



GREG BROWN counts amazing views out the windshield among his top joys of piloting.
GregBrownFlyingCarpet.com

CONSOLATION PRIZE

Our weekend guests Alex and Sabina arrived to unseasonably wet and cold autumn weather.

As with previous visitors, I'd promised Alex a Grand Canyon aerial tour. I mention only Alex because while he and I had flown together before, Sabina had expressed such fear of airplanes that I'd presumptively invited another friend in her place. Saturday, rain confined us indoors. Based on forecast improvement, we designated Monday for hiking and autumn leaf-peeping. That left only Sunday, weather permitting, for flying.



Sunstruck autumn aspens line Arizona's San Francisco Peaks.

Sunday morning, both Flagstaff Pulliam (FLG) and Grand Canyon (GCN) airports reported scattered clouds at 1,700 feet above ground level, roughly 8,700 feet above sea level (msl). While that was adequate for the route, the Grand Canyon Special Flight Rules Area requires a 10,000-foot msl minimum altitude to overfly the canyon.

Lacking pilot weather reports, I explained that we could safely fly to the Grand Canyon, but depending on arrival-time conditions we might not be able to cross. Alex was predictably game to go. Sabina, however, surprised everyone by volunteering to join us—her sister and friends had told her she'd be nuts to miss the Grand Canyon from above.

Although apprehensive, Sabina took the co-pilot seat, usually best for nervous passengers. Noting clenched teeth and hands while taxiing out, I offered to turn around, but she insisted we continue. After takeoff, however, she began peering out the window.

"This is actually OK, Greg," she said as we rounded the San Francisco Peaks northbound. "I could learn to like it if landing isn't too scary." Clouds thinned as we approached the Canyon's South Rim, with bases slightly above 10,000 feet. So we embarked between scattered cumulus across the Dragon Corridor. It soon became apparent, however, that denser clouds blanketed the 1,000-foot-higher North Rim, with tops exceeding 12,000 feet. I reversed course mid-canyon, but "oohs" and "ahhs" suggested that even our brief foray had been rewarding.

"What's it like to fly the plane?" asked Sabina. I briefed her and passed the controls. "Maybe we could fly once more before we go home!" she exclaimed, steering us homeward around the east side of the San Francisco Peaks.

Suddenly off our wing, sunlight pierced fearsome clouds shrouding the snow-slathered peaks, sparking autumn aspen trees to flaming gold. Awestruck, we could all but hear angels sing. Battling turbulence, Jean and I managed a few haphazard photos before joining Flagstaff's traffic pattern. I wrestled bumps and gusts right down to my landing flare, but not even Sabina seemed to mind.

"I want one of those aspen shots you took, if they turn out," said Alex as we stowed the *Flying Carpet*. To think that I'd almost scrubbed the morning's flight. For once the Grand Canyon had been upstaged, and what a consolation prize! **FT**