



Aerotrekking

For those of you who remember the 1960s (with all due respect to the adage that if you do, you weren't really there), it may be hard to believe, but it's happening all over again. Ken Kesey, the Merry Pranksters, the bus, and most importantly, the life-altering Electric Kool-Aid. But unlike the trek described in Tom Wolfe's classic novel aboard a bus named *Further*, this new test is not only a journey of self-discovery, but a low and slow flight across the West. With unusually heightened senses you can smell the sage and feel the layers of cool air that still lie unmolested along the canyon walls... What is this hip new trip? It's called Aerotrekking and it is nothing short of a whole new trip of rediscovering America.

"We're explorers really," says John McAfee, the man who brought us the computer anti-virus software that still bears his name, and the zeitgeist embodiment of Ken Kesey. "There is so much of America that people have only seen from an airliner window at 40,000 feet or just from their car window." McAfee uses new light sport aircraft which are nimble enough to allow him to explore canyons and trails that are so remote that it's likely no human being has cast a shadow there in

The Newest Electric Kool-Aid Test

By Lyn Freeman



perhaps hundreds or even thousands of years. His flights have discovered Anasazi ruins left empty since the sixth century AD as well as remnants of Butterfield Stage Coach trails abandoned sometime in the late 19th century.

And he's not alone in his enthusiasm to take a look at the parts of America that have somehow slipped off the modern radar. The Pranksters are there, though they now refer to themselves as the Sky Gypsies, equally as diverse and inimitable as the originals. One is a retired geneticist, another a rocket scientist. There's a Federal

Aviation Administration inspector, a physician and still another Gypsy who confesses having done little more than hang glide since high school and so on... They gather at the group's headquarters in Rodeo, New Mexico to plan new expeditions, and their numbers are steadily growing. Especially after a story about McAfee and his aerotrekking appeared recently on the front page of the Wall Street Journal.

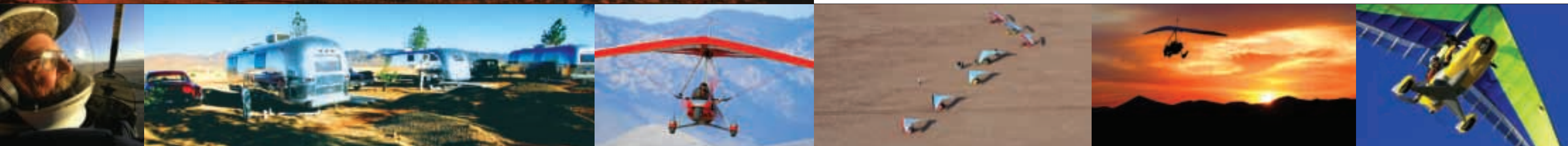
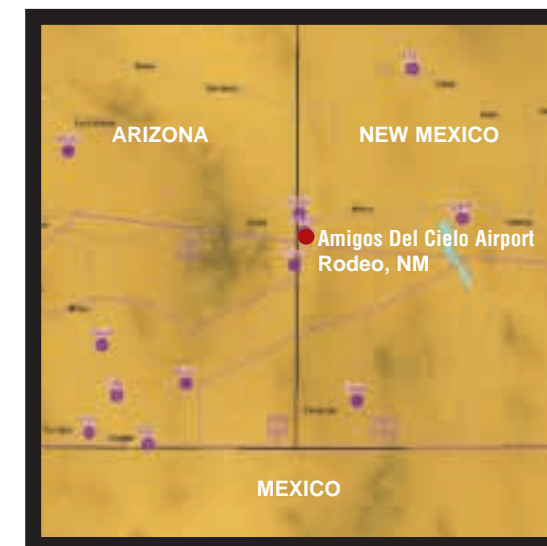
The Sky Gypsies refer to the aircraft they use as 'kite planes.' They are essentially derived from hang gliders but now have an engine on the back and some-

times even a glass cockpit up front. These weight-shift aircraft are sophisticated enough to chew up most of a \$100,000 bill and require a minimum of an FAA sport pilot license to fly as PIC.

"We have lots of pilots who fly over here in their airplanes (McAfee and his Sky Gypsies have built not one but two runways plus a gaggle of hangars) and learn to go aerotrekking," McAfee says. "We don't have a formal school for flight instruction, but many of the Sky Gypsies are also instructors. General aviation pilots typically spend 5-10 hours of dual time

They refer to themselves as Sky Gypsies





learning how to fly the weight-shift aircraft but the lessons can be a blend of flight instruction and aerotrekking over the countryside. It usually doesn't take long for most to drink enough Kool-aid to see what drew McAfee here in the first place.

To accommodate the influx of enthusiasts for the new sport, McAfee has purchased eight completely restored classic Air Stream trailers for guests. "I wanted something that kind of fit in," he says, noting the lingering Route 66 feel to the area. He also thought the overall ambience would be a bit better if the trailers also had cars parked next to them, so he purchased a small fleet of automobiles and put them in place outside each trailer's door. They all run or have been

impeccably restored. He's right; it does make the trailers feel more... home like.

Also to accommodate visitors to the aerotrekking headquarters, McAfee built a high brow café and gourmet coffee shop. The building also houses a small, but upscale movie theatre. Next to that building is a large state-of-the-art greenhouse so guests can always have fresh vegetables, an otherwise not-so-easy feat in a part of New Mexico where a single rain drop falling can gather a crowd to watch.

McAfee's intention is to create a giant loop of aerotrekking 'stations' reaching up from his New Mexican headquarters into several other states. He envisions having a series of stops where aerotrekking can land on a runway, put their aircraft in

hangars and be assured of having food and even ground transportation available. Enthusiasts could base themselves for a several days at each location, exploring different directions daily, then eventually move on to the next 'station' along McAfee's loop that eventually leads back to Rodeo.

But the raison d'être of McAfee's operation is clearly aviation. He and the Sky Gypsies are up before the sun, logging onto weather reports from a variety of reporting points. They're interested in surface conditions, both reported and forecast, as well as winds aloft to get a general idea of how the air will flow over the surrounding terrain. The small aircraft are especially vulnerable to rough air and

the Sky Gypsies take flying and flight safety very seriously. Some days there is only a small window of flight time available, usually just after sunrise or just before sunset. But on the days when the stars align and everything is just right, aerotrekking becomes the stuff that all pilots dream about.

"Sometimes we'll just stay in ground effect for twenty or thirty miles," McAfee smiles. "Then we work our way up into a canyon and suddenly everything is so green and lush and there's waterfalls and a herd of antelope looking at us eye to eye and you're in the middle of nowhere, there's no roads, no sign of man anywhere and because we're flying though all of this, it just seems like you're part of land-

scape, not just looking at it. That's when aerotrekking becomes pure magic."

It's the kind of trip Tom Wolfe always searched for.

To reach the Sky Gypsies for more information, call 505.557.1008. ✕