

AOPA members were asked in an informal survey to name the most challenging mountain airports they have flown into, with the stipulation that the airports in question had to be public use with paved runways. That eliminates those Idaho bush strips located on the side of a mountain.

1. Telluride, Colorado (TEX)

Telluride Regional Airport, the nation's highest airport with airline service, is a problem for pilots who don't calculate density altitude in summer. Obviously, any airport at 9,078 feet msl requires awareness of density altitude even on barely warm days. The runway length is 6,870. (The runway is being rebuilt, requiring the airport to close from April to November 2009.) High terrain next to the airport generates rotor clouds on windy days. Runway operations are mostly one way, and one end has a 1,000-foot dropoff. One-way operations mean departing traffic may be coming at you as you approach this non-towered airport. (See "[America's Airports: Landing on a Mesa](#)," February *AOPA Pilot*.)

2. Aspen, Colorado (ASE)

When approaching the 7,000-foot long runway at Aspen Pitkin County/Sardy Field, at 7,820 feet msl, from the west pilots must begin the descent and configure for landing before the airport is visible.

"Outbounds turn to the right until above the inbounds, then turn left over them and fly down the valley, climbing until they clear the rocks and head for wherever they're going," says Wayne Bower of Dallas.

The approach at Aspen is challenging when flying visually, and has challenging instrument approaches as well with steep climb requirements, says aviation columnist Bruce Chien of Peoria, Illinois.

3. Leadville, Colorado (LXV)

Lake County Airport is North America's highest elevation public-use airport. "It's not the approach itself—it's in a wide valley—but it's the sheer altitude of 9,927 feet msl that requires a modified technique," warns Denver-area flight instructor Mark Kolber of Midlife Flight. The traffic pattern altitude is 10,700 feet msl, and the runway is 6,400 feet long.

"I was going to take a mountain flying class there last summer and because of a heat wave [creating high density altitudes], I couldn't fly," recalls W.R. "Gig" Giacona of El Dorado, Arkansas. One of the topics that class covers is, "What we can do when performance charts do not include our operating altitudes."

4. Glenwood Springs, Colorado (GWS)

Glenwood Springs Municipal Airport at 5,916 feet msl comes with lots of challenges, according to Denver flight instructor Kolber. The runway is 3,300 feet long with trees at each end. A narrow and twisting canyon guards it, and like so many Colorado mountain airports, weather and winds sometimes demand one-way runway operations. "It's an airport in a canyon with outcroppings along the canyon walls. There are limited opportunities for go-arounds, and departing traffic is coming the other way," Kolber said.

The airport manager there, Dick Weinberg, is a former FAA employee with 5,000 hours of experience in the mountains. He flew his Piper Cherokee 235 to Leadville, Colorado, in November 2008 and reports a takeoff run on that cold day of 4,000 feet. Glenwood Springs' runway is 3,300 feet long by 50 feet wide, and the airport can often have density altitudes of 9,000 to 10,000 feet. "A lot of people call me chicken," he said. At least Weinberg is still alive to hear their taunts.

AOPA Air Safety Foundation accident reports indicate unpredictable winds were the culprit in a 2008 landing accident at Glenwood Springs. A Colorado Department of Transportation aviation Web site indicates there are "frequent high winds."

5. Angel Fire, New Mexico (AXX)

Also nominated by Kolber is Angel Fire, New Mexico, which sits at 8,322 feet msl in a narrow valley. The runway is 8,900 feet long. "The valley is narrower, but the real challenge here is that the runway is oriented north/south while the prevailing winds are from the west. That, combined with the surrounding terrain, means that the wind is almost always a crosswind and is usually pretty strong," Kolber said.

Harvey Wright, manager of Ross Aviation at Angel Fire, notes that the airport is in a valley one mile wide between 10,800-foot mountains—with crosswinds. Predominately west winds can reach 55 knots, so there is usually turbulence in the valley, he said. At the time he was interviewed, the runway lights were under a seven-foot snowbank. Turboprop and jet aircraft rarely have a problem, but

single-engine piston aircraft should leave on Runway 35. There is a 2,500-acre lake in that direction where aircraft can circle to climb. AOPA's Airport Directory notes, "Mountains in all directions."

6. Ruidoso, New Mexico (SRR)

Sierra Blanca Regional Airport, near Ruidoso, New Mexico, at 6,814 feet msl is on a mesa and serves a ski destination. The main runway is 8,099 feet long. "It lies in the shadow of the nearly 12,000-foot peak that hosts the Ski Apache area. Very squirrely winds there, but a beautiful destination in the Lincoln National Forest," says Jonathan Rudolf of Farmington, New Mexico.

Airport Fire Chief Russell Shearer said seasonal winds used to be the problem, but lately winds have occasionally been high throughout the year. In December 2008, for example, winds there made the news when they reached 74 knots. In previous years, winds like those occurred mostly in the spring. Density altitude sometimes hits 11,000 feet msl in summer. "Leaving is the problem," Shearer said. "Sometimes, when a pilot asks for fuel, we'll ask if density altitude has been checked."

7. Morgan, Utah (42U)

John Leavitt of Heber, Utah, suggested Morgan County Airport, Utah, at 5,020 feet msl as an airport pilots might find challenging. The runway is 3,900 feet long and very close to terrain. "You have to take off to the west and make a turn before you hit the mountain. If you take off to the east you will have a hard time climbing out," Leavitt said.

Airport Manager Joe Garfield said there is 75-foot-high terrain 100 yards from the runway. "It's not an FAA-approved runway because of that. We have a hard time getting funding and keeping the airport open," he said. In addition, hangars are 100 feet from the runway centerline. "Better land on the numbers on Runway 21," he said. "There's a seven-foot drop from that end of the runway to the opposite end." Pilots arriving with too much speed find the runway dropping from under them as they attempt to touch down, and may have to go around. It's not uncommon to find deer and elk crossing the runway.

8. Sedona, Arizona (SEZ)

Sedona Airport at 4,830 feet msl has high terrain near the airport. It is located on top of a mesa. Paul Perlman of Orchard Park, New York, noted that when taking off on a hot day, it could be difficult to outclimb the terrain.

The mesa is 600 feet higher than the city, and the 5,132-foot runway starts and ends near the edge of the mesa. A few pilots have landed too fast and then jammed on the brakes, blowing tires. "If you undershoot, you're in trouble, and if you overshoot, you're in trouble. You can't land on the numbers, but you can't wait too long after that," said an airport official.

9. West Dover, Vermont (4V8)

One of our members nominated the ski resort airport in West Dover, Vermont, as among the most challenging. AOPA's Airport Directory warns that mountains surround the Mount Snow Airport and that crosswinds are common. "Use extreme caution," the directory warns. It has an elevation of 1,953 feet msl and a runway length of only 2,650 feet. Brush up on short-field operations.

The airport is now owned by a group headed by airshow performer Mike Mancuso. Mancuso said if there is any wind at all, it feels to the pilot like the wind is blowing at double the actual speed. It is almost always a crosswind. He has cleared some trees on the approaches to the runway, but the airport is unattended.

10. Thermopolis, Wyoming (THP)

Jim Wolper of Pocatello, Idaho, nominated Hot Springs County/Thermopolis Municipal Airport as a challenge because of its high terrain and the "bizarre runway slope" of its 4,800-foot runway. But the airport manager and flight instructor, Ray Arey, disagrees.