



PLUS See the Grand Falls and Roden Crater in this slideshow.

AT 185 FEET, Arizona's Grand Falls is taller than Niagara (note cars in foreground), but flows in volume only a few times a year.

field of vivid yellow wildflowers bordering Lake Mary southeast of town. I diverted in that direction and sailed over the sea of golden blossoms. Floating in their midst like a spidery space station was the Navy Precision Optical Interferometer, an observatory that collects starlight from distant galaxies via widely dispersed light tubes, and calculates their distance from Earth via parallax.

Following a joyous few minutes savoring chrome-yellow flowers, I departed Flagstaff's pine forest over high desert to intercept the Little Colorado River. I found it chiseled as if by a coping saw through crimson rock north of Winslow. Tracing the channel toward its distant Colorado River junction, I almost missed Grand Falls, as it proved virtually invisible from the upstream side. But for whatever reason, I happened to glance back. To my surprise and delight given the dry summer weather, the falls flowed vigorously.

Not until spotting a pair of sightseer autos overlooking the waterfall did I fully comprehend its scale from the air. I was

SUMMER SIGHTSEEING

NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST

Once or twice a year I hear of friends visiting Grand Falls, a seasonal waterfall on Arizona's Little Colorado River. Although the little-known 185-foot desert cataract is taller than Niagara Falls, it runs in volume only occasionally following mountain snow-melt, monsoon thunderstorms, or rare widespread rain.

Jean and I have always wanted to visit the landmark, but have been hampered both by its ephemeral water flow and the tortuous drive over primitive roads to reach its remote location northeast of Flagstaff. The rugged journey favors high-clearance vehicles, and traveling in pairs in case of breakdown. Invariably we either hear too late that the falls have been running, or are otherwise committed when invited to go.

Given the magnitude of the waterfall when flowing, I'd always assumed it would also be exciting to view from the air. But it's not marked on sectional charts, nor many other maps for that matter, so finding it seemed a task in itself.

Then one late-summer morning I found myself desperate to fly. Armed with a new camera that demanded testing, I decided on a lark to seek out Grand Falls and mark it for future reference in my GPS navigator. There'd been little rain lately, so I

didn't expect the falls to be running. But knowing their location would be useful for a future aerial visit when the right opportunity arose.

I first gleaned general coordinates and nearby landmarks via Internet search. I also knew the Little Colorado River runs northwestward from Winslow to ultimately join the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. By intercepting the Little Colorado near Winslow and tracing it downstream, I should easily find Grand Falls.

The instant I departed the ground, I knew I'd picked the right day to fly. The sky sparkled cobalt, punctuated by snowy puffs of fair-weather cumulus. No sooner had I turned downwind for departure than I was mesmerized by a huge



LATE-SUMMER wildflowers tint the Coconino Plateau near Flagstaff, Arizona.

also intrigued by the cascade's unusual configuration, spilling 90 degrees from a wide, lazy stream into a narrow rock chute. Masses of mud tinted the torrent umber; no wonder the cataract is nicknamed "Chocolate Falls."

After obsessively orbiting and photographing the falls, I finally broke free of their spell and steered westward toward the San Francisco Peaks and home. But hardly had I turned when distracted by another remarkable sight—a splash of raw vermilion punctuating the barren landscape.

Renowned artist and pilot James Turrell, who works exclusively in the medium of light, years ago purchased Roden Crater—a volcanic "cinder cone" east of Flagstaff—and embarked on a long-term project to craft a giant art piece out of it. Inspired by the celestial alignments of New Mexico's Chaco Canyon and other native ceremonial sites, Turrell sculpted the crater and pierced it with concrete-lined light channels penetrating to the interior. In the process, the cone's weathered surface was excavated, revealing raw red volcanic cinders visible from miles away. (Hopefully Turrell's masterwork will one day open to the public.)

I'd overflowed Roden Crater before but only randomly, and now mentally fixed its location just west of Grand Falls. Again I circled and took photos. Then I returned to sightsee town from aloft, practice a few landings, and spoil myself with that occasional but eternal joy of flyers: scoping my house from the air. As one who is so often destination-focused, it was a rare pleasure rambling local skies for an hour on this heavenly morning.

Such aerial attractions beckon to all aviators on lazy summer days, wherever they may roost. It's just a matter of discarding the practicality of a destination, and rising to the occasion. Taxiing in, I remembered the rich words of J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote, "Not all those who wander are lost." 🐉

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