



October 2009

Commentary

Flying Carpet: Cross Country

"Why would anyone want to cross the country in a small airplane?" You could see the question in every nonpilot's eyes when our planned trip came up. It's no surprise they'd wonder why we'd endure long, noisy hours to accomplish missions they so mindlessly suffer by airline. In fact, I've given up trying to explain it: the self-fulfillment, the remarkable land and cloudscapes that entice aviators to pilot their personal steeds to the corners of the Earth.

Only occasionally can Jean and I justify making a cross-the-country journey ourselves. But there's a family gathering to attend in Illinois; Jean has a board meeting in Virginia; and we owe a long-promised visit to our son and daughter-in-law in South Carolina. Along the way are valued friends and business associates to see in three additional states. Sure, it'll take 10 long hours from Flagstaff to Chicago, but from there we'll enjoy efficiently short hops until the long journey home. An otherwise grueling itinerary will become adventure. And there's an anniversary to celebrate.



I've avoided the weather map this week; there's no changing it, so why lose sleep over the possibilities? Thankfully, we had awakened this morning to a rare picture-perfect day for such a long journey. Clear skies stretch at least to Missouri.

No nonpilot can appreciate the elation of staggering skyward with an airplane-load of glorious anticipation, and aiming your spinner toward mysterious lands beyond the horizon. As we steer from Flagstaff across Arizona's crimson crust, our groundspeed pegs at 128 knots, where it will precisely remain for hours on end. True to forecast, not a cloud appears; save one.

"Look!" says Jean, an hour beyond Gallup, New Mexico. Appearing strangely impotent in these cobalt skies, a lone thunderstorm off our wing hurls rain and lightning down upon New Mexico's Mount Taylor.

Over Santa Fe, we peer fruitlessly for a friend's house we hope to visit on the way home. Then we rub shoulders with mighty mountains through the gauntlet of Glorieta Pass. Grand vistas spill open on the other side. How stunning that the razor-sharp Rocky Mountains should yield so abruptly to 1,400 miles of flat and open land.

From here the smooth, latte-colored earth of eastern New Mexico gradually acquires a barely perceptible olive sheen. Jade irrigation circles sprout in the Texas panhandle, growing increasingly dense and colorful with each passing mile. With them begins the road lattice that so characteristically grids our country's midsection.

By now our psyches sag with our fuel gauges toward empty. We recharge amid checkerboard farm fields at Garden City, Kansas; it's painfully flat here, perfectly hot, and much greener than the world we departed a short eternity ago. Joining our Flying Carpet on the ramp are a half-dozen other airplanes criss-crossing the country. Like us, they are just passing through; I wonder how many itinerant aviators ever visit the shaded community of Garden City we admired from the air.

Groomed grain-elevator towns nestle increasingly closer together as we continue east, and our navigational charts blossom with airports. How reassuring to find landing sites and weather reports 30 to 40 miles apart, versus the 100 or more we're accustomed to.

Lime-hued fields transform to emerald across Kansas, then shrink, soften, and turn polychrome in Missouri. Everywhere is the rich artistry of water. In our own desert Southwest, water mostly chisels the pasteroded rocks and scarred arroyos are the footprints and fossils of eons-long events. But here, the life-giving elixir paints in real time with trees, crops, and blooms of every color.

We've monitored the weather all day for the eastern reaches of today's journey; fortunately the few Illinois thunderstorms lie well south of our route and there's an improvement trend. So although we've allowed two days for this trip, we'll press on to Chicago and gain precious time with family.

Stratus appears near the Mississippi River, but with bases at 2,000 feet and tops at 4,000 it's easy stuff. Although it's flyable underneath, we file an instrument flight plan to take advantage of tailwinds on top. Rarely do we tread such glorious cloud carpet; their high-mountain cousins are mostly big, mean, and too tall to top.

I tune our radios for an easy instrument approach into Illinois' Aurora Municipal Airport. Down and down we descend until kissing the white blanket of clouds. Then we hold our breaths and dive in, only to emerge over knife-edged black and green cornfields swathed in the warm lavender of dusk.

After landing we meet family for dinner. It still amazes me that our modest Flying Carpet can make Chicago in one stop, and the East Coast in two. Sure, there are long flight hours between those stops nine and a half since departing Flagstaff but, oh, the sights we've seen.

"You flew all the way from Arizona?" friends and relatives will ask at tomorrow's gathering and every other destination along this journey. It's a curious thing. The same folks who wonder why you'd cross the country by personal airplane are the most admiring when you materialize like leprechauns at their local airport.

"Greg and Jean just piloted their own airplane from Arizona!" they'll echo at every introduction, making us minor celebrities. Although none can verbalize the reasons, maybe they sort of understand why we do it, after all. Either way, here we are on a two-week cross-the-country flying adventure, and this is only the first stop!

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! See more [cross-the-country photos at his Web site](#).

By Greg Brown

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