

FLYING CARPET / By Greg Brown

SKY ISLANDS

'ON THE PATH' TO LAKE TAHOE



Finally, we're off to visit Tom and Laurel!" Jean exclaimed as we climbed westward toward Truckee, California. "I can't believe it's been four years since we've seen them." Among our most treasured friends, the Lipperts live near Lake Tahoe in the crook of California's elbow. It's a desolate 13-hour drive from Flagstaff to

Truckee; although both communities float on cool-and-wooded mountain "sky islands," they are separated by 500 miles of harsh desert. But the Flying Carpet would deliver us there in three and a half hours.

"Remind me; how did you first meet Tom and Laurel?" asked Jean as we skirted the western Grand Canyon. I described how our longtime friendship began with a five-minute meeting at an AOPA convention's cocktail party. Months later, when I wrote Laurel suggesting we connect at an upcoming Reno conference, she'd replied, "Why book a smoky Reno hotel room, when you and Jean can stay in beautiful Truckee with us? While only 30 minutes away, we're high in the Sierra Nevada near the shores of Lake Tahoe."



That invitation changed our lives. Not only did the Lipperts' high-mountain Xanadu later encourage our own move to Flagstaff, but we also soaked up their inspiring example of making the most of life no matter what's thrown your way.

The couple lived hand-to-mouth, one as a freelance writer and the other a photographer, yet somehow they found the resources to fly—Laurel at age 42, and Tom at 60. After briefly owning an Aeronca Champ, they wandered North America in a diminutive Cessna 140 purchased for \$10,000, charming everyone they met along the way. Later they upgraded to a four-place Cessna 170, and most recently a 182. Although prudent with their money, Tom and Laurel feel no pressure to justify their flying obsession to skeptics. When asked, "Why fly?" Tom simply answers, grinning, "Because it's on the path!"

Approaching Las Vegas, we busily scanned for traffic. Huge swaths of restricted airspace block the straight-line course to Truckee, so our favored route is around the edge of congested Las Vegas airspace via the Jean, Nevada, airport, and northwest along the California border.

"Center won't pick you up on radar at 8,500 feet," came the customary parting words from Las Vegas Approach as we disappeared behind Mount Charleston. "They might be able to see you part of the way at 10,500." Radar coverage is often lacking in the vast Mountain West. But with even voice communications sparse along this lonely route, Jean and I plugged into our portable oxygen bottle and climbed higher. When outside of radar flight following, we radioed periodic position reports.

Even the place names reflect the desolation of this route. From the barren Pahrump Valley we navigated the Amaro Desert and Sarcobatus Flat. En route, we peered past Funeral Peak into Death Valley.

Thankfully, we were graced today with gentle southeasterly tailwinds. Along with the added speed came comfort—for once, no turbulent winds spilled over the nearby 14,000-foot, snow-capped Sierra Nevada to batter our craft.

"Remember that time Tom and Laurel loaned us their house while vacationing elsewhere?"

"Sure. Inside their hangar was their car containing detailed directions, entertainment options, preferred local coffee shop, keys, and a map. We swapped our airplane for the car and drove off for a week of adventure. It was like Mission Impossible! I particularly enjoyed hiking Donner Pass, and scoping out antique yachts at the Lake Tahoe

Wooden Boat Show.”

Back then our friends lived downtown, and this would be our first visit to their new home outside of town.

By now, we skimmed rising terrain near Mono Lake. Passing a 14,000-foot ridge, we squinted back across the Owens Valley.

“So there’s Mammoth Lakes,” said Jean, noting the ski community shaded by monumental mountains. “Looks challenging, landing on that little runway in the lee of the Sierra, especially if there’s any wind.”

Soon the Carson Range rose ahead, buttressing the east side of the Tahoe Basin; beyond it floated the startlingly blue waters of the nation’s second-deepest lake. Unlike most lakes, groundbound in deep valleys, Tahoe levitates in a crystal chalice 2,000 feet above the Nevada desert, like a toast to the gods. And you can only fathom that miracle from an airplane.

We threaded snow-frosted Spooner Summit Pass south of Carson City, steered northward over Tahoe’s cobalt waters, skimmed Northstar’s ski slopes, and then plummeted earthward toward Truckee-Tahoe Airport deep in the Martis Valley. I was on short final for Runway 10 when the wind shifted suddenly left, then right, and finally to a tailwind at touchdown.

“Are those squealing tires I hear?” I asked Jean, wincing.

“No, Greg; that’s just wind whistling through the vents.” I was too busy to see if she was smirking.

“The wind’s always squirrely here in the mountains,” said Tom, soothing my bruised ego when he and Laurel embraced us at the self-serve pump. “But hey! We’ve arranged a nice cozy hangar for the Carpet.”

What builds the bond of friendship? I wondered, as we drove off laughing and chatting with our too-long-unseen companions for lunch. Sure, Jean and I are bound to Tom and Laurel by a mutual love of piloting, and thanks to the distance between our far-flung sky-islands, by flying itself. But that doesn’t account for feeling so at home with people we rarely see. Clearly, as Tom would say, our deep-seated friendship is “on the path.”

GREG BROWN’S books include *Flying Carpet*, *The Savvy Flight Instructor*, and *You Can Fly!* Visit his [Web site](#).