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HISTORIC JEROME, Arizona, on Mingus Mountain between Flagstaff and Wickenburg.

LEND ME AN EAR

ROMANTIC FLYAWAY TURNS QUIET

Music ranks close behind food, clothing, and shelter among things humans most value. So when a pair of favorite country and bluegrass performers scheduled a concert within *Flying Carpet* range, I booked tickets two months in advance. The performance would take place in Wickenburg, 60 miles northwest of Phoenix. The small desert town is renowned for its Old West character and would offer warm respite from Flagstaff's cold mountain winter. Sensing the opportunity for a romantic "flyaway," I reserved rooms at Rancho de los Caballeros, one of Wickenburg's historic dude ranches.

The next morning I encountered friends Julie and Bob Millis at the Flagstaff Airport. "Where's your airplane?" I asked, noting their empty hangar.

"That's an odd story," said Julie. "Last weekend Bob and I flew to Wickenburg, where we often vacation during the winter. After parking we learned they were repaving the airport ramp, and that our plane would be moved during the process. But they apparently decided at the last moment to close and repave the runway, too. So we had to leave the plane. Bob's driving me back next weekend to get it."

Intrigued at our mutual connection to the tiny town, I discovered the Millises would be there during our musical mis-

sion, so we planned a preconcert dinner. Shortly thereafter I flew Julie to Wickenburg to retrieve her airplane, saving Bob the five-hour round-trip drive. "See you back here in a few weeks!" said Julie.

Prepaying for the concert and lodging had its disadvantages. Even as the weather shaped up nicely for our getaway, I acquired a nasty cold. "Surely you'll be well by next weekend," said Jean, hopefully. Fortunately I indeed felt better by departure day. Despite bitter cold and the need to shovel snow from the hangar, my head had seemingly cleared and I suffered only a runny nose.

Launching on a crystalline Saturday morning, we skimmed snow-frosted pin-

nacles of the Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness, photographed the old Mingus Mountain mining town of Jerome, and threaded the Bradshaw Mountains south of Prescott. Just 50 minutes later, we descended into the warm Sonoran Desert. Wickenburg Municipal Airport lies at 2,400 feet, my lowest elevation since dropping Julie there weeks earlier. Our friends greeted us at the tiny territorial-style terminal.

"How was your flight?" asked Julie.

"Spectacular!" I replied. The only nuisance was my newly plugged right ear, not particularly surprising when landing 4,600 feet lower than our takeoff airport. Surely it would clear in a few minutes.

Bob and Julie dropped us at Los Caballeros. The buildings were utilitarian, but the resort's desert landscaping, colorful furnishings, and Western décor proved unique and welcoming. Hand in hand, Jean and I wandered the grounds, pausing to pet horses at the ranch corral. This was indeed romantic, as verified by Jean's glowing smile. My ear, however, remained plugged. I hoped it would clear by dinner.

We met the Millises that evening in the resort dining room. Over wine and good food, we learned more about our friends—of our common Illinois childhood roots, and how Bob's physics degree had led to an astronomy career culminating in directorship of Flagstaff's acclaimed Lowell Observatory, where Pluto was discovered. Julie detailed her teaching career, and described how an Alaska sightseeing flight had inspired her to become a pilot at age 61 and earn her instrument rating at 67. Julie is especially fortunate to enjoy a supportive and participating nonpilot spouse. Together they fly the Southwest in their Cessna 172.

GENE SCHILDMAYER

With my ear still clogged, however, I was challenged to hear everything in the bustling restaurant and had to glean details from Jean afterward. “I hope this clears before the concert,” I whispered to my wife. But it didn’t. We arrived to a full house, and when the music began I determined that an earplug in my left ear somewhat equalized hearing with my plugged right ear. That’s no way to

enjoy a concert, although the performance proved a pleasure despite the circumstances.

I tossed and turned that night, worrying if I’d be able to fly home the next morning. While ear congestion is less concerning flying to a higher elevation than a lower one, I didn’t want to take any chances. In my dreams I flew endless alternate routes home seeking the lowest

possible en-route altitude. But, given our 7,000-foot home-field elevation, none could save more than 500 feet.

Thankfully, my ear had finally cleared when we awoke. Much as we’d anticipated horseback riding, Jean felt we should depart promptly to preclude any further problems. I took an approved decongestant and we launched home-ward. Soaring over snow-sparkled spires, Jean and I agreed that even a plugged ear hadn’t drained the delight from our romantic getaway. And happily, CDs we’d purchased would allow me to relive the concert with both ears back home. However, Jean said, “About next week-end’s California flight—I think we should postpone it until you’re 100 percent well.” We did. 🚫



JEAN AT the Wickenburg Municipal Airport terminal, Arizona.

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