

## The Seaplane Adventure



Napa Marina on the inflatable dock



Spence Pond

**Have you put off getting your pilot's license because you are TOO BUSY, or you say you will finish it in the Spring, Summer, or Fall and the seasons come and go and you still haven't finished? Or, when is the last time you added that new endorsement or rating to your pilot's license?**

Well, recently I spent 3 days getting my Seaplane Rating (ASES - Airplane Single Engine Sea) and then did an additional 3 hours flying around and landing on the local lakes, rivers, and waterways. Woohoo!!! This is something I have wanted to do for years.

The training was to begin in Napa on the Napa River very close to the Napa Airport. (Norcal, the long standing and popular seaplane operation, was no longer in business). The instructor at Napa was John Carmichael, a seasoned pilot with lots of float time locally and in Alaska. The C172N Seaplane owned by Bigfoot Air was docked at the Napa Marina. Did you know there was a marina in Napa? Neither did I.

Once we let the air out of the inflatable dock so the seaplane was now floating in the water, we were ready to go. As there were no fuel islands on the water to get fuel for a seaplane, (planning ahead is always required in the lower 48), we flew a couple of blocks over the train bridge and landed at a house with a dock where there was a parked truck with fuel tanks. The hose was very long and stretched all the way to the dock and then the seaplane.



At the Dock



Fueling from the truck

So after filling up, we were off to Lake Berryessa as I performed slow flight, stalls, and Dutch rolls enroute. We practiced normal landings, glassy water landings, rough water landings, crosswind landings, spot landings, and three types of taxi for use with different wind and water surface conditions. Performing the "step" taxi for the first time is really a treat. The "step" is a surface underneath the floats perpendicular to the keel that creates turbulence, (it reduces the adhesiveness of the water), to allow the seaplane to get up on top of the water to gain enough airspeed for takeoff.

On this beautiful late October day, there was not much activity on Lake Berryessa other than a para glider and a few boats, so we had much of the lake to ourselves. We took a break at the local picnic ground, then finished the day with more takeoffs and landings.



Lake Berryessa



Historic Ship near Suisan Bay

The next morning we headed out to the Delta and up the Sacramento River for some touch and goes. The section of river was so long that after doing about 20, the length of the river outlasted my shoulder's endurance, but certainly was great for repetitive and immediate feedback for pitch and power. The next destination was Hogan Reservoir, just west of Calaveras County Airport, (CPU). We practiced spot landings, more glassy water landings (when the water is so reflective that you have very little depth perception), where you come in low over the shoreline or a point of land sticking out in the water to help in judging height. But then, the airspeed is fixed with pitch attitude, in this case 55 then slowing to 50kts, the power is set at 1800, and you hold that until touchdown. Patience and believing that it will work are the keys.

It was now after 1 pm and the wind was picking up. The wind is what complicates everything for the seaplane pilot. Not only does it affect landing, with drift being a real danger, but correct taxiing becomes the challenge. The seaplane has a typical air rudder, but also has a water rudder on the back of each float to aid in steering on the water. As the winds picked up and we were struggling somewhat to taxi the seaplane where we wanted, we decided to head on over to Spence Pond, our final destination for the Checkride, and do some practice taxiing and docking.

Sometimes you just can't taxi where you want as the weathervaning takes over so you do something that is called sailing. Basically you taxi backward at low idle, maneuvering the tail where you want it to go with rudder, and add in opposite aileron. With the winds now 14 gusting 22 at CPU, we were definitely feeling the effects and careened into the opposite shoreline. No damage so we pushed off with the paddle and tried again. After what seemed like forever, we finally approached the small dock hoping not to strike the gorgeous yellow Stinson that was parked just a few feet away. John jumped out on the dock, grabbed the line on the tail, slipped on the wet wood, and as the adrenaline was rushing, barely kept the plane from escaping. I then jumped out and grabbed a line from the wing and we had her. Another 20 minutes of maneuvering up onto the grass, with four lines secured to the cleats, and we were done. John had been wondering why it was so difficult to taxi, and sure enough, one of the water rudders was broken. So with the wind and the broken water rudder, we decided the following morning would be best for the Checkride. We could still taxi, just not with lots of wind.



The yellow Stinson



Having fun fueling

It was another beautiful, sunny but cold morning with frost lingering on the glistening seaplane surfaces. Terry Campbell was the examiner, the former owner of Norcal. She had picked us up at the dock the day before, took us to the much needed Starbucks, then drove us around the quaint towns of Murphys, <http://www.visitmurphys.com/index.html> and Angels Camp, <http://www.angelscamp.com/> while pointing out the many local wineries. We then experienced her small town hospitality of a wonderful home cooked meal at her ranch style home on top of the tallest hill in the area.

After some discussion of the seaplane characteristics, we flew over to Hogan Reservoir. She took me through the various types of landings, taxi, and of course threw in the engine failure at 300'. After 1.1 hours, I was a seaplane pilot!



The Checkride



Beautiful Scenery



A narrow path



Low Flying

Now the real fun began. I had three more hours of advanced training left, so as PIC, we headed to Malones and Don Pedro Reservoir. The best part ever was making the steep descent over terrain down into a gorge, and flying 50' above water level, (AWL), navigating one sharp turn after the next as the river snaked through the gorge. Then, to top it off, we flew under a bridge...just kidding!



Descending into the Gorge



The Gorge



The Steep Turn



Flying under the Bridge

More takeoffs and landings then down to the delta to land where ever we wanted. With John's knowledge of the waterways, I felt like I was getting the neighborhood inside scoop about the duck club and the person that used to land their DC3 on a tiny dirt strip. This was a world that doesn't exist for the land plane pilot.

The last stop was the Petaluma River. I chose a spot very close to Gness and the big towers. The next time I fly into Gness, I want to remember what it was like to be flying around at a few hundred feet and landing on the adjacent waterway.

**So now, what is stopping you from finishing that private pilot training, or additional endorsement or rating?**

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