

## Escapes

## Up and away! A flying leap for womankind

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

I once went on a road trip with a pilot. My inability to see faraway highway signs — compared with his eagle eye — never failed to amuse him. But later, at dinner, I used my laser vision to read the tiny print on the back of his FAA license, which he could barely detect as a blur. Combined, our eyesight was perfect.

After that trip, we each felt a renewed confidence about our respective professions. Surely a writer needn't worry about seeing specks on the horizon, I thought, when her chief concern is minding words on a laptop screen.

And then, last weekend, I played hooky from the screen and found myself in the cockpit of a Cessna 172 Skyhawk. But by the time I was flying over the Potomac River, concern about my vision had subsided. At an altitude of 2,000 feet, eyes fixed on the horizon, all I could think about was my stomach.

Most flight schools offer what's called a discovery or introductory flight. It's a good way to check flying off your bucket list, but it's also the start of training for students working toward a private pilot's license (a project that costs around \$10,000). There are more than 3,500 schools nationwide, which means your view from the cockpit could be coastal or mountainous, or anything in between.

A friend had given me a gift certificate for an introductory flight at GT Aviation in Fort Washington, not far from Andrews Air Force Base. It's at Potomac Airfield, one of three general aviation airports — airports for private planes — within Washington's Flight Restricted Zone. (The others are Washington Executive Airpark and College Park Airport.) To get there, I drove through a residential neighborhood, over several speed bumps, and parked my car in a small lot near the runway.

In the flight school office, I met my instructor, Chris Totten, who grabbed a red phone on the wall. "5477 Kilo," he said, followed by more pilot-speak, picking up clearance for our flight. We walked outside to a sunny, slightly hazy day, and he introduced me to the Cessna 172 — the all-time best-selling aircraft and one of the top planes for training.

I peered inside my little single-engine four-seater. There were dual controls for instructor and student, and Chris explained that he'd handle takeoff, landing and taxiing. "You'll do everything in between."

Before we got in, he asked me whether I was susceptible to air sickness. "Umm . . .," I hesitated a moment too long. Chris ran off, returned with a little bag, and we climbed in.

I sat on the left, scooted my seat forward and assured myself that this was nothing more than a flying car. My surroundings were familiar: door with a handle; window with a latch; control column, or yoke, that resembled a steering wheel; sun visors and dashboard. A key turned the ignition, and the machine rumbled to life. Easy-peasy. Until Chris pointed out the fire extinguisher and explained what to do should we need to make an emergency exit after landing.

He offered a cursory introduction to the controls. "Here's our basic six-pack," he said, pointing out round instruments such as the altimeter (indicating height above sea level) and the vertical speed indicator (rate of climb or descent; when the needle's on zero, the aircraft is holding steady). The throttle, a large black knob, adjusts engine speed; the foot pedals serve as brakes and rudder controls (moving the nose side to side, called yaw); and the yoke moves left, right, front and back to control the roll (wings side to side) and pitch (nose up and down).

I watched Chris read through items on a laminated checklist, pausing to confirm that our seat belts were fastened and the flaps were up. "Doors," he read, then glanced over to discover that mine wasn't



TIMOTHY POOLE

**Taking off:** You can try an introductory flight lesson at Potomac Airfield in Fort Washington.



MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



TIMOTHY POOLE

**Ready for liftoff:** Top, GT Aviation instructor Chris Totten prepares the cockpit for a student flight lesson. Above, Potomac Airfield from the air.

fully closed. We slammed it shut, and with that, I became a checklist believer.

Before I knew it, we were taxiing down the runway. Through my headset, I listened to radio chatter between Chris and the control center that handles Washington air traffic. And then we were up, angling into the blue sky. Chris leveled out the aircraft and told me to take the controls, explaining that we wanted to maintain the same amount of horizon through the windshield — too little of it means that we're climbing, and too much

means that we're descending.

My hands grasped the yoke, turning, pushing and pulling it to adjust the plane in its various dimensions. At Chris's urging, I even experimented as we banked a tad left and right.

After a few minutes, I realized that I hadn't been breathing. Whatever. I was flying! It's one thing to marvel at aerodynamics, but this was something else entirely. Like, mind-blowing. Here we were, in a vehicle that looked like a winged smart car and sounded like a lawn mower,

and we were in the wide-open sky.

I peered over my left shoulder and saw little green squares, a snaking river, Tonka trucks at a construction site and black lines of highway. A few jets crossed our path, far above us, heading toward Reagan National. I was terrified and thrilled, and I would have screamed with delight if I hadn't been worried about how it would upset my equilibrium. Because just then, the little bag was working its way back into my consciousness.

The fact is, I've been known to experience motion sickness in anything from a flight simulator to a minor earthquake. But from everything I've experienced, once I get behind the controls of a vehicle — on land or in water — I'm in good shape. I'd expected the same in the friendly skies. My stomach, however, had other ideas.

We flew across Interstate 95, and Chris followed a rectangular path to land at Stafford Regional Airport, just south of Quantico. The landing was so smooth, I barely knew that we were on the ground. As we taxied, I began to appreciate what pilots refer to as the \$100 hamburger — they take a short flight, grab lunch, then head home. Thirsty and a bit unsettled, I probably would have paid \$100 right then for a ginger ale.

But I would have to settle for some fresh air. We opened the vents, checked the air sock along the runway for wind direction and took off, heading northeast. Twenty minutes later, we'd crossed over the sparkling Potomac and landed at our home runway. Chris parked the plane on the grass and turned the key, and the propeller came to a stop. The fate of the little bag? Top-secret.

Outside the office, I met Tim Poole, president of the flight school. We sat at a picnic table, and he assured me that nausea is common for beginners but that it usually lessens with training. "It's all about that third dimension," he said. "Flying is different from other types of motion."

I sat in the sun and watched a few flights take off before I got into my car. And then I drove back through the neighborhood and rolled over the speed bumps, which were — for the moment — about as much of the third dimension as I wished to pursue.

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## IF YOU GO

## GETTING THERE

GT Aviation and Potomac Airfield are about seven miles outside the Beltway. Take Exit 3/Maryland 210 and merge onto Indian Head Highway. Turn left onto Old Fort Road, make another left onto Allentown Road, then turn right onto Airport Drive, then right onto Glen Way. Follow the green signs for the airfield, a half-mile on your left at 10300 Glen Way.

## WHERE TO LEARN TO FLY

## GT Aviation

Potomac Airfield  
10300 Glen Way, Fort Washington  
301-248-1711  
[www.gt-aviation.com](http://www.gt-aviation.com)  
One-hour introductory flight in a Cessna 172 for \$119.

## NAFC — Flight Center

Lee Airpark  
3090 Solomons Island Rd., Edgewater  
410-956-8751  
[www.nafcfllyng.org](http://www.nafcfllyng.org)  
One-hour introductory flight in a Cessna 172 for \$180 or a Piper Warrior for \$160.

## Washington International Flight Academy

Montgomery County Airpark  
7940 Airpark Rd., Gaithersburg  
240-246-7529  
[www.learnstoflydc.com](http://www.learnstoflydc.com)  
Discovery flight in a Cessna 172 for \$99; 30 minutes on the ground, 30 minutes in the air.

## Aviation Adventures

Manassas Regional Airport  
10600 Harry Parrish Blvd., Manassas  
Leesburg Executive Airport  
1001 Sycolin Rd. SE, Leesburg  
Warrenton-Fauquier Airport  
5075 Airport Rd., Midland  
[www.aviationadventures.com](http://www.aviationadventures.com)  
Adventure flights available at all three locations average \$100 for 30 minutes and \$170 for 60 minutes in a Cessna 172 (prices increase with different models). Light-sport aircraft flights are \$90 for 30 minutes, \$150 for 60 minutes.

## Brett Aviation

Martin State Airport  
701 Wilson Point Rd., Middle River, Md.  
410-391-0210  
[www.brettaviation.com](http://www.brettaviation.com)  
Thirty-minute discovery flight in a Cessna 172 for \$129.

## Chesapeake Sport Pilot

Bay Bridge Airport  
210 Airport Rd., Stevensville, Md.  
410-604-1717  
[www.chesapeakesportpilot.com](http://www.chesapeakesportpilot.com)  
Introductory flights in light-sport aircraft, such as the Sky Arrow (one hour) or AutoGyro Calidus (30 minutes), for \$99.

## WHERE TO CELEBRATE FLIGHT

## Virginia Regional Festival of Flight

[www.virginiaflyin.org](http://www.virginiaflyin.org)  
Annual festival May 4-5, at Virginia's Suffolk Executive Airport. Includes free Young Eagles flights for kids 8 to 17 on Sunday after the air show. See dozens of aircraft, demonstrations, workshops and vendor displays. Entrance fee \$10; younger than 13 free. (\$5 if you fly in.)

## Women Can Fly

[www.womencanfly.com](http://www.womencanfly.com)  
The inaugural flying events of this national volunteer organization will be held in Virginia and will educate girls and women about aviation through free flights, simulation experiences and classroom presentations. Each event is from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., rain or shine. June 8, Warrenton-Fauquier Airport; June 22, Hampton Roads Executive Airport; June 29, Lynchburg Regional Airport. Register online.

## INFORMATION

Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association  
[www.letsgetflying.com](http://www.letsgetflying.com)

— M.D.G.K.