

An aerial photograph of a coastline at sunset. The sky is a gradient of orange, yellow, and blue. The sun is a bright white circle on the horizon. A lighthouse with a red light is visible on the coast. The water is dark blue with some whitecaps. The land is a mix of brown and green.

Flying Home: the Great Q-Route Mystery

The Great Q-Route Mystery

By Mike Jones

Cessna Pilots Magazine, originally published as a sidebar: March 2026

My trip home from Punta Gorda was less exciting than the ride down. It was a bit over four hours in CAVU VMC at 7,000 feet. ATC issued several re-routes as I plodded northward including one near Jacksonville that included an airway called “Q87.” Unfamiliar with high-altitude Q-routes, I simply replied “unable.” The controller cordially suggested, “Then how about destination direct?” Sweet! For two hours and 300 miles I flew a perfectly straight line, without a turn or a bump or a hassle in the sky.

But what’s a Q-route?

The FAA has designed Q-routes to service high-altitude traffic, usually from 18,000 feet to FL450. They appear in blue on FAA High Altitude Charts. These routes require GPS or inertial navigation systems instead of ground-based navigational systems. They provide more direct routes which improves

 **ForeFlight**

Summary
2026.02.09 19:20Z
KPGD to KSOP (IFR) in N7591N
Depart 2026.02.09 20:00Z for 3:33 ETE
Routing: ROGAN LAL JINOS ETORE FEMON **Q87** JROSS FLO

efficiency, reduces fuel costs, and enhances safety. Q-routes are part of the FAA's transition toward satellite-based navigation, replacing the older "J" routes used in the flight levels. They are used widely throughout the U.S. National Airspace System and specifically over the Gulf of Mexico to streamline traffic flows.

So why was N7591N assigned a Q-route at 7,000 feet?

Jeff Van West, VP for Content and Strategy, and his team of very talented ATC experts at PilotWorkshop.com had a couple ideas of what might have happened. As a bit of background, he coached me, "Victor Airways get assigned as shorthand but not the reverse, because the Q- and J-routes have an implicit minimum altitude of FL180."

After Van West's brain-trust of experts at PilotWorkshop.com had battered the event around a little, they developed three possible explanations. Most likely my Q-route was:

- A mistake where an automatic routing was miscoded; it should have excluded pistons but for some reason did not.
- A mistake where someone mis-entered an altitude, perhaps typing 190 instead of 90, which put 7591N in the flight levels. This may have even happened when a controller was manually amending the route ForeFlight filed digitally.
- A lazy (and incorrect) way to simply get 7591N moving in a desired direction, but at low altitude.

"That last one is least likely," Van West concluded. "You were right in declining the clearance—and got rewarded with a direct. How great is that?"

All in all, it's a mystery.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is based in Pinehurst, NC and consults with small airports to improve their performance and sustainability. He's got 4,000 hours in his logbook and usually flies his 1979 Cessna Centurion. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.