

FLYING CARPET / By Greg Brown

GRAND CANYON NEW YEAR PAMPERING GUESTS WITH AN AERIAL ADVENTURE



Greg, do you and Jean have New Year's plans? I'm thinking of bringing my girlfriend to Arizona for a few days." It was my brother calling from Chicago.

"We'll be here, Alan, and we'd love to see you. In fact, we've got a party in the works. Come on out!"

"I'm hoping to take Sue for her first visit to the Grand Canyon. How long a drive is that? We also want to lounge at the pool, so that leaves only a day." I explained that the road trip from Phoenix, where we then lived, required four to five hours each way.

"Driving that in one day wouldn't be much fun. Would Sue consider flying?" I knew my brother would, because he's a pilot himself.

"Sure, she'd love that. But could we see much if we flew there? You can't overfly the canyon anymore, can you? And how would we get to the Rim?"

"Leave that to me," I said. "Just get yourselves here, and weather permitting, I promise a day at the canyon that Sue will never forget."



Given our distant and busy lives, Alan and I rarely see each other. When we do, professional obligations often limit our time together. So although Alan and Sue's visit would be brief, Jean and I delighted at the prospect of vacationing with them. What's more, Alan has done many nice things for us over the years. Here was our chance to return the favor.

Immediately I began planning the excursion. You can indeed still fly over the canyon, but only via established corridors. First up was to check my Grand Canyon Special Flight Rules chart for currency.

Identifying those overflight corridors is nearly impossible by visual reference alone, and they don't align with ground-based nav aids. What's more, they don't appear on today's moving-map displays. You must manually program each corridor's unnamed lat-long coordinates into your GPS. (The waypoints remain unnamed because the necessary intergovernmental and tribal approvals make updating the chart prohibitively difficult. The latest edition is from 2001.)

Since few of us program raw GPS coordinates anymore, I'd previously learned the hard way that doing so "on the fly" is time-consuming and distracting. Between its breathtaking views and other sightseeing air traffic, the Grand Canyon is no place to bury your head in the cockpit. Now I enter the corridor waypoints into my GPS before takeoff. This would be my first crossing using a new panel-mounted model, so I reviewed the programming procedures in advance.

The National Park Service shuttles visitors from Grand Canyon National Park Airport to the South Rim only in summertime; fortunately cabs are available. To pamper our guests I made lunch reservations at the historic El Tovar Lodge overlooking the South Rim. All was in place when the four of us launched from Mesa's Falcon Field Airport on the sparkling-clear morning before New Year's Eve.

"Will we really need these winter coats?" asked Sue as we taxied out in 70-degree temperatures.

"You'll see!" Jean chuckled. Northward we soared from sunny cactus-strewn desert up and over the Bradshaw Mountains. Within minutes Sue noted snow on the northerly slopes.

Near Cottonwood the ground dropped dramatically under us into the Verde Valley. Beyond it beckoned the red rock spires of Sedona. Soon we found ourselves eye to eye with bustling ski slopes on 12,600-foot Humphreys Peak,

Arizona's tallest mountain. Ahead lay a green plateau carpeted with snow-flecked Ponderosa pines.

"What's that huge ridge up ahead?" asked Sue, one and a half hours after takeoff.

"It's the far side of the Grand Canyon," said Jean. "The North Rim is 2,000 feet higher than the south side." Everyone gasped when the ground beneath us plunged a mile straight down as we entered the Dragon Corridor, over the deepest and widest portion of the canyon. For eight amazing minutes we ogled the aqua Colorado River meandering far below through its tumbled and striated gold-and-crimson channel.

Again we gasped upon skimming the snow-frosted 9,000-foot North Rim. I looped over copper-hued Marble Canyon, and then back south to explore new vistas through the Zuni Point Corridor.

"Now this is the way to see the Grand Canyon!" said Alan as the ground again fell away. Somehow I remembered to radio for a taxi; it was waiting when we landed. After sightseeing along the South Rim, we savored prickly pear chicken and Navajo tacos on Native American fry bread in El Tovar's elegant dining room. (Seems like rattlesnake appetizers and gourmet mutton stew appeared on the menu, too.)

Among Arizona's charms is the confluence of high-elevation wintertime and balmy desert heat on the same day. After we returned to Falcon Field, our guests squeezed in some afternoon sunbathing.

Having traveled the world, Alan is not easy to impress, but I knew we'd succeeded when after boasting of our adventure to fellow New Year's Eve party guests, he phoned two days later from Chicago.

"Greg, thanks again for an incredible vacation. After discussing it all the way home, Sue and I agreed that you were right: She will never forget her first visit to the Grand Canyon—and neither will I."

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

TRAVEL LOG: GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK (GCN)

Runways: 3/21, 8,999 by 150 feet

Location: Six miles south of the Grand Canyon

Elevation: 6,609 feet

Tower hours: June 1 to September 30, 6 a.m.-8 p.m.; October 1 to May 31, 7 a.m.-7 p.m.