do not apply. (You took off or landed in the US so variable #1 is not met)

Method #3: Since the prevailing winds are normally from the east, fly KHOW-MYEF-MDPP-TJBQ on the way down then TJBQ-MYEF-KHOW on the return. This way the total nautical miles flown within the calendar month becomes 373.7Nm, the billable amount is \$212.09 which does not exceed \$250.00 and the FAA does not bill you. (Your billable amount does not exceed \$250.00 so variable #3 is not met)

IF YOUR AIRCRAFT DOESN'T HAVE THE RANGE:

Method #1: Make the MYEF-MDPP leg during one calendar month and the MDPP-MYEF return portion during a different calendar month. (Neither variable #1 or variable #3 were met)

Method #2: Use FAA services, but when billed, request a one-time waiver and hope they grant it. The FAA has overflight fee waiver authority but it is entirely at their discretion. The FAA has been known to waive a particular monthly bill on a case by case basis.

Method #3: Don't use any FAA services (VFR flight following, contacting flight service, IFR flight, etc.) for one of the two flights between MYEF and MDPP. You can still monitor their frequencies, but don't talk unless it is an emergency or safety of flight situation. This way the total nautical miles flown within the calendar month becomes 373.7Nm, the billable amount is \$212.09 which does not exceed \$250.00 and the FAA does not bill you. (Variable #3 is not met)

We have to emphasize that it is ultimately your decision as PIC to which, if any, of the methods you want use during the Florida to Puerto Rico and back portion of the trip. Again, we want to be sure you understand the procedure and don't get "blindsided" by this.

Q: Will there be any landing or parking fees charged at the Mayaguez Airport (TJMZ)?

A: The Puerto Rico Ports Authority, which is responsible for all public airports in PR, will invoice each plane owner about 45 days later for landing and parking fees. The invoice will be mailed to the registered address on the FAA database of each airplane. Last year these fees were very minimum. Landing fees were about \$7.00 and parking about \$4.00 per day. We paid less than \$80 each for a whole week of landings and parking.

Q: Are there any other fees?

A: Depending on the Islands we visit there might be additional fees but we won't know until the itinerary is finalized.

Q: Is there security for our airplanes at TJMZ?

A: There is regularly scheduled airline service at TJMZ so there is 24hr a day security. But, just like any airport in the US, you still must take personal security measures to help protect your airplane and equipment.

Q: Are there tie-downs, ropes and chocks available at the Mayaguez Airport (TJMZ)?

A: There are tie-downs available, but not ropes or chocks so bring your own ropes and chocks to secure your airplane.