

Air Traffic Control: Friend or Foe?

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I was chatting with a chapter member about a recent trip. He told me that the hardest part of the trip had been flying through the airspace around Salt Lake City International Airport. He swore that he would never ask for flight following again, saying, "They kept sending me to all kinds of places where I didn't want to go."

Air Traffic Control (ATC) provides flight following (technically, radar traffic advisories) at the cost of some convenience. In the end, do they help or hinder the VFR pilot? He says they hinder; I say they help. Let's see why I think the way I do.

First, why does ATC reroute us? The answer is pretty simple: They are shooting big fast airplanes into the sky, and they don't want to hit us. Salt Lake International averages almost 1,200 flights a day, and at the busy times they have more than one IFR airplane taking off every minute. They also have F-16s and other military airplanes headed in and out of Hill Air Force Base. This is a flak barrage for any airplane passing through the area. So, the controllers ask VFR airplanes to move for their own good.

You can legally go through the area at 10,500 MSL without talking to ATC (as long as you have a working Mode C transponder), but you might as well wander through a minefield. Airplanes arriving at SLC are at 11,000; airplanes leaving SLC are at 10,000; at 10,500, you are squeezed in between them like a Taylorcraft sandwich.

So your reward for getting flight following and squawking the code and holding altitude and holding heading and accepting a minor reroute is that ATC won't shoot any 106.00-calibre bullets at you (that's the fuselage diameter of a SkyWest RJ). When the controllers point out the heavy jet indicating 300 knots that will pass 500 feet above you, or the trio of F-16s that will pass 500 feet below, you get a free air show instead of a scare.

Another reason to accept the reroute is that it is not that bad. A perpendicular diversion of 37 miles only adds one mile to a 700-mile trip! So you might as well enjoy the sightseeing and the free air show. You can reduce this even more if you know where ATC likes to send VFR airplanes (for example, mountain east of Salt Lake City), and aim for that from the beginning.

Sometimes ATC provides shortcuts. Las Vegas has complicated airspace, and several times I have had controllers suggest a shortcut that I did not think would be available. I came out ahead with flight following.

Flight following is the biggest help when you need it the most, that is, when you have a problem. ATC can help you find the nearest airport, and coordinate rescue efforts. You will also hear about weather problems, temporary flight restrictions, or other factors affecting your flight right away.

Some pilots don't like talking on the radio. The advantage of flight following may make it worth the effort to improve. The Aeronautical Information Manual (AIM) has all the rules, but the first rule is to listen before you talk, so you have a sense of what is going on. Your first call should say who you are calling, who you are, where you are, and what you want: "Salt Lake Center,

Archer 8256X, 20 north of Malad, request flight following.” After that, listen to what the controller asks you to do. This can range from something simple like “Say altitude” to something more complex like “Maintain 8 thousand while in Class Bravo airspace.” Controllers always say things exactly the same way, so once you have gone through the drill once or twice you will know what to expect. Talking to someone who has done it can also make it easier. And, you can listen to ATC during your local flying (128.35 is the frequency in our area).

The worst thing that you can do on the radio is get angry. It is perfectly OK, and even expected, to question a controller’s request, if you have a good reason. What’s a good reason? If they steer you toward the mountains at an uncomfortably low altitude, you should ask about it. Or if they give you a heading into a cloud (VFR), you should politely tell them; they will make another plan. Just say “Approach, 56X, we won’t be able to stay VFR on this heading.” Nothing fancy; just be clear and concise.

And don’t think that you are bothering anybody by asking. Controllers get their satisfaction from talking with pilots and helping them on their way. They WANT to talk with you. So give them a call...