



Commentary

Flying Carpet

Birthday flowers

Celebrating life in Death Valley

When celebrating birthdays with zeros in them, flowers alone won't do it. So when Jean marked a new decade this March, I sought a worthy weekend getaway. With most places still wintry, it made little sense leaving balmy Phoenix for somewhere frigid. But then I remembered our wish-list destination of Death Valley, California, tolerable only in winter when everywhere else is too cold. I phoned for a room.

"Sorry," said the agent, "we're booked up for Saturday night. Thanks to record rains, everyone's coming for the biggest wildflower season in years." He offered a room for Sunday.

Tantalized by those blossoms, Jean arranged to take off work Monday. Sunday morning we sailed two and one-half hours westward from Phoenix, escaping rain and icy clouds for increasingly barren terrain.

Bypassing Las Vegas, we descended over the desolate Funeral Mountains into a moonscape of salt flats and mineral-tinted rock. There we spotted Furnace Creek Airport next to a tiny palm-studded rectangle, the only visible green in all of Death Valley. Over salt flats on downwind our altimeter indicated 600 feet — field elevation here is 210 feet below sea level.

"This place is scary," said Jean when we landed. Nary a blade of grass could be seen, and nearby dust devils swirled white with salt. Hoping I hadn't blown our birthday trip, I loaded our bags into the courtesy van. Fortunately, our destination offered haven. Nestled like an emerald fortress against the brutally empty desert, the 1927 Furnace Creek Inn welcomed us with palm trees and a swimming pool.

"Shall we try a hike?" I asked Jean, eyeing bleakness beyond the fence.

"Sure, Greg, why not?" The nearest hiking trail, however, proved to be several miles away. With no rental cars available, we decided to hitchhike. That raised eyebrows at the front desk, but we figured that a hundred miles from nowhere, drivers here could only be sightseers like us. Squinting under an unrelenting sun, we stuck out our thumbs.

Only six or seven cars had passed when an aging Taurus wagon pulled over. Behind the cracked windshield rode a cheerful middle-aged woman and an elderly man wearing a safari hat. Exchanging hellos, we embarked on those uncomfortable first moments when new acquaintances ponder what they've gotten into.

"I'm Jane McEwan," said the driver, "and this is my father, Bill. Did your car break down?" Jean explained that we'd flown here by light airplane and were bound for the Golden Canyon Trail.

"You're pilots, eh?" said Jane. "My friend Dan flies a Piper Arrow, and I've just subscribed to something called *Flight Training* magazine." Bill chimed in, "I used to fly gliders, even built some myself." Jean and I swapped glider-flying tales with the man. Though each of us had first soloed in Schweizer 2-22s, Bill had far surpassed our soaring accomplishments — he flew among the record-setting soaring pioneers around Inyokern, California.

"There's the trailhead," I observed, disappointed that our promising conversation would prematurely end.

"Are you here to see wildflowers?" asked Jane. "That trail is geologically interesting, but there'll be few blossoms. Dad and I are driving to where the big show is supposed to be, about 40 miles south of here. Care to join us?"

"You bet!" Jean and I replied in unison. We soon learned that Bill and Jane had driven from Ridgecrest, California, on a father-daughter daytrip to celebrate Bill's own milestone. "I'll be 90 next week," he explained. Bill was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford when the Germans bombed England in 1940. Evacuated home, he earned a doctorate in physical chemistry at Harvard before serving in North Africa and Italy. After the war, he developed rocket propellants at China Lake Naval Ordnance Test Station for the early aircraft missile programs.

Soon Bill was swapping molecular formulas for various drug families with Jean, a doctor of pharmacy. His business card, however, identified him as a sculptor. Another of Bill's passions explained his love for flowers. "Growers know my invention for propagating orchids, the McEwan Flask."

Out the window, people were wading at Badwater, the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere at 282 feet below sea level.



"Is there always water in this lake?" asked Jean.

"First time I've ever seen water in it," replied Bill. No wonder — with annual rainfall of less than two inches and daytime July temperatures averaging 115 degrees Fahrenheit, Death Valley is the driest and hottest place in North America.

Jane steered for a roadside patch of color. An environmental attorney, her background is as a naturalist. "You pilots will appreciate this 'parachute plant,'" she said. "Note the silky blossoms blowing like chutes in the wind, while the leaves lay flat against the ground." Nearby she identified purple Desert Sand Verbena and pink Desert Five Spot. The biggest show, however, greeted us at the Ashford Mill ruins, where a breathtaking carpet of Desert Gold wildflowers hovered between stark walls of multi-hued rock.

Returning to Furnace Creek, we topped the fuel tank for our new friends and headed to the pool. How incongruous it seemed in this desert oasis isolated by hundreds of miles of uninhabitable salt and rock, toasting life that evening over a gourmet meal.

"It was a wonderful birthday," said Jean as we turned homeward next morning. She kissed me, then pointed downward at a single splatter of blossoms tinting otherwise bleak barrens. "But let's not come back in summertime." Two days later the press would trumpet the biggest Death Valley wildflower explosion in 100 years, and no more rooms would be available there for months. I guess Jean got birthday flowers, after all.

Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His books include Flying Carpet, The Savvy Flight Instructor, The Turbine Pilot's Flight Manual, Job Hunting for Pilots, and You Can Fly! Visit his [Web site](http://www.GregBrownFlyingCarpet.com), www.GregBrownFlyingCarpet.com.

By Greg Brown

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Furnace Creek Airport, elevation minus 210 feet.



"Salt devils" viewed from the Furnace Creek Inn.



Bill and Jane McEwan
at Ashford Mill ruins.



Desert Gold wildflowers near Ashford Mill..