



INTERNATIONAL AIRSPACE

What you should know

By Rick Gardner

We are all accustomed to the freedom and liberty of being able to hop in our airplanes and fly wherever we want without doing anything more than filing a flight plan, lighting the fires and blasting off. However, when your destination requires that you fly through international Flight Information Regions (FIRs or “airspace”), things can get a little more complicated.

Most pilots are aware that prior permission (overflight permit) is sometimes required to fly through international airspace and that fees may be due for flying through that airspace (including the USA).

However, finding out how to obtain the overflight permit and how to make the payment can be a challenge and the procedures for doing so varies from airspace to airspace. In some parts of the world like Central America and the Caribbean, smaller countries may have joined forces to combine their respective airspaces and turned over the responsibility to manage this airspace to a third party entity. While the third party may administer the airspace above, each country below this airspace may still require operators to obtain a permit to overfly them. This is particularly true with COCESNA airspace in Central America where some jet operators have been forced

way off of their planned route because they did not get a permit from a particular country. This can present an unplanned logistical and safety challenge.

Requesting a permit usually entails providing an itinerary, completing forms and submitting aircraft and crew documents to the controlling agency. The controlling agency will analyze the documents submitted and if completed correctly, will provide you with the authorization number for the overflight permit which should be included in box 18 of your ICAO flight plan form.

The methods for calculating airspace fees and for making payment vary widely. Some controlling agencies use Maximum Take Off Weight (MTOW) to calculate a “flat rate” for using their airspace whereas others use MTOW to calculate a rate applied to the actual distance flown. In rare instances a controlling agency, like SENEAM in Mexico, will use the wingspan of the aircraft to determine the rates to be applied. Some controlling agencies may exempt aircraft below a certain MTOW from airspace fees but not from permits. Usually flights to, or from, a country like the USA and Mexico will not pay airspace

fees. However, if you fly through that airspace and did not depart or land at an airport in that country (USA), airspace fees will be due. When the airspace is controlled by a third party agency like COCESNA in Central America or Piarco in the Caribbean, fees will be charged regardless of where you depart or land. Airspace fees may have to be pre-paid prior to flight (Curacao) or become due after the flight has been completed. Fees may be collected in US Dollars, Euros (Cuba) or pesos (Mexico). You may be notified of the amount owed by receiving an invoice mailed by the respective controlling agency or not at all, as in the case of Mexico where they have a “self determination” policy. Mail from some foreign countries may take an extremely long time to reach the recipient, if it arrives at all.

To help inform operators of the requirements for flights in the western hemisphere, we have a free interactive map that is accessible from the “International Permits” page of our CST Flight Services website (www.cstflightservices.com/International-Permits). By moving the cursor over the respective country, the map will display requirements for landing/entry/overflight permits, airspace and APIS.

This can be a useful tool for planning your flight. Members of our Pilots Association can download many of the forms for requesting overflight and landing permits themselves. If you prefer, we can take care of obtaining the necessary permits and paying airspace fees on your behalf with our Premium International Permits or Ground Handling Services.

Failing to obtain the required permits or failing to pay for past flights can result in inconveniences, or worse. We regularly receive calls from pilots who have been denied access to airspace or have had their airplanes grounded in a foreign country because they owed airspace fees from past flights that had been left unpaid by their trip planning company. One of the most challenging airspaces in this regard is Mexico due to the fact that routes from the USA to popular international destinations cross into their airspace. If you have flown from anywhere in the USA across Mexico, or the Gulf Of Mexico, to Central America, the Caribbean or South America, you probably flew through Mexican airspace. Unpaid Mexican airspace fees accrue back taxes and interest and follow the tail number of the aircraft which means that if you purchase an aircraft, or change the tail

number of your aircraft, you may also be purchasing the unpaid debt of that aircraft or that of the aircraft that bore the tail number you just obtained.

If you have any doubts as to whether you owe unpaid airspace fees, including Mexico, we will be happy to explain how to determine this on your own (yes, for free). If you determine that you do owe Mexican airspace fees, take note that these have to be paid to the Mexican IRS in Mexico and cannot be paid with a credit card, check, nor wire transfer. The most practical option for making payment is to use a company like ours that has offices in Mexico to avoid having to pay company A in the USA who pays company B in Mexico and you pay for both. The company you use should always provide the actual payment confirmation made to the Mexican IRS, an invoice from the company doesn't cut it. Make sure that your international trip starts out on the right foot by determining what permits will be required for your route of flight and make sure that the corresponding airspace fees get paid. If you have any doubts, feel free to contact us at ops@cstfltsvc.com or at +1 786 206 6147.