A pilot buddy recently launched on a 1,000-mile cross-country. Like most pilots, he greeted his first extended light-plane journey with both excitement and trepidation. He studied route and airspace, calculated fuel and weight and balance, took two written tests, and checked out in a Diamond DA40. Although initially apprehensive, he phoned me exhilarated following his solo landing practice.

“That was so much fun I can’t believe it!” he said, detailing each successive landing like a newly soloed pilot. “Now I’m stoked to fly that cross-country!” My friend and his family live in southern New Mexico, 10 hours’ drive from relatives. When he mentioned that private flying would be perfect for such trips, his wife encouraged him to join the local aero club. This first mission would be to collect her and the kids from visiting her folks in Dallas.

The morning my buddy rotated from Alamogordo, his wife and I tracked his progress online. He texted a “thumbs-up” photo refueling at Roswell, complete with “fighter-jockey” grin, and later landed uneventfully at McKinney National Airport (KKI).

Flying home on Sunday, however, he and his family were battered by headwinds. Unforecast crosswinds diverted them from his planned fuel stop to unattended Terry County Airport (BFE), where they landed in 38-knot gusts.

“The wind is howling like a banshee!” he texted from the terminal building. “Everyone did great, though, except when my wife shrieked during my one-wheel crosswind touchdown. Ours is the only airplane on the ramp, with just three airport dogs for company. Thankfully the airport manager loaned us a car to go eat lunch.” After waiting fruitlessly for calmer winds, they overnighted in nearby Brownfield. The following morning, they breezed two hours home to Alamogordo.

While such adventures are familiar to general aviation fliers, I should mention that this fellow is an Air Force F–16 instructor pilot. What a kick that someone who’s flown the globe in fighter jets should find adventure in the “little airplanes” you and I fly.

My friend earned his private pilot certificate in high school, but last commanded light aircraft in college. Joining me in the Flying Carpet several years ago, he joked that “these things fly so slow on approach I feel like we’ll fall from the sky.” Still, he loved it, so I asked him how a lowly Cessna could be fun compared to an F–16.

“Flying the jet is awesome,” he replied. “But we’re always on missions, being evaluated. You, however, get to launch when and wherever you like and savor the views. Best of all, you can take friends and family.” Indeed, this Dallas trip was his first opportunity to fly his wife in their 10 years together.

Light planes require radically different speed and power management than jets, different landing flare and crosswind techniques, low- versus high-altitude weather evaluation skills, and visual flight and airspace planning. All these were “new” to my friend after 15 years away, and it was inspiring to see how professionally a U.S. Air Force pilot refreshed those skills to safely transport his family. Best for me, however, was finding that “low and slow” is as exciting for a fighter jockey as it is for the rest of us.