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TONTO NATURAL BRIDGE near Payson, Arizona.



able \$20 each way for the 12-mile drive. Tonto Natural Bridge is reportedly the largest natural travertine bridge in the nation, and possibly the world. Unlike more common above-ground stone arches, Tonto Bridge was sculpted from underneath by Pine Creek. Trees and vegetation carpet its ground-level top, and spring and rainwater percolate through limestone to trickle and shower 180 feet to the underlying creek. Not only does this stunning watery oasis mark an otherwise parched area, but visitors can actually observe the continuum of living vegetation accumulating calcium carbonate and turning to stone. Surrounded by colorful autumn leaves, the four of us savored the bridge from above, then descended to picnic, hike, and scramble through the 400-foot-long tunnel. It's amazing how little known this treasure is both within and outside Arizona.

There's no cell phone service in deep and steep Pine Canyon encompassing the park, so we'd prearranged a pick-up time. When we returned to Payson Airport that afternoon, it seemed far too early to end such an enjoyable day.

"Let's dine with Barry and Susanne at Sedona before heading home," Jean suggested. So we launched our loose flight of two over the near-vertical 2,500-foot Mogollon Rim, and then descended among scarlet buttes to Sedona's dramatic mesa-top airport. We intercepted Susanne and Barry elatedly beaming at the tiedowns—despite many previous visits they'd never before approached from the panoramic southeast, nor so late in the day when the sinking sun transmutes rose rock to crimson.

PICNICKING PILOTS

FUN IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

How far must you fly to have fun? At AOPA Summit last fall, Jean and I dined with Barry Knuttila of King Schools and his wife, Susanne. Over dinner we learned the two fly often from their San Diego home to vacation in Sedona, Arizona.

"We're going later this month," Susanne said. Knowing we live in nearby Flagstaff, she quizzed us about lesser-known regional sights. I suggested Tonto Natural Bridge State Park near Payson, which we've always found fascinating. Our friends hadn't heard of it, so I detailed driving routes. It's two hours over mountain roads from Flagstaff; I estimated 90 minutes each way from Sedona.

"We're staying right at Sedona Airport, and I see Payson's not far as the crow flies," said Barry, consulting his smartphone. "Would you consider joining us if we flew there? Susanne and I could fly directly to Payson coming from California, and you and Jean could hop down to meet us in the *Flying Carpet*." It had never occurred to me to fly to Tonto Bridge given its rather remote location, but Barry later took the initiative to phone around. With no weekend rental cars available at

Payson Airport, he arranged a car service to deliver us to the park.

Barry does some pretty neat piloting. Along with sharing a Beech Debonair with another King Schools executive, he's qualified together with John and Martha King to fly the company's Falcon 10 jet. Barry also instructs for San Diego's Plus-One Flyers flying club. On this trip the couple would fly a twin-engine Piper Aztec Barry manages for a private owner.

Jean and I landed first at Payson Airport on the appointed morning, just 35 minutes after takeoff. When Barry and Susanne arrived in the cherry Aztec, we swapped hangar talk regarding the dip in the runway, collected our picnic lunches, and headed for the parking lot. The personable limo driver charged an incredibly reason-

SURROUNDED BY COLORFUL AUTUMN LEAVES, WE SAVORED THE BRIDGE FROM ABOVE, THEN DESCENDED TO PICNIC AND HIKE.

I made an early dinner reservation at the airport restaurant, in hopes of departing before nearby high terrain disappeared in darkness this moonless night. But between sparkling conversation and leisurely service on a bustling Saturday evening, that wasn't to be. We'd launch from Sedona after dark.

Following dinner, Barry cheerfully directed a flashlight for my preflight. Susanne, however, was apprehensive. No night-flying fan, she offered to loan us their rental car overnight. I thanked her and explained that under other less-favorable circumstances, we'd accept. But Flagstaff is only 20 miles away, the weather was perfect, and I know the terrain. However, Susanne's concerns apparently stirred Jean.

"Are you sure we're OK flying back now?" asked Jean as we peered into nothingness at runway's end. To reassure her, I shared my safety strategy.



BARRY AND SUSANNE Knuttila arrive at Payson Airport, Arizona.

Flagstaff lies north of Sedona and 2,000 feet higher, with rapidly rising terrain. We'd depart downhill on Runway 21, and climb southbound over descending terrain until high enough to safely reverse course homeward.

Satisfied, Jean gleefully clicked her mic button to illuminate Sedona's pilot-activated airport lights. Then we launched into the abyss. Climbing over

the lights of Sedona and Oak Creek until reaching 8,500 feet, I steered north into blackness.

"Is that Flagstaff's airport beacon, already?" asked Jean as we completed the turn. It was, so with the control tower closed she again activated airport lights. The runway materialized just short of town, levitating cosmically in space. We floated surreally to touchdown as if traversing a magical string.

"Wow! Can you believe we only flew 90 minutes today?" I asked when logging the flight.

"That's amazing!" said Jean. Somehow it seems the amount of enjoyment should be proportional to the length of the trip. But today proved that's not necessarily true. 🙄

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year.  (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com).