



Fly-In Camping

Sleeping with your airplane in the great outdoors

BY GREG LASLO

IT'S THE DREAM: SPENDING the night under the stars—and under the wing of an airplane.

For experienced campers and backpackers, it's a piece of cake—load up and go. But for those of us who don't have campcraft merit badges, the idea can seem a little intimidating.

Not to worry. To find out how to turn the dream into a reality, we asked three experts for advice. Don Abbott is founder of the American Air Campers Association. Ramona Cox is an expert air-camper from Los Angeles who flies to backcountry airstrips across the American West and maintains www.SkyChickAdventures.com. Patti Andrews is a flight instructor in Palo Alto, California, who takes student pilots on cross-country

“boot camp” flight-training experiences.

CAMP? OUTSIDE? WHY?

Don says there are a couple of good reasons to consider a camping trip. First, it's a cheap vacation. Second, it's a chance to fly with your family to something other than another airport pancake breakfast. Third, it's a way to discover new places. “It offers excitement, it offers laughter, it offers conversation—all that stuff,” Don says. “It offers [pilots] the benefits of getting the family back together, and it gives a purpose of owning an airplane—to go out and adventure.”

Adventure. Exactly, says Patti. “You’re so self-contained, there’s a sense of pride in flying in somewhere and unpacking; it’s like you’re backpacking around Europe as a teenager,” she says. “You feel very free and flexible, and you don’t need to make a reservation, and you’ve got everything you need right there in the cabin of that 152 or 172. It feels very liberating.”

And it’s a chance to be as social—or as solitary—as you like, and even get back to nature; Ramona once videotaped a herd of elk wandering past her campsite that didn’t even seem to care she was there. “I’ve always loved camping,” she says. “The air-camping really goes back to my roots, because I love, love, love the outdoors.”

PICKING A PLACE

The “right” destination depends on what you’re looking for. For your—or your camping buddy’s—first trip, stay close, Don says. There are more than 900 airports in the United States that allow camping, so you should have several to choose from in, say, an hour-and-a-half ring from home. It wouldn’t hurt to pick one with a hotel and restaurants nearby, Patti says, just in case it doesn’t work out. Avgas availability is good, too. Check your state aeronautical department’s website, sectionals, and airport/facility directories for ideas; www.AmericanAirCampers.com is also compiling a directory of airport camping sites.

For a little more flavor, give yourself a mission. Ramona will fly out to Death Valley to watch meteor showers, Don went walleye fishing in Canada last summer in his 1950 Ercoupe, and thousands of other pilots go to AirVenture, Sun ’n Fun, or other fly-in camping get-togethers every year.

The ultimate trips, though, are those once-in-a-lifetime adventures, Don says: literally cross-country to California wine country or even camping in Everglades

City, Florida, then a bop over to Fort Lauderdale to catch a cruise ship. Ramona once spent a summer searching for the best remote hot springs.

Whichever kind of trip you take, do your homework. If she’s flying to a location she hasn’t visited recently, Ramona will contact local pilot associations. “No one has better information than the locals, so I rely on the word of mouth and information of those pilots,” she says.

TAKING THE KIDS

Since you’re looking for some quality time with the family, we’ll assume you’ll be taking your children—and that’s a good thing. Don’s grown daughter still talks about the airplane

trips they took together more than 30 years ago.

To keep every family member excited, make each part of the planning. “This thing can be a real team effort,” Don says. “Do your research: What do you want to do, what do you want to see?” Pick your airport destinations around those activities—whitewater rafting, hiking, museums, fishing, or whatever. If your kids are old enough, give them jobs, Don says. Show them how to set up the tent, or auger in the tiedown stakes, or if they’re so inclined, even help with flight planning and navigating. These are airplane kids, after all.

After camp is made, break out the board games, Frisbees, or water balloons—anything but Game Boys or other electronics. Ramona



When camping at an airport, it’s a good idea to check ahead to verify that bringing your pet is permissible.

MEET THE PANEL



DON ABBOTT

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RAMONA COX

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PATTI ANDREWS

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suggests taking a bug-collecting jar with a magnifying-glass lid, cheap binoculars, and small flashlights. Patti has even watched students entertain themselves for nearly an hour turning the runway lights on with a handheld radio. Airplane kids, indeed.

CHOOSING GEAR

Since all your stuff has to fit in your airplane, you'll want good-quality, lightweight, low-volume gear—or a bigger airplane. How much gear depends on what you're flying; a Cessna 152 or RV-8 has less space than a Bonanza or the Turbo Stationair that Ramona flies. Nearly every airplane works with most airports, Don says, so don't let yours limit your imagination.

Given your mode of transport, you'll need portable airplane tiedowns, and a cell phone will help you check weather. A few pieces of plywood to slide under your wheels will also keep your airplane from sinking in wet ground.

Feel like roughing it? Throw a tarp over the wing and call it done.

In bear country, particularly, avoid storing food in your airplane, unless, of course, you're shopping for a new one.

If you want a stove, pick one that burns avgas, Don says. For remote trips, say to forestry air strips, Ramona recommends adding a few extras: a snakebite kit, a personal locator beacon, water-purification tablets or filter, and a satellite phone—all in case of emergency and to get weather in mountainous areas, where an accurate report is a safety issue. If this is your idea of camping, consider first taking a back-country-flying course to hone your short- and unimproved-field landing techniques; Ramona worked up to the most-challenging fields and still works to stay proficient.



The right gear and aviation-specific safety precautions ensure an enjoyable camping experience.

PACKING THE PLANE

Unless you also have a Stationair, you'll need to pack judiciously. "Go through your stuff and say, do I really need this, do I really need that," Don says.

Patti suggests packing as if you were going to carry it all on your back. "Most people would not set out for the day with a pack of more than 40 pounds," she says. "If you figure two people with 40 pounds, that's 80 pounds. You have that in the back of a 152."

Of course, you don't want 80 pounds flopping around the back of your airplane. Keep everything packed tightly by cinching your load down with cargo netting or gear straps, Ramona says.

Consider weight-and-balance, too. Heavy items should be stowed low and forward; otherwise, they can tumble backward, which is probably more excitement than you're looking for. These kinds of real-world weight-and-balance and performance calculations are exactly the reasons Patti does camping trips with students. "It really calls upon you to use your basic flight-planning skills in a way that sometimes you let go a little bit," she says.

MAKING CAMP

"Always tie down the airplane first," Ramona says, in case the wind picks up. "Second, set up the tent." She puts her tent close to her airplane, but not tucked underneath; the noise of rain dripping off the wing onto the tent fly will eventually drive you nuts, she

says, but put it close enough to run to if you need something.

If you're determined to build a campfire, keep it a safe distance from both the airplane and the tent, Don says. Airplanes, you're certainly aware, will vent fuel, and that's not a call you want to make to your insurance company.

Lastly, secure your camp at night. Stow or hang your food to keep critters away. In bear country, particularly, avoid storing food in your airplane, unless, of course, you're shopping for a new one.

With these tips in mind, you're ready to make memories that last a lifetime. Case in point: not long ago, Patti took two high-school students on a base-camp trip in preparation for their checkrides, which they'd take with the examiner at their final destination. When they both passed, they stayed an extra night to savor the moment. "It was really the culmination of a whole summer's really hard work with these two really talented girls, and it was just great to be out there camping with them," Patti says. "We were kicking back in the grass, looking at the stars, and reminiscing about their checkride and what it had meant to them to be flying all summer. We could relax. It was a really magical moment, actually."

Now go out, and have some of your own. **EAA**

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