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**MAX AND SERGIO** Schaar with their Cessna 172, the *Green Hornet*, in Flagstaff, Arizona (left).

**CHLOE AND ANGUS** Watson at Monument Valley, Utah (next page).

## 'FLYING CARPET' TOUR

### THE GREAT AMERICAN FLYING VACATION

**N**othing beats exploring the world from the cockpit of a personal airplane. Sure, there are endless regional diversions to draw us aloft, but who among aviators doesn't aspire to grand aerial journeys, and treasure the memories of those made in the past? For unlike airline travel, piloting is as much about the voyage as the destination.

Last summer I heard from Angus Watson, who with his wife, Chloe, was planning a flying vacation from Chicago through my neighborhood: the desert Southwest. We discussed their intended route and associated terrain and weather considerations. But not until Angus shared their online photo album afterward did I realize that he and Chloe had just completed a "Great American Flying Vacation." Their dozens of amazing ground and aerial photos reminded me that such journeys are at the core of why we learn to fly, but at the same time have become disappointingly rare.

The Watsons invested \$6,000 in their 16-day, 3,000-mile vacation, including 27 hours in their flying club Cessna 182, avgas, car rental, and lodging.

"We chose to stay at some pricey hotels—Santa Fe's La Fonda, The View in Monument Valley, and the Grand

Canyon's El Tovar Lodge," explained Angus "But, compared to a premium two-week cruise or tour, this vacation was a bargain. And as they say in the ads, how do you value piloting an airplane over Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon, and Canyonlands National Park? Priceless!"

Then last fall, San Antonio pilot Sergio Schaar wrote me about "touring the beautiful Southwest by air. I have great interest in flying from San Antonio to Monument Valley during March spring break with my 13-year-old son Max in my 1971 Cessna 172." He expressed concerns, however.

"I love traveling to new places and I love adventure, but I'm also a conserva-

tive newly minted instrument pilot who always puts safety first. I am concerned about mountain downdrafts, high density altitudes, the tricky approach into Monument Valley's one-way airport, aircraft performance if I need to fly instruments at high minimum en route altitudes, winds aloft exceeding 30 knots, rapidly changing weather, not to mention being in the middle of nowhere... and, of course, my own limitations. Greg, do you think it would be stupid and crazy for a 300-hour flatland pilot like me, who has never flown in high elevations and mountainous terrain, to try a trip like this? Too ambitious, maybe?"

"Of course not," I replied. "This is why you became a pilot!" After answering Sergio's questions, I introduced him to Angus, who shared insights and encouragement from his recent experiences flying a similar route. The subsequent three-way burst of emails, posts, and phone chats sparked my interest in Sergio and Max's version of the Great American Flying Vacation. Enthusiastically, I traced Sergio and his son's progress from San Antonio to Santa Fe, Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon, and Sedona. At each stop they texted arrival and departure news, and stunning photos captured along the way. A personal highlight was their landing at Flagstaff to meet Jean and me.

"My wife, Deanna, calls this the *Green Hornet*," Sergio said of his knockout metallic-green Skyhawk, "although a hornet doesn't sound fast enough for me!" Over Navajo tacos at the old Weatherford Hotel, Sergio and Max recounted

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their never-to-be-forgotten father-son adventure. Then I suggested sights and destinations along their southern route home via El Paso.

“Of course I want to see anything relating to your stories, Greg. After all, this is the *Flying Carpet* tour to trace the adventures in your column.” Noting my surprise, Sergio explained: “It all started when I complimented you on some Southwest aerial photos you posted on Facebook last fall, and you said, ‘You need to fly to Arizona sometime and see it yourself!’”

To my amazement and delight, I learned that Sergio’s itinerary was constructed entirely of destinations from his favorite *Flying Carpet* tales.

“I’m still savoring the echoes of our journey,” wrote Sergio upon returning to San Antonio. “There’s so much to think and reflect about. What a great feeling!” Traveling on a budget, the



Schaars completed their five-day tour for \$1,950, some \$500 less than Sergio’s estimate for flying commercial and renting cars. Once the door to personal air travel has opened, you can’t close it—Sergio is teaming up with another pilot to fly to EAA AirVenture in Oshkosh this summer.

It’s difficult justifying such flying adventures to nonpilot friends. “Wouldn’t it be cheaper to drive?” they ask. “Or faster to go by airline?” It’s

hard to convey the joy, adventure, and rewards of cross-country flying in terms the uninitiated can understand. Yet who could feel greater personal glory than Angus stepping from his Skylane following such an adventure, Sergio disembarking from the *Green Hornet*, I from the *Flying Carpet*, or you from your own favorite aerial steed?

When your spouse next suggests a cruise, consider flying vacations you can make for a similar investment. Fly to the nearest beach? To a Caribbean island? To Alaska? Then as appropriate, negotiate a rental-plane discount, invite good friends to share expenses, and launch on your own Great American Flying Vacation! 🛩️

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