

NIGHT CROSSINGS

Crossing ridges later in the day when conditions are less than calm adds significant risk. Night flight usually presents less wind, no thermals and a more stable atmosphere, but it also means you have far fewer visual cues to keep you safe.

By day, it's easy to fly down a valley in a climb until it looks like you have a ridge cleared or a pass "made" and then hitting "Direct To" on the GPS. This approach doesn't work so well at night. At night, the visual references you rely on to tell you you have safely cleared a ridge or pass aren't there.

One key to night departures from valley airports is to "visualize" your departure beforehand and know the headings you need to follow to stay below terrain plus the minimum altitudes you need to reach to clear the ridges. Advance planning and good pilotage will prevent impact with terrain. Be extra mindful if Class Bravo airspace limitations keep you pinned down against the rocks or create artificial "canyon walls."

In 2007, a Garmin G1000-equipped Cessna T182T, operated by the Civil Air Patrol and piloted by two ATP-rated pilots, each with more than 25,000 hours of flight time, was destroyed after impacting Potosi Mountain, about 13 nm southwest of Las Vegas, Nev. The aircraft was on a VFR night flight, climbing to a safe altitude of 10,500 feet with radar flight following. The aircraft impacted Mount Potosi (circled above in red), elevation 8514 feet msl, at an altitude of around 7500 feet. Both occupants were killed.

