

FLYING CARPET / By Greg Brown

## SCENT OF THE SKY

FLYING TO THE LAVENDER FESTIVAL



Ever heard of the Arizona Lavender Festival, at someplace called Concho?" asked Jean from behind the Sunday section. We were lazily sipping coffee over the weekend paper.

"No, but Concho is over by St. Johns, on the New Mexico border."

"Well, I like lavender, and nothing's happening today. Maybe we should go."

"Sure," I said. "Do you think anyone else would be nutty enough to join us for such an event?"

"Flying to a lavender festival seems pretty far out. In this case I think we should go by ourselves."

Aside from isolated afternoon thunderstorms, the forecast called for clear skies. I phoned ahead for a loaner car, and soon we were aloft. The terrain is largely flat and empty between Flagstaff and St. Johns; marking the hour-long flight were only Meteor Crater and a handful of sun-starved canyons etched by high-desert creeks.



"There are horse trials taking place near the approach end of Runway 32, so we recommend landing Runway 14," replied St. Johns unicom when I radioed for landing. A dapper older gentleman greeted us with the loaner car when we taxied in.

"I'm Gary Platt," he said, vigorously shaking our hands. With buildups already brewing over distant mountains, I wondered aloud whether to install the cockpit cover. "Most days any thunderstorms stay over the mountains until late afternoon," said Gary. "You'll be gone by then."

"This seems like the 'road to nowhere,'" said Jean as we drove through golden grasslands rolling between low mesas and distant mountains. The few vehicles we passed were workaday trucks towing stock trailers. Nearby, cowboys on horseback herded cattle into split-rail pens. Driving 13 miles to the hamlet of Concho went quickly on this quiet highway. Passing mobile homes and crumbling ranchos, we steered from the remote gravel road specified on our newspaper-ad map, onto a single-track ranch lane.

"Do you smell that?" asked Jean as we parked at Red Rock Ranch and Farms. Before us, broad purple carpets shimmered in the sun—and, oh, the fragrance! Along with the expected lavender-colored blossoms, other plants bore blooms ranging from white to royal violet. What a miracle it seemed, in parched Arizona!

"Some lavender varieties are best suited for decorating and personal care products," explained owner Mike Teeple to several dozen enthralled listeners. He described lavender's decorative uses, and demonstrated the distillation process for extracting the essential oil used in lotions, fragrances, and cosmetics.

Next, Teeple turned to medicinal uses. "Lavender is a natural sleep aid, with no side effects," he explained. "It also calms the nerves. When I tried to hire a harvesting crew eight years ago, they initially declined because of all the bees covering the crop. But then I showed them how lavender calms bees." He ruffled a plant dense with foraging insects, to no apparent effect. "That same crew has been harvesting for us ever since."

For lunch I was tempted by organic pizza served from a converted school bus in the ranch yard, until Jean produced homemade chicken wraps from her backpack.

"Join us at our picnic table!" offered a woman we'd earlier seen harvesting lavender from the "U-cut" field. She too had come from Flagstaff, driving three hours each way with her extended family.

Then Teeple stopped by. “Please get out from under these awnings if the wind picks up,” he advised, pointing across cobalt skies to distant thunderheads. “Last year some tents blew down when storms came into the area.” It was only noon—hopefully we wouldn’t encounter weather problems flying home.

After lunch, Christine Teeple demonstrated cooking with lavender, one of the intriguing attractions that had drawn us here. In the process we sampled iced tea, lemonade, brownies, and hors d’oeuvres—all infused with lavender.

The buildups were darker and sported rain shafts when we returned to the airport that afternoon, but they’d approached no closer than when we’d arrived. We rolled the Flying Carpet to the self-serve fuel pump.

“Here, I’ll do that!” said Gary, rushing from the office in a dashing straw hat. Only after he fueled the airplane did Jean notice an oxygen bottle behind the office counter. “Unfortunately I can’t function above 8,500 feet any more, so I had to give up flying,” said Gary, cheerfully waving goodbye.

“Smells great in here!” said Jean as we flew home, gazing down upon the Painted Desert. She nodded toward newly acquired soap and spices, and fragrant lavender plants destined for her garden. “We should make day trips more often, Greg. They are so relaxing.”

“Could it be the lavender?” I asked, feeling mighty relaxed, myself.

“If so, I hope the effect continues at home.” Shortly after landing, Jean was out in the yard planting. But our biggest lavender revelation was yet to come.

“I love lavender!” our daughter-in-law Desi exclaimed upon learning of our adventure. “Wish I could have gone!” Similar exclamations from other women soon convinced us that we could have filled five airplanes for our aromatic excursion. Who’d have imagined that passion for lavender might entice people into the sky? Take a number; we’re now accepting reservations for this year’s festival!

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