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DON ENJOYS the Crosswinds Restaurant's "million-dollar view" at Payson Airport, Arizona (PAN).

MILLION-DOLLAR BRUNCH

OH, THE SIGHTS WE SAW

Except for two brief local hops, I haven't flown in a month. First rain stopped me, then weeks of winds gusting as high as 48 knots. Today I awoke to the first beautiful morning in forever. I long to fly! I've scheduled routine avionics maintenance next week in Prescott—perhaps they could take me today instead. Nope. I call but they're too busy.

"Jean, want to fly somewhere for breakfast?"

"No, I'm playing tennis this morning." (No kidding; she really says that to me all the time.) *OK, if I can't find anyone to join me I'll go myself. No way am I letting a morning like this pass after being grounded for weeks, mission or not.* I grab a weather briefing to Payson. It's a mere 30-minute flight, but scenic, and the field's Crosswinds Restaurant boasts great affordable food and a "million-dollar view" of the towering Mogollon Rim.

Who might consider joining me for such a mission, at the last minute on a weekday morning? It's a long shot, but I phone my nature-photographer buddy Don Hill. He and Barb are usually booked, but today she's out of town visiting relatives.

"Yeah, I'd love to go, Greg. I'll just load my camera with a fresh memory card and battery and meet you at the airport."

Don starts snapping photos as our wheels leave the ground. It's bumpier than I expected, but Don says it doesn't bother him. I guess a guy who served in the U.S. Navy aboard river ships in Viet-

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nam has experienced worse than a little turbulence.

"What's that canyon beneath us?" he asks, a few minutes out. I dial up my tablet sectional chart and identify the Beaver Creek Wilderness Area. Turns out Don and Barb have hiked it (along with nearly

every worthy wilderness hike around)—and with llamas, no less.

"I love maps!" he says, peering at the device. He recounts navigator training in the Navy. Next thing you know we're looking for an old "PHX→75" airmail mileage marker atop the Mogollon Rim. I've seen it only once before and achieved nothing better than a blurry cellphone shot, but together we manage to rediscover the landmark. I ask Don to record it for posterity.

We touch down on Payson Airport's trademark dip-in-the-middle runway, and settle at a window table in the Crosswind Restaurant. There we take in the "million-dollar view" and swap stories over omelets and corned beef hash. As a friendly server tops off our coffee, I reminisce to Don about how cooks here once answered unicom from the kitchen. Along with collecting winds and active runway to the crackle of frying eggs, inbound pilots could reserve tables and radio breakfast orders from the air. Afterward we photograph each other before the stunning Mogollon Rim backdrop, and laugh together at the longstanding Payson "Pilot Weather Rock."

With Don's camera at the ready, we take off to explore additional landmarks on the way home: Tonto Natural Bridge, largest travertine bridge in the world; Apache Maid Mountain's lonely fire lookout tower; and Stoneman Lake, currently dry but one of only two natural lakes in all of Arizona.

Clouds are building over Flagstaff as we approach, there's virga, and it's getting big-time bumpy. I ask Don how he's holding up.

"Fine, Greg. What do you have in mind?" I propose that we steer west of town for shots of his house, the pond where he photographs birds, and the caldera he and Barb favor to hike. With no other aircraft around, Flagstaff Tower approves our mission. Don readies his camera with excitement as I steer over the white-domed U.S. Naval Observatory, and then shoots on "continuous" as we twice circle his neighborhood and nearby caldera, overfly town, and return to land.

We've logged hardly more than an hour aloft, yet it's been a blissful morning just goofing off over Northern Arizona. After we install the airplane in its hangar, I suggest that Don head home, unless he really wants to stick around while I clean the windshield and update the logbook.

"I actually have lots of things to do," he says straight-faced, and then breaks into a grin. "Like checking out all the photos we just took, on my computer!" Over the coming days he'll distribute no fewer than four email blasts to his family and friends, each detailing a phase of his fleeting flying adventure with "Cap'n Greg," and illustrated with annotated photos enumerating "the sights we saw." (If only his shot of the ethereal PHX→75 marker had turned out. I still can't prove it exists.)

I've never liked the term "\$100 hamburger," especially used in front of nonpilots, because it trivializes the incredible joy of flight down to eating an overpriced sandwich. But I've just savored a delightful morning aviating with a dear friend—an otherwise routine flight made magical through the eyes of an enthusiastic passenger. Of course the views from aloft were even better than those at the restaurant, and Don helped me see them anew. A million-dollar brunch? Now that makes sense! 🗣️

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