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**A LATE-SEASON** snow squall threatens Sedona Airport in Arizona.

# SMALL FLIGHT TURNS BIG

BETTER THAN A SUNNY DAY

**B**y car, Sedona, Arizona, is 45 minutes on winding mountain roads from Flagstaff. But by *Flying Carpet*, it's fewer than 20 miles and takes 10 minutes. The small distance, however, belies the grandeur of the flight. Forested Flagstaff graces the southwestern Colorado Plateau, while sunbaked Sedona edges the Verde Valley far below the plateau's red-rock rim. To fly there you cruise cool pines for five minutes, launch over a 2,200-foot precipice, and plummet a half-mile downward between scarlet spires to Sedona's mesa-top "aircraft carrier" runway.

Videographer Derek Ellis and I had been filming at Flagstaff Airport under partly cloudy skies this unseasonably cool morning. The forecast called for gusty winds and midday snow showers, so we'd agreed to shoot on the ground today and film aloft tomorrow, which was to be sunny and warmer. After capturing hangar and preflight shots, Derek wanted to test our cockpit audio setup for tomorrow's aerial recording. So he took the co-pilot seat and I cranked up the engine. *So much for that forecast bad weather*, I thought, scanning high broken clouds.

It seemed like a shame not to fly when we were sitting there with the engine run-

ning. I asked Derek if he was willing to go up for a look. If conditions were favorable, we could do some filming. If not, we just fine-tuned the audio. My friend showed thumbs-up, so armed with my previous weather briefing we taxied for takeoff. No sooner had we cleared the trees than it was obvious the weather was good for miles around. What's more, shafts of sunlight streamed between the clouds, and the air sparkled clear for filming.

I steered to where scenic Sedona huddled out of sight beyond the rim. Within minutes we cleared the cliffs, and Derek excitedly filmed the freshly revealed red rock paradise on his first-ever light

airplane flight. When he finished, I suggested we land for breakfast at the airport restaurant.

Sedona's runway slopes upward to the northeast. Since slope generally trumps light winds when it comes to runway performance, Sedona traffic normally lands uphill on Runway 3, and departs downhill on Runway 21. There are various rules of thumb for estimating when winds should override slope in determining takeoff and landing direction. Some pilots use 10 percent of touchdown or rotation speed as their limit for arriving or departing with a tailwind, while others round the number to a simple 10 knots. With today's breeze southwesterly, I elected to land uphill with a light tailwind.

Over huevos rancheros and plenty of coffee, we discussed Derek's upcoming graduation from Northern Arizona University, and his filmmaking career plans. Then, some 35 minutes after arriving, we moseyed out the restaurant door toward the airplane.

"Whoa! Look at that!" said Derek. To our astonishment, a massive snow squall loomed ominously from the northwest. With skies still fair in other directions, I hurriedly phoned Flagstaff's automated weather station—it, too, reported good weather, so as long as we departed before the storm enveloped Sedona Airport there'd be no problem getting home. What's more, clear alternates lay in every other direction. So we hurried to the airplane; I checked the oil, started the engine, and we taxied out.

By now, however, outflow from the snow squall had reversed the winds to

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northerly. Launching uphill into higher ground shrouded by a snowstorm was out of the question, so I opted to depart downhill with a near-maximum tailwind. Sedona's generous 5,100-foot runway, plus descending terrain and clear weather to the south, made the decision easy.

By the time we reached the Runway 21 run-up area, occasional massive wet snowflakes splashed on our windshield. Briskly, I completed my pretakeoff checks and reached for the mic, but at that instant another airplane reported a two-mile final for landing. Given opposing traffic at this "one-way" airport, we lingered for two nail-biting minutes. Fortunately the snow was moving slowly. The other airplane landed; we took off and turned northeast to bypass the storm. After takeoff, Derek and I ogled silvery snow squalls pummeling crimson buttes. Upon reaching safe altitude, the two of us filmed and photographed in awe.

As it turned out, we had to steer northeast all the way to Mormon Lake before circumventing the weather, meaning our 20-mile homeward flight blossomed to more like 50. Even when we finally turned toward Flagstaff, the spectacle wasn't over. North of the city, the San Francisco Peaks beckoned from a cloak of clouds and snow, but south of town the airport boasted good visual conditions—as it had all morning. One last piloting challenge remained. Flagstaff's winds now gusted strongly from the west, variable in direction a full 180 degrees from southwest to northeast.

"We'll rock and roll all the way to the runway," I explained to Derek, "and likely touch down on the right wheel." I knew I could handle it, but wanted to prepare my novice passenger.

"That was incredible!" said Derek, speaking for us both as we taxied in. "Oh, and no need to film tomorrow; I got some amazing footage!" Our small flight had become a big one—and to think we'd considered postponing it for a "better" day. 🧐

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

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