



TIME MACHINE

REUNITING WITH A LONG-LOST FRIEND

Wow! Nothing's more breathtaking than flying at dawn," said Jean as we leveled after takeoff from Flagstaff. "Check out the sunrise striking the peaks. And how every tree casts a shadow 10 times its height!" Steering into open country, we became time travelers treading a primordial landscape. Suddenly I was grateful for rolling out of bed early this morning, rather than sleeping late.

Today's primary mission was for Jean to train coworkers in Tucson. This would be our fourth flight to the "Old Pueblo" in a month, albeit to different airports for different purposes.

"I'm sure glad to be flying," said Jean, gesturing down at Interstate 17. "Driving would have meant leaving home yesterday and staying two nights for today's meeting. This way we'll be home for supper."

Flagstaff to Tucson is a poster-child airplane trip. Regulars claim they can drive the 270 miles in four hours. That might be true at midnight, but rarely at other times. En route, drivers must negotiate traffic-clogged Phoenix, the nation's fifth largest city, from end to end. And with few alternate routes, horror stories abound of motorists stranded when accidents close the highway. By *Flying Carpet*, however, it's a scenic 90-minute flight.

Such auto traffic might suggest that Arizona overflows with people, but from the air one discovers that development is still mostly limited to urban areas and the few highway corridors linking them. Happily, the majority of the West is still blissfully free of people and development.

Accordingly, it was 35 solitary minutes before we saw our first town, Payson. By

the time Phoenix peeked from under its distant veil of smog, 9,157-foot Mount Lemmon already beckoned from Tucson. Like Flagstaff's Humphreys Peak, Mount Lemmon towers from a level plain. On a clear day, pilots can navigate much of Arizona using just those two tall peaks as signposts. Bound from Phoenix to Benson? Turn left at Mount Lemmon. Going to Winslow? Hang a right at Humphreys Peak. But despite occasional pauses to admire passing mountains, lakes, and deserts, our minds were on other, more important matters.

"If only I could join you and Mark for lunch, Greg. You will tell him I said 'hi,' won't you?"

"Of course I will, Jean! And surely we'll see him more often in the future." We reminisced about meeting Mark Fitch as newlyweds back in Lafayette, Indiana, when he and I were officemates at my first professional job. And about flying Mark and his then-girlfriend to his hometown of Auburn, Indiana, for the Auburn, Cord, and Duesenberg auto festival. We relived that long-ago journey over the farm-field-lined Wabash River, a lifetime away from the rugged Salt and Verde rivers now flowing beneath us. Unfortunately, I'd lost touch with our friend even before we moved to Arizona, and despite repeated attempts, hadn't been able to find him.

Recently, I'd unearthed a faded snap-



THE AUTHOR REUNITES with his old friend Mark Fitch, at Tucson International Airport.

shot from our mutual workplace, and upon sharing it with remaining friends from that distant time, inquired about my pictured coworkers. One, I learned to my horror, had died by suicide not long after the photo was taken. Another had evaporated to San Francisco. "Oh, and Mark Fitch recently moved to your neck of the woods; he lives in Tucson."

What a kick to discover my old buddy nearby! Armed with Mark's location, I tracked him down on Facebook. When Jean proposed today's trip, I knew precisely how to occupy myself during her meeting.

All of our recent communication had been online, so when Mark pulled up to the Tucson Executive Terminal FBO, I



PLUS See a video slide show of Brown's flight.

TRAVEL LOG: TUCSON INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (TUS)

Runways: 3/21, 7,000 by 150 feet; 11L/29R, 10,996 by 150 feet; 11R/29L, 8,408 by 75 feet

Tower: Open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Location: Six miles south of Tucson

Elevation: 2,643 feet



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FLYING CARPET»

found myself accosted by an unforgettable booming voice from 30 years ago. My friend was remarkably unchanged, except his great black beard was now grey, and his hair gone altogether.

“Somehow, Mark, I expected you to pick me up in your yellow Renault Le Car.”

“That old thing? I'd forgotten all about it, Greg!” I couldn't believe whose hand I was shaking. “Let's not waste time finding someplace fancy to eat,” added my friend, “I'd rather spend it catching up.”

Alighting at an old-style diner, we talked careers and photography, families and flying. Mark's no-nonsense delivery hadn't changed, nor his quirky sense of black humor. But I hadn't imagined how much water has traveled under the bridge since we last met. I knew not

I FOUND MYSELF ACCOSTED BY AN UNFORGETTABLE BOOMING VOICE FROM 30 YEARS AGO.

of Mark's wife, Melody, and their 24-year-old son—nor he of my own even-older kids. How could so much time have passed?

“Gotta get back to work,” said Mark, checking his watch. “But I want to see your airplane first!” It seemed appropriate, commemorating our reunion in front of Tucson's nostalgia-inducing 1950s control tower with its neon letters running down the side. It harkens back to when you could tell where you'd landed by the style of the buildings.

“How was it, seeing Mark?” asked Jean upon returning to the airport.

“Incredible,” I said. “I'll fill you in on the way home. But one thing I learned for sure—our *Flying Carpet* is also a time machine.” We strapped into our cozy cockpit, and, inspired by reunion with a grand old friend, reminisced our way homeward into a golden Arizona sunset. ☺

Visit **Greg Brown's** website (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com).