

FLYING CARPET / By Greg Brown

## FLIGHT OF CONTRASTS

VISITING THREE WORLDS IN ONE WEEKEND



“Hopefully we won’t get clobbered by an F-16,” said Jean. Our eyes darted anxiously outside the cockpit while traversing western Arizona’s Bagdad 1 Military Operations Area. Jean had a business meeting in sunny San Diego, so we’d delightedly packed our swimsuits for this excursion from our chilly mountain town of Flagstaff.



“You’re beneath the military airspace at that altitude,” said the Albuquerque Center controller, but his words were only slightly reassuring. Our chart showed the MOA’s floor at 7,000 feet above sea level or 5,000 feet above ground—here, over mountainous terrain, who knew whether fighter jockeys could interpret that ragged bottom any better than we could? But to bypass the massive chunk of airspace would require a huge detour.

Soon after emerging from it, we found ourselves flying the trackless Mojave Desert. Jean and I contemplated the austerity of this route, including 200 miles of barrens with hardly a road, much less any airport in sight. Two fragments of civilization broke the remote crossing—a sliver of green lining the Colorado River, and lonely Interstate 10 between Blythe and Palm Springs, California. Otherwise, nothing passed our windows but low and leaden mauve-hued mountains drifting in an endless ocean of golden sand. Then suddenly, from this tortured gray-and-ochre treadmill burst a startling flash of cobalt blue.

“The Salton Sea!” said Jean as we embarked over 15 incongruous miles of water. “It looks so refreshing after all that desert; hard to believe it’s saltier than the ocean.” Those new to Southern California are often surprised to discover that the state is mostly desert with just a thriving ribbon of coastline. Following three hours over bone-dry desert and that one undrinkable splash of saltwater, the San Diego basin materialized like paradise beyond the Laguna Mountains. Just 15 sea-misted minutes later we touched down at Montgomery Field Airport.

Swapping jeans and flannel for shorts and T-shirts, we soaked up sun along the shore and dined with friends in the city’s historic Gaslamp Quarter. Afterward, we wandered the bustling Friday-night streets and chuckled at multitudes of “Critical Mass” bicyclists commandeering Fifth Avenue to the chants and drumming of Hare Krishnas. After Jean’s meeting the next day we savored seafood at the Embarcadero Marina with our son, Hannis, and his friend.

We slept late on Sunday morning, and after breakfast launched at noon—but not for home. Shortly before departing Flagstaff we’d learned that Jean’s nephew, Travis, from Illinois would arrive in Phoenix Sunday afternoon for a professional meeting. Although it meant completing our trip at night, we’d exploit the rare opportunity to see him on the way back.

The well-traveled route to Phoenix seemed downright comforting after Friday’s remote journey. Sure, much of the way is brutal sand-dune desert, but east of the Laguna Mountains the terrain is mostly low and flat. What’s more, welcoming airports dot the Imperial Valley and Interstate 8. Cool and comfortable at 9,500 feet, we pondered the plights of pre-air-conditioning motorists who crossed the searing sands beneath us on a short-lived plank road built at the turn of the last century.

Postponing our descent into desert heat until the last possible moment, we landed at Deer Valley Airport. Despite having lived 20 years in Phoenix, returning to monumental cacti and 107-degree Fahrenheit heat was still a shock following Flagstaff’s cool pines and San Diego’s lush flowers and balmy breezes. We rendezvoused with Travis at his

hotel pool, and together enjoyed a delightful few hours catching up on news of his career; his wife, Ashleigh; and their pending first baby.

“Let’s get as far as possible before dark,” I said, when Travis departed for his meeting. Along with acclimating to darkness, it’s nice knowing that everything’s working well before facing nightfall over hostile terrain. We launched our Flying Carpet into the embers of a blood-red sunset and steered northward to follow twinkling taillights on Interstate 17. The final rays of twilight evaporated just north of Black Canyon City.

“How high are the mountains around here?” asked Jean, peering anxiously into the inky abyss. “I expected more help from tonight’s half moon.”

“Me, too. Maybe some forest-fire smoke is obscuring visibility.” Although our GPS display showed all terrain at least 2,000 feet beneath us, you can’t help but pucker on such an ebony night.

We breathed relief when Sedona materialized alongside Interstate 17’s ribbon of auto headlights descending the 2,000-foot shoulder of the Coconino Plateau. Floating surreally above it all were the green and white flashes of a distant airport beacon.

“We’re almost home—there’s Flagstaff on the plateau,” said Jean. “Good thing we know the terrain or this could be disorienting.” Soon afterward a regional airliner reported inbound behind us, followed by an air ambulance flight. Assigned “number one to land,” I made a short approach.

“It’s cold here!” exclaimed Jean upon opening the door. “What an amazing trip,” she added, “visiting three such different worlds in a single weekend. If ever our airplane felt like a true magic carpet, this flight was it!”

**GREG BROWN’S** books include *Flying Carpet*, *The Savvy Flight Instructor*, and *You Can Fly!* Visit his [Web site](#).