

## Postcards

# A Western Adventure

## Exercise your pilot privileges on a scenic trip

**BY COLLEEN BACK** (From [AOPA Pilot](#), February 2003.)

Private pilot Philippe Archambault lives in Hong Kong and enjoys flying light aircraft throughout the world. One of his favorite memories is of his first day of flying on a Parkwest Air Tour in the southwestern United States. "I felt like I was leaving for a fantastic adventure — like the first visitors to the Southwest might have felt a couple centuries ago," recalled Archambault. "We took off from Grand Junction, Colorado, and flew over a high concentration of [national] parks — Arches, Canyonlands, Natural Bridges, Monument Valley. Flying over the rocks of Monument Valley will remain one of my best flying memories ever."

"My favorite day has to be the day we flew over Glacier National Park," said Rick Kelty, beaming. "Flying around Glacier, I was soaring like the world's biggest eagle out there. Just wonderful."

Archambault, AOPA 3519941, and Kelty, AOPA 667468, are typical "non-typical" pilots who have participated in different vacations operated by Parkwest Air Tours. The company runs all-inclusive flying tours throughout the western United States and Mexico.

Consider this: Kelty is 56, lives near Los Angeles, and flies his 1973 Beechcraft Bonanza F33A for recreation. He has 1,300 hours and is an instrument-rated commercial pilot. By contrast, Archambault is a 30-year-old Frenchman living in Hong Kong. He got his certificate in Florida two years ago, has about 170 hours, and rents Cessna 172s when he flies on vacations throughout the world.

"We really don't have a 'typical' pilot who flies with us," said Collin Fay, who owns Parkwest Air Tours with his wife, Marisa. "Most of our clients have not flown in the West, but they have wanted to, and chose us to help them make it happen. They range in experience from 100 hours to 14,000 hours."

The Fays founded Parkwest Air Tours in 1999. Collin is a soft-spoken, 44-year-old mining engineer by trade and a CFII and 14-year veteran of flying in the West. Marisa is a private pilot, and at 34 is full of drive and energy. The two met in 1993 in Arizona. They began dating and taking flying trips, which encouraged Marisa to buy an AOPA Air Safety Foundation Pinch-Hitter® video to learn the basics of flying. Her continued interest led to more lessons and later, her certificate. In 1997, the couple lived in Uruguay and took a flying trip in Australia — this proved to be their inspiration to start a business. They relocated to Grand Junction and began earnestly researching destinations and services for their fledgling business. The tours they created range from the "Southwest Safari," which highlights Grand Canyon National Park, Bryce Canyon National Park, and Death Valley National Park, to the "Rocky Mountaineer" — an introduction to fun, safe mountain flying. They also have the "Beyond the Border" trip highlighting Mexico's Copper Canyon and a 16-day "Grand Expedition," which includes stops from northern Arizona to Glacier National Park on the Canadian border. Each tour has a very different focus and flavor — but all are designed around national parks.

"Once we decided to start the business, the biggest thing we needed was a theme," said Marisa, who handles business operations and logistics. "We saw a real opportunity to showcase the national parks all around the West, which proved to be a good way to center our destinations. When you stop to think that more than 90 percent of U.S. pilots live outside the prime national park states, you realize there are lots of pilots who are potentially missing out on some wonderful flying experiences. Pilots from other parts of the United States or abroad generally would not consider doing a 10-day flying trip on their own out here — so our job is to take away the stress and fear of the unknown by providing good briefings and training and by handling those 'yucky' things like reservations and cars and planning activities. The tour group generally does the rest — they fly and bond and have a great time."

Tours basically work like this: Pilots select a trip from the Parkwest Air Tours Web site (<http://www.parkwestair.com/>); pay a fee and provide certificate, medical, and logbook copies; and then show up in Grand Junction on the appointed day. Parkwest handles all logistics, including aircraft rental (if desired), maps, route planning, briefings, GPS equipment and programming, training, lodging, meals, and ground activities. Each tour has a preplanned route that generally entails two to four hours in the air on flying days. All flying is done VFR in groups limited to seven airplanes, but the flying is done individually (it's not formation flying). There are also nonflying days so participants can enjoy the sights at a reasonable pace. An air-to-air frequency allows participants to share weather information or point out interesting scenery.

The group gathers at about 7 a.m. for breakfast and the day's briefing and weather discussions. If the weather is questionable, the group makes a go/no-go decision. Flying tends to be done early, when turbulence is at a minimum. This also allows the most time for everyone to enjoy the sights upon landing. At a new destination, the average day includes lunch, followed by a professional tour inside the national park, hiking, relaxing, horseback riding, whitewater rafting, or other activities. The group gathers for dinner at a historic or notable place. Parkwest mixes scheduled activities with free time for clients to explore on their own.

But before the group takes off into the wild blue yonder, Parkwest plans time in Grand Junction for trip briefings and activities. "They definitely have great organizational skills," commented Michelle Paluck, AOPA 1083521, of Plano, Texas. She and her husband, Bob, AOPA 1706625, brought their Mooney Ovation2 on a recent Grand Expedition tour, which visits six national parks and seven states. "Weeks ahead of time, Parkwest sent us the marked charts, GPS coordinates, and routing information for the tour and for getting to Grand Junction, which helped us preplan for the flight up. It also let us know they knew what they were doing," she said. "When we arrived, we met the other pilots for dinner, and the next day we had a full-scale briefing on high-altitude flying — things like leaning on the ground, density altitude, runways, airspeed, and the like. Then we got information on what to expect once we got to the destination," she said.

Pilots renting an airplane from Parkwest receive a one- to two-hour checkout and training (included in the trip cost). The rental airplanes are generally Skyhawks or Piper Cherokees. Most are equipped with VOR/DME, and all have a panel-mount GPS or yoke-mount Garmin 195 GPS.

"We fly strictly VFR, and the GPS just helps everyone keep track of each other while we're on tour," Collin said. "The preprogrammed route keeps people out of trouble with special-use airspace, and following it also gives the pilot the most spectacular visual route. We brief pilots on flying responsibly in and around the national parks and ask pilots to do position reports regularly so that we have a picture of how things are moving."

Pilots bringing their own airplanes are not required to have a checkout, although flight training is available. Depending on the tour, some training may be provided to the entire group.

For example, the Rocky Mountaineer trip goes through the Rocky and Sawtooth mountains and includes a mountain-flying ground school and three hours of flight training before the tour begins. The flight training includes a flight to Aspen and Leadville, arguably America's highest airport at just under 10,000 feet. "This trip is an introduction to mountain flying. We're not bush pilots, and we certainly don't teach people how to be bush pilots," Collin said firmly. "We instill basic principles of flying at high altitudes — we cover performance considerations, airflow patterns in the mountains, safe ways to cross mountainous terrain, and how to generally read the weather."

After the briefings, checkouts, and trip discussions, the group tours the Colorado National Monument on 20,000 acres of craggy sandstone cliffs and beautiful rock formations. Later they visit a local winery and enjoy dinner overlooking the spectacular scenery. The next day, the group departs on the air tour.

The Fays spent months mapping out the routes and lodging choices for their tours. "We came up with some ideal leg distances and then took many trips to scout everything on the ground to see how we could make it all come together," remembered Marisa. "We needed to check tiedown availability, fuel prices, the right kinds of lodging, good meals, and transportation."

The result is relatively easy flying with spectacular views — the Grand Canyon is a highlight for many. "I had one pilot tell me that he had been thinking of flying over the Grand Canyon for six months since he booked the trip, and how exciting it was for him to be doing it that morning. It is such a blessing to have this as my job," said Marisa.

Poor weather rarely poses a problem — Grand Junction enjoys an average of 347 VFR days a year. "We had days with the horizon 70 to 80 miles away, and we could pick out landmarks 35 miles away. It was really special," Kelty said.

But when weather does interfere, the Fays have contingency plans, and a bit of group flexibility and good humor certainly helps. If an extra overnight is needed at a given destination, Parkwest makes adjustments to ensure people get back to Grand Junction on schedule. The biggest weather challenge Parkwest has faced on tour was the "storm of the century" in Death Valley. Scheduled to stay one night at a desert inn, the group stayed three nights because of high winds, thunderstorms, and lightning. "They say that there is standing water in Death Valley only once in a hundred years. Well, we happened to be there for it, which certainly made it unique!" Marisa said.

Each pilot has varying levels of experience and different ideas about what is unique or challenging on the tours. For Les Paul, a 68-year-old British pilot who lives near London, the two- to three-hour flying legs and high-elevation airports of the Southwest Safari were a new challenge. "That first day was a three-hour leg over some gorgeous scenery," he remembered. "But I've never flown a three-hour leg — I fly short trips in England. I've never relied on a GPS throughout a trip, and I've never had to lean an engine before takeoff. Each day brought something we hadn't done before. One day we took off from below sea level [minus 211 feet] in Death Valley, and then landed at 7,586-foot-elevation Bryce Canyon. With my age, I doubt I'll ever experience that kind of flying ever again."

Kelty also had new experiences. "I learned that thunderstorms in the West come up in the afternoon — and then they just dissipate — it's pretty predictable. Just because one comes along doesn't mean you can't launch in the evening when it's calm. I gained some confidence. I also learned a bit more about cockpit organization.... The whole experience helped inspire me to continue working on my commercial, which I now have."

Collin confirms that many pilots take away more than great photos and memories. "One of my favorite things about this business is being able to see people improve their skills and expand their horizons. Some of our clients used to just fly IFR all the time doing the same thing. Now these same people are enjoying their planes and their licenses much more."

Michelle and Bob Paluck are good examples of the phenomenon. "Bob and I have always flown in 'flat country' — I learned in Chicago and he learned in Texas. We had done a bit of flying to local places, but the Parkwest trip was our first really big trip. That was the trip that really helped break us out of the box and now we use the plane for really fun longer trips," she said.

Although everyone seems to learn something, the real focus is on enjoying the flying and sights with the fun of a group and the safety of guides. "Make no mistake about it, this is a vacation first," said Gene Badal, AOPA 1301134, a 64-year-old pilot from Skokie, Illinois, with 550 hours. He brought his two adult sons on the 2001 Rocky Mountaineer tour in his refurbished 1965 Piper Comanche. "It's not principally an education, but you do learn things. I went because I didn't want to consume my energy in being a 'charter pilot' with my sons. I wanted to enjoy the vacation, the sights, and no hassles while enjoying the flying aspect."

Nonpilot companions seem to approve of the trips as well. "It was awesome to be in the mountains, and the flying was exciting," said Badal's 22-year-old son John, who doesn't typically fly with his father on trips. "It wasn't like we were flying all day long, either. For someone from the Midwest, it was neat. The wine tasting, rafting, hiking, it was all great! Some of the places for dinner were gourmet, and then some places in the middle of nowhere were comical." He went on to describe how one small restaurant in the mountains served Collin a steak "the size of a boogie board," which provided a laugh for the group and a challenge for Collin to finish.

Guests typically stay in historic lodges within the national parks or in other uncommon inns. "The places we stayed were all unique, in keeping with the character of the area. For instance, we flew into the grass strip at Smiley Creek, Idaho. We stayed above a trading post and the views were incredible from every angle. And you could've also stayed in a tepee if you wanted. It was just one unique experience after another on that tour," said Badal.

Although an all-inclusive trip isn't cheap, the money goes a long way. Participants can expect to pay about \$265 per person per day if they bring their own airplane. For renters, trips cost about \$340 per person per day. "We'd go on another trip of theirs in a minute," said Michelle Paluck. "Yes, you add everything up and it ends up being a big number, but to me, it's worth every dollar."

"Sometimes we hear people say, 'Well, I can do this on my own for less, so I won't go on your trip,'" remarked Collin. "That's fine if they want to do that. But I think very few who don't live in this region go and do it on their own. The planning takes a lot of time, and weather and lack of local knowledge can be intimidating for those not from here. For example, Crater Lake is nearly impossible for an individual to do like we do it, because the ground logistics are so difficult. We actually hire a yellow school bus at Crater — it's funny to clients but it's often their favorite spot of that trip because it's just so beautiful. We feel good because clients who have gone with us have told us that the service and safety we provided is a huge value to them."

The sights are among the most beautiful in the world and relatively few people get to experience them from light aircraft. Ask a Parkwest tour participant to describe his or her favorite day on the tour, and you will likely get multiple answers from the same person. Michelle Paluck gave the question some consideration, and said, "Glacier [National Park] was fabulous. But how can you pick one favorite when you have gone over Grand Canyon, Glacier, Crater Lake, Yellowstone, and Monument Valley in the same trip? It's really unfair." Enough said.

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## **Flying at 10,000 Feet With 160 Horses**

Collin Fay, co-owner of Parkwest Air Tours and a CFII, helps "flatlander" pilots enjoy safe high-altitude flying. Contrary to what some pilots may think, a high-performance airplane, turbine, or twin is not needed to fly safely at 10,000 feet msl. Piper Warriors, Archers, and Cessna Skyhawks can be safely flown above 10,000 feet. Fay considers the following guidelines as essential when flying at higher elevations or around mountainous terrain:

- Know your aircraft performance. Check the altitude, temperature, and winds for the route and make sure the runway is appropriate (length, surface) to accommodate your aircraft and that your climb performance ensures adequate obstacle clearance. Remember, temperature affects density altitude, which affects your aircraft performance. Additionally, don't load your aircraft to maximum gross weight — the FAA recommends loading your aircraft at least 10 percent below gross weight at higher altitudes to give an extra margin of safety.

These performance numbers are from the pilot's operating handbook (POH) and represent the performance of a new aircraft with a test pilot at the controls. It is doubtful that you will get the same performance. A good rule of thumb is to double the ground-roll figure to determine the runway length required. Remember that climbout suffers substantially as well.

- Know the winds aloft. If winds aloft are going to be greater than 20 to 25 knots, and your flight route takes you over mountain passes or ridges, you may want to consider flying at a different time. A mountain pass acts like a giant venturi, often creating turbulence. However, wind and turbulence are relatively predictable, and flying on cool, calm mornings usually ensures a comfortable flight.

- Plan your route carefully. Try to follow highways where possible in remote mountainous terrain. This makes navigation a bit easier, and it provides contact with civilization in the event of a forced landing.
- Lean your mixture. Just as you would lean at altitude in flight according to your aircraft's POH, you need to lean prior to takeoff from any airport above 3,000 feet msl. Leaning the mixture during a static runup maximizes engine performance (use the tachometer for locating maximum rpm as you adjust the mixture and then enrich slightly to operate 50 to 100 degrees rich of peak).
- Trust your airspeed indicator. At higher altitudes, true airspeed (which equals ground speed in zero wind) increases with altitude for the same indicated airspeed (for example, on an 80-degree day, 70 KIAS equals 71 KTAS at sea level but 83 KTAS at 8,000 feet — a 17-percent increase). As you take off or land, you may feel that you are fast, but you must resist the temptation to rotate too early on takeoff or pull the throttle back on approach. Additionally, it is important to maintain  $V_Y$ , no matter how poor the climb performance is — don't try to force the aircraft over obstacles. If your climb rate is not sufficient, do a few shallow 360-degree turns, preferably over an airport or open area, to gain altitude. — *CB*

**Here is how density altitude impacts the performance of a fully loaded Cessna 172N on an 80-degree Fahrenheit day:**

<b>Pressure Altitude</b>	<b>Density Altitude</b>	<b>Takeoff Performance*</b>	<b>Rate of Climb</b>	<b>Landing Performance*</b>
<b>Sea Level</b>	1,388 feet	847/1,514 feet	735 fpm	540/1,285 feet
<b>8,000 feet</b>	11,109 feet	1,881/3,883 feet	315 fpm	725/1,605 feet

\* Takeoff and landing performance numbers are ground roll/total to clear 50-foot obstacle