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COCHITI RESERVOIR on the Rio Grande, just west of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

PERFECT USE OF AN AIRPLANE

CELEBRATING THE RIO GRANDE

The date had long been marked on my calendar—a Friday night gala in Santa Fe introducing aerial photographer Adriel Heisey’s new book, *The Rio Grande: An Eagle’s View*. Adriel has invested the past 10 years photographing the 1,875-mile river from its Colorado headwaters to the Gulf of Mexico, all from ultralight and Light Sport aircraft.

I was intimately aware of my friend’s tribulations in shooting, refining, and culling some 35,000 photographs for the book, while piloting full time for the Navajo Nation and completing other assignments. Every month or so he’d call and say, “Greg, I’m flying the president to Flagstaff for a meeting today. Can we hang out someplace with Wi-Fi and good coffee?”

Over sandwiches and cappuccinos, Adriel would share his latest milestones, flying stories, and photos for this seemingly endless project, all while uploading images to some phantom editor from his laptop. Often, he had expressed discouragement over the years-long burden of the

massive undertaking, but by next visit he’d be renewed by some new fix of flying and photographing amazing sights along the river. Finally, at the Santa Fe event, Jean and I would experience the long-awaited book of dazzling photographs, essays, and a foreword by Robert Redford.

Shortly before the gala, Jean was invited to attend a professional panel in Huntington Beach, California. “That’s the day before Adriel’s book debut,” I reminded her.

“It’s just a morning commitment, Greg,” she replied. “We can fly to California on Wednesday, get a beach fix, and dine out together. There’ll be plenty of time to

return home Thursday after the meeting, and get to Santa Fe on Friday for the gala.”

That evening over dinner, I boasted to our neighbors Ethan and Susan Braunstein of our upcoming “perfect use of an airplane”—flying west from Flagstaff to the beaches of Southern California, and then east a day later to old Spanish Santa Fe.

“We love Santa Fe!” said Susan, straightening in her chair.

“Do you have any extra room in your backseat?” Ethan said jokingly.

“Sure we do!” I replied, startling them both. Not only are the Braunsteins good friends, but they’re trim—and lightweight companions are well-suited to warm-weather flying out of high-elevation airports. Their company could only add fun to our journey.

That Wednesday Jean and I launched two and one-half hours westward over the Mojave Desert to bustling John Wayne-Orange County Airport, where final approach put us wing tip to wing tip with giant airliners. At Huntington Beach we strolled the surf and dined to a seaside sunset silhouetting the town’s namesake pier. Following Jean’s Thursday-morning meeting, we wandered the beach for another hour before departing for home.

With lots planned for Santa Fe, we rendezvoused with the Braunsteins early Friday morning. Never have more enthusiastic passengers graced our cockpit.

“We’ll be in Santa Fe by 10 a.m.!” exclaimed Susan. “This is normally a seven-hour drive!” Sparkling conversation and high-desert sightseeing condensed our two-hour flight into what seemed mere minutes. To our delight, the Braunsteins took command after we landed at Santa Fe Municipal Airport. We checked into their favorite inn, toured their favorite Canyon

SANTA FE MUNICIPAL AIRPORT (SAF)

Runways: 2/20, 8,342 by 150 feet; 10/28 6,300 by 75 feet; 15/33 6,307 by 100 feet

Elevation: 6,348 feet
Location: Nine miles southwest of Santa Fe

Tower hours: 0800-1630 every day
Fees: Tiedown

Road art galleries, and lunched at their favorite restaurant.

At the Santa Fe Convention Center that evening, Jean and I joined a sellout crowd stylishly attired in Santa Fe formal. For men that meant anything from blue jeans to suits, trimmed with bolo ties. Women sported long skirts with bold silver and turquoise jewelry. And, of course, western-style dress boots were *de rigueur* for everyone. Beyond a gauntlet of silent-auction items, we found Adriel and his wife, Holly, ensconced at our table.

“Where’s your book?” I asked.

“Don’t you dare buy one!” said Adriel, smiling but not joking. “I’ll personally give you a copy.” He had none handy, but Jean unearthed a sample near the stage. We’d barely cracked the glossy cover when the emcee ushered everyone to their seats.

Following dining, speeches, and a live auction, Adriel stationed himself before a long autograph line. “I’ll bring your book to breakfast tomorrow,” he called.

Saturday morning we convened at another Braunstein favorite, Café Pasqual’s, but Adriel and Holly were nowhere to be seen. “We can’t make it,” said Adriel when I phoned their hotel room. “I never guessed how tired I’d be after last night’s excitement.” The rest of us savored *chiles rellenos* and gourmet corned beef hash before launching for home.

“There’s the Rio Grande,” observed Jean shortly after takeoff.

“Which reminds me, Greg,” said Ethan. “Is Adriel’s book within reach so Susan and I can see it?” Jean and I raised eyebrows at each other, and laughed.

“You won’t believe this,” I said, “but Adriel has yet to give us our treasured book, and we’ve hardly seen one ourselves.” Oh, well, that’ll offer another opportunity to celebrate, when Adriel comes to Flagstaff. As for the Braunsteins, within a day of our return they’d touted our Santa Fe flying adventure throughout the neighborhood. Nothing beats a *Flying Carpet* for important missions of friendship. 🐉

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