

Sleeping bags *and* avgas

Connect with
your inner camper
through aviation

By Ian J. Twombly

The crisp, cool night air. The stars, shining down on your front-row seat to nature. The airplane noise. If the combination sounds like heaven, airplane camping is for you.

Plan your next camp out with the guide on page 29 →

Believe it or not, our airborne craft are not only fun weekend toys and fast business traveling machines, they're also SUVs capable of taking us to serene camping settings straight out of an L.L. Bean catalog.

Despite what are sometimes miniscule useful loads, small GA airplanes are surprisingly good weekend campers. Many pilots think the airplane is too small, the load-carrying capability not good enough, or the campsite too far from the airport. But with a little creative packing and some good preflight scout work, camping with an airplane is vastly more rewarding than taking the car, and in almost all cases the campsite will be like nothing you will ever experience in your Ford.

Your imagination is the only limit when deciding how far you want to take the adventure. If the solitude of backpack camping in the middle of nowhere is your thing, the airplane can get you there, although you may want to seek out some specialized training to make it happen. Many places in the western United States have small backcountry landing strips carved out of the wilderness. Go east of the Mississippi and those opportunities decrease, although they still exist.

Once you've decided to embark on an airplane camping adventure, the preflight planning must begin almost immediately. There are many important considerations to make this type of trip successful and safe, including weight and balance, space, availability of aircraft services, and what shouldn't be on the packing list.

The first thing to decide is where to go. Do you want the backcountry experience that few pilots ever get to enjoy, or are you looking for a more predictable family vacation? If it's the former, make sure you know the

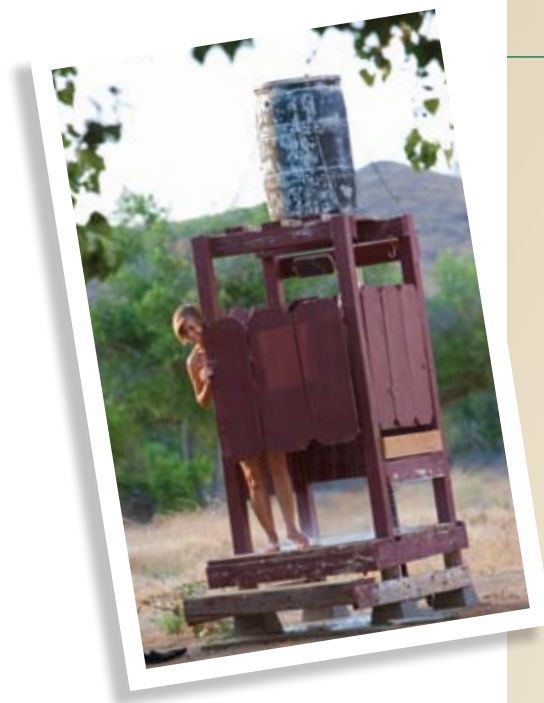
local area and are comfortable with all the variables, such as weather, fuel availability, and preflight planning services. Flying from Denver to Salt Lake City might take you over some mountainous terrain that you've prepared for, but landing in it and staying a few nights is very different.

Once you find an airport that offers the type of camping you want to do (or a rental car to get to where you want to go), then the only other unique preflight consideration is consumables. Many FBOs have basic things such as ice and vending machines, but the chances of them being next to a full-service camp store are remote at best. Call ahead to make sure you can get the items you need.

Of all the potential issues that will spoil your camping trip, the first is likely to be weight and balance. Small GA airplanes can carry a surprising amount of stuff, but when already loaded with full fuel, four people and gear is often a fantasy. But under a partial fuel load and with only one or two passengers, many aircraft have capable baggage compartments. It might even be able to hold huge coolers and large tents. Just make sure to weigh everything beforehand.

Before zipping up the bags and completing the packing checklist, take a moment to consider the special environment you'll be traveling in. Although items such as propane and butane cylinders aren't specifically prohibited aboard GA airplanes, they aren't allowed on commercial airplanes. That should make you at least stop and consider whether you want a high-pressure cylinder of flammable material onboard, or if you can make do without the lighter fluid and camp stove altogether—or buy it at your destination.

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After a day spent white-water rafting down the Kern River in Kern Valley, California, a shower hits the spot (left).

Once you know you are under gross weight, it's time to start loading up. You may find that actually getting everything in the airplane is a bigger issue than staying under gross weight. Remember that many baggage areas have their own weight limits, for both balance and structural reasons. Assuming you are under that, fill away. Use seats as storage areas. But remember that in turbulence or on a rough landing, your stuff could transform from a pile of pillows and bags to painful projectiles, so strap cargo down with the seatbelts and nets.

Now that you have the airplane loaded, take the time to consider whether you feel comfortable flying at gross weight and with a rearward center of gravity (which it will be in

all likelihood). If you're not used to this type of a loading scenario, know that the airplane will seem sluggish, both on the runway and in the climb. A rearward CG isn't especially challenging, but it will keep you on your toes during takeoff and landing. Fight the urge to let the load fly the airplane by being a hawk on the airspeed.

When you reach your destination, take a minute to tie down the airplane, take a deep breath, and garner a big smile. Your friends will be jealous knowing you didn't just explore wilderness and de-stress in a tent this weekend, you got there by airplane! This type of trip is the reason you are learning to fly.

Deputy Editor Ian J. Twombly is a CFII.



Summer temperatures are moderate along the Oregon coast, home of Nehalem Bay.

Camping on the airport

Check out these airports for a true taste of what airplane camping is all about. There's something here for every pilot, whether you want to get away from it all and camp in the backcountry, or if you're just looking for a new adventure close to home this weekend. Check AOPA's *Airport Directory* (www.aopa.org/members/airports) for more airports that allow camping.

Payson, Arizona (PAN): With nice graded campsites, fire rings, plenty of aircraft parking, a restaurant on the airport, showers, and free firewood, Payson Airport may be the ultimate spot for airplane camping. Check out the world's oldest rodeo, look for unusual rocks, or simply relax by the fire.

Petit Jean Park, Arkansas (MPJ): Water views are the attraction at this airport adjacent to a state park in central Arkansas. It's set on the north end of Petit Jean State Park close to the Arkansas River. Simply land and taxi to the end of the runway for campsites with water, electricity, fire rings, and grills.

Wellsboro, Pennsylvania (N38): Those pilots who think there are no great outside attractions in the Northeast haven't been to the Grand Canyon of the East near Wellsboro, Pennsylvania. The Wellsboro Johnston Airport has cheap fuel, nice grassy areas for camping, and is located near the canyon. For an extra packing challenge bring bikes and ride the six miles to the canyon.

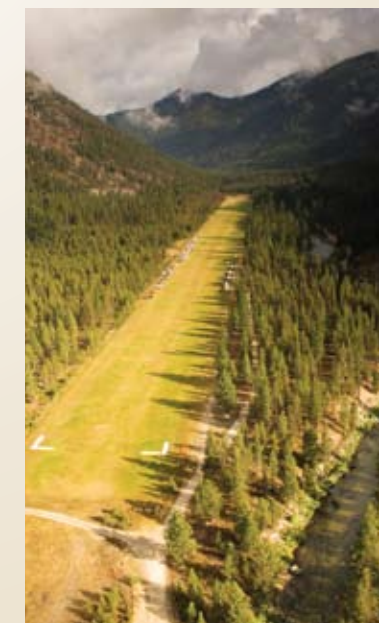
Oceano, California (L52): Combine flying, camping, and a day at the beach and you may have the ultimate vacation. Oceano County Airport north of Los Angeles offers all this in one place. The campground has restrooms, tables, and fire pits. Then, when the kids want to run on the beach, walk the short trail to the Pacific and consider yourself a hero.

Flying M Ranch, Reklaw, Texas (7TA7): Most pilots who camp only do it once a year at a fly-in. If you had to pick one, the Flying M Ranch is a good bet. Every year during the fourth weekend in October, owners open up their ranch and 4,000-foot grass strip for a weekend of fun. Local EAA chapters furnish the meals for a small fee, so there's no need to pack food.

Johnson Creek Airport, Idaho (3U2): Idaho is a premiere destination with dozens of impressive spots. But many are a challenge, even for locals. Try Johnson Creek Airport in Yellow Pine as a beginner. The campsites are right on the grass airport, and amenities include showers and high-speed Internet for flight planning.

Kern Valley Airport, California (L05): What more could you want than a nice tree-shaded spot, showers, a bathroom, and easy access to a restaurant? The Kern Valley Airport has all that. You can even raft down the white water of the adjacent Kern River when you get tired of relaxing or watching airplanes.

Hatteras, North Carolina (HSE): East Coasters have a great beach airport camping option as well with the Billy Mitchell Airport. Although camping isn't allowed on the airport itself, it's only a short walk to sites in the Cape Hatteras National Seashore.



At 4,993 feet msl, Johnson Creek Airport in Idaho will require mountain-flying savvy.