



May 2009

## Commentary

### Flying Carpet

#### Flight of two

##### Family sightseeing adventure

"What shall we do tomorrow?" I asked our guests. "Should we hike to some prehistoric rock art on the Dixie Mine Trail?" Jean and I lived near Phoenix at the time, and were hosting my sister and brother-in-law, Leslie and Lindsay, and their 14-year-old son, Iain, from Pennsylvania. Joining them were our sons Hannis and Austin, home on vacation, and another out-of-town guest.

"We saw the petroglyphs on our last visit," Lindsay said. "Personally, I'd like to fly to Sedona and go hiking." That was an inspired idea except for one problem — there were eight of us but only four seats in the *Flying Carpet*.

"We do have other pilots here," said Jean, nodding Austin's way. "If only we had two airplanes!" Austin had become a private pilot five years earlier following his junior year in high school. Although having flown only a few personal missions since then, he had subsequently earned glider instructor wings at the U.S. Air Force Academy, and flown extensively with me in the *Flying Carpet*. There was no doubt about his ability to pilot a second airplane. It's just that none of us were accustomed to thinking that way.

"Maybe we can rent one," I said. Austin phoned Mesa's Falcon Field to confirm his rental currency, and to everyone's delight, booked a Cessna 172.

"I get to fly with Austin!" Iain exclaimed upon hearing the news.

"Me, too!" said Jean.

"I'll ride with Dad," said Hannis. Whew! At least someone was willing to ride with me. Ultimately a seat-rotation plan developed, so most who wanted to fly with Austin could do so at least one way.

"This is exciting!" my son beamed as he retrieved his flight-planning materials. "I am a little nervous, though. Despite my flying experience, I've never flown the family on my own before — and never when my piloting skills were central to the mission." Poring over the charts with Austin was his admiring younger cousin.

"Should we reserve a rental car at Sedona?" Lindsay asked.

"That's not necessary," I replied. "One of the most scenic 'red rock country' hikes is within walking distance of the tiedowns — the Airport Loop Trail. No need to pack lunch either; we'll eat afterward at the airport restaurant."

Sedona Airport, widely regarded as one of the most spectacular landing sites in the country, perches like an aircraft carrier atop 400-foot Table Top Mountain, overlooking town. Although wildly popular as a four-state pilot brunch destination, few of its visitors hike the stunning trail that encircles the mesa below its top. There are no better viewpoints for savoring Sedona's scenic treasures.

We decided at Falcon Field next morning that Austin and his passengers would take off first, since the *Flying Carpet*, a Cessna 182, is slightly faster. We also agreed to contact each other on an air-to-air radio frequency, once both of us had cleared the Phoenix terminal area.

"I know Austin's sharp, but are you sure this is safe?" Leslie whispered in my ear as her son climbed aboard Austin's airplane. She was only half-smiling.

"Don't worry, Les," I answered, sharing a hug. "He's an accomplished pilot."

Despite efforts to contact Austin in the air, we next heard his voice when he reported entering Sedona's traffic pattern; he was already tying down the 172 when we landed. "We beat you here, Uncle Greg!" gloated Iain upon running to meet us on the ramp. "Austin is a great pilot, and landing on top of the mesa was awesome!" We swapped high fives walking to the 172.



I greeted Austin with as much of a proud-dad hug as I dared without embarrassing him. "A great flight!" he said. "Though for some reason I was unable to raise you on air-to-air frequency." We concluded that with only one radio in the 172, Austin had already switched to Sedona's frequency when I departed Phoenix airspace. He also described how when he approached the airport, another pilot was taking off in the "wrong" direction, so he'd adjusted his landing pattern accordingly. (Sedona's single runway slopes upward to the northeast. Under light-wind conditions preferred practice is to land uphill to the northeast, and depart downhill to the southwest.) Then my son laughed. "I put all my effort into greasing my landing because I figured you'd be watching, Dad — only to discover afterward that you weren't here yet!"

Gathering hats, cameras, water, and backpacks, our cheerful party walked Airport Road to the parking turnout halfway down the mesa. "This is amazing!" said Lindsay, as we embarked on the trail. "When you said the trail was within walking distance of the airport, I never guessed it could be this spectacular." Gradually we rounded the mesa, taking time out to snack, gossip, and laugh with our rarely-seen relatives. Iain took particular pleasure in videotaping landing aircraft from the trail just below the approach end of the runway.

At the Table Top Trail turnoff our group temporarily divided: Half rested before the breathtaking view, while the rest hiked the headland spur and back. To crown the afternoon we dined on cactus pad salad and prickly pear lemonade on the Sedona Airport Restaurant patio, our dusty hiking clothes contrasting with the more refined dress of other diners.

After renegotiating who would ride back with Austin — Hannis decided to accompany his brother this time — a passing pilot photographed our glowing family with the two airplanes before a backdrop of buttes tinged ruby by the late-afternoon sun.

"Today's hike was even better than I imagined when I suggested coming here," said Lindsay, boarding the *Flying Carpet*. "We'll remember this visit for a long, long time. Now if only I'd gotten to ride with Austin..."

*Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His books include Flying Carpet, The Savvy Flight Instructor, The Turbine Pilot's Flight Manual, Job Hunting for Pilots, and You Can Fly! [Visit his Web site, www.paperjet.net](http://www.paperjet.net).*

**By Greg Brown**

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***Hikers trek Sedona's Airport Loop Trail.***