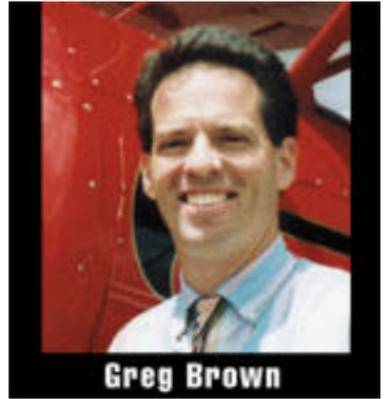


Commentary

Flying Carpet

Rock Art Ranch

"Never did I imagine ever finding myself in a place like this!" said Purna, as we lurched along the rutted cattle track, like characters from a Tony Hillerman Navajo detective novel. "Always I have lived in the city, and this is unlike anything I've ever imagined." My wife, Jean, and I had plucked the young native of India and her fellow graduate student, LeeAnne, from plush Scottsdale, Arizona, where the two were visiting from Chicago.



Together we'd flown from urban landscape to a high-desert plateau, notable from the air not so much for its own featureless surface, but rather for the distant buttes and mountains to which it leads one's eyes.

Parched and treeless below us, high plains rolled like soft flesh to the horizon, slashed here and there by deep incisions cut by water zigzagging through the land. What's down there, I wondered, in those crevices rendered bottomless by harsh desert shadows?

Also scarring Earth's clean-shaven face was a misplaced lunar feature—Meteor Crater. We circled it before landing at Winslow's Lindbergh Airport, laid out by the adventurer shortly after his famous Atlantic flight.

Winslow is a quiet place, sustained by traffic on Interstate 40 and the adjacent transcontinental rail line. We toured the restored railroad hotel there and shot photos at Standing on the Corner Park, where a bronze young man waits eternally with his guitar for the "girl, my Lord, in a flatbed Ford" immortalized in the Eagles song.

Shortly we found ourselves treading gravel toward Holbrook on historic Territorial Road, our plume of dust the only feature piercing grassy barrens except for occasional cattle laying claim to the road. Purna and LeeAnne were astonished at the unbroken horizon, encompassing pink Painted Desert far ahead, distant Navajo Nation mesas to our left, and Humphries Peak 60 miles behind.

Miles later, at a hand-lettered sign, we turned off gravel onto those dirt wheel ruts. Immediately we were impressed by the roughness of the track, especially with nowhere to turn around and the convincing appearance that it led to nowhere but oblivion.

"We can see so far," blurted Purna with alarm from the back seat, "and not a house in sight. I do hope we are not lost!" But then suddenly, from land that had seemed flat and empty only moments before, there appeared a hollow with broken-down buildings and decrepit farm equipment. "Rock Art Ranch," said the old sign passing over our heads.

Waiting to greet us was Brantley Baird, owner and resident since his father bought the place back in '45. Baird's deep blue eyes reach out from under his battered felt hat like those of your favorite uncle, and you know immediately that this man is the genuine article, part of a vanishing breed. I squinted through blistering sunlight at our urban visitors, trying to gauge their thoughts as they shook hands with a *real cowboy*.

Baird showed us an old blacksmith forge, along with cabins from the original Hashknife Ranch that once covered this territory “from over by Flagstaff all the way to the New Mexico border.” When he got to Native American pottery and arrowheads, I knew we were nearing our journey’s goal.

He then led us across sand-and-rock-choked terrain to the brink of one of those incisive canyons that had so intrigued me from the air. So often when flying we peer down into nooks and crannies of the world, wondering what secrets might lie there, if only we could reach them. One of those mysteries was now revealed to us, and it was more delicious even than I had imagined.

There, hidden in the shaded bottom of this narrow channel through parched and desolate terrain, was an oasis — desert rose, cattails, and wild walnut trees arranged like pearls along crystalline Chevelon Creek and garnished with red, white, and yellow wildflowers.

Baird paused reverently to drink at the creek. “Go ahead, have some,” offered the old cowboy, reading our hesitation. “It’s cold, and clean as can be!” He then lead us along blackened sandstone walls, decorated by ancient visitors with the unmistakable outlines of animals, hunters, and hands.

Countless human figures populated those canyon walls, along with the god Kokopelli playing his flute; geometric symbols; and likenesses of deer, bears, snakes, scorpions, and creatures we couldn’t recognize. Most wondrous of all was the image of a woman. Wearing Hopi-style sideknots in her hair, she was unmistakably giving birth to a child. Remembering the deliveries of our own children, Jean and I momentarily shared a bond with that woman, across the centuries.

As we wandered this sheltered Eden, Baird sat in cool shade and relaxed, absorbing our wonder as only the latest beings over thousands of years to seek solace here from the desert sun.

That evening, upon departing windswept Lindbergh Airport for home, we peered intently at the desert below. Mellowed by its position low in the sky, the formerly vicious sun now caressed Earth’s soft skin, accentuating the mysterious scars engraved so raggedly by Chevelon Creek and its siblings. It was easy enough to imagine ancient inhabitants looking up from those dark shadows of Chevelon Canyon. What would they think of us, removed as we are from them by time, culture, and the miracle of flight?

Yet we too had sought shelter in their canyon, and shared emotions common to all humans through their artwork. Perhaps it’s not so strange to feel a connection with those ancient peoples, each of us exploring life in our own ways—they through the miracle of a hidden, water-sparked oasis in their desert, and us attaining that same destination through the time machine of a *Flying Carpet*.

By Greg Brown