

PICKING ALTERNATES? CHECK NOTAMS

The route to our planned destination went IMC on us on our third leg in a day of ferrying a new Cessna Skycatcher to Tampa from San Diego. It wasn't unexpected. My cockpit companion and I first caught up with this system the day before, near the end of a four-leg day from El Paso, and it forced us to make a new plan then, as well.

That day we enjoyed the option of several airports in the area—airports the system departed within the prior 30 minutes. This time, however, the weather complicated our choice of options and, just as I planned to reverse course my flying companion called out an airport as our best choice; the weather datalink overlaid on the GPS map showed it clear of the weather.

Perfect! Just what we needed. Following his direction, I banked toward that not-too-distant field while he looked up the CTAF. Before he could tune the radio, the airport appeared through a break in the clouds. Perfect!

"I have the airport," I called out. Then, "We can't land there," I said.

"Sure we can—it's long enough, it's visual...you want me to land it?"

"Only if you're good with landing on those big 'X' marks...the runway is closed."

In our rush to find an out, neither of us considered calling Flight Service about that suddenly needed alternate, even though time allowed. We would have learned of the runway closing before we lost more time and faced more clouds.

Ultimately, we made our destination after a major circumnavigation of the weather. But the lesson remains imprinted to this day: Check NOTAMs for alternates, well before filing them, or immediately when forced to choose on-the-fly.