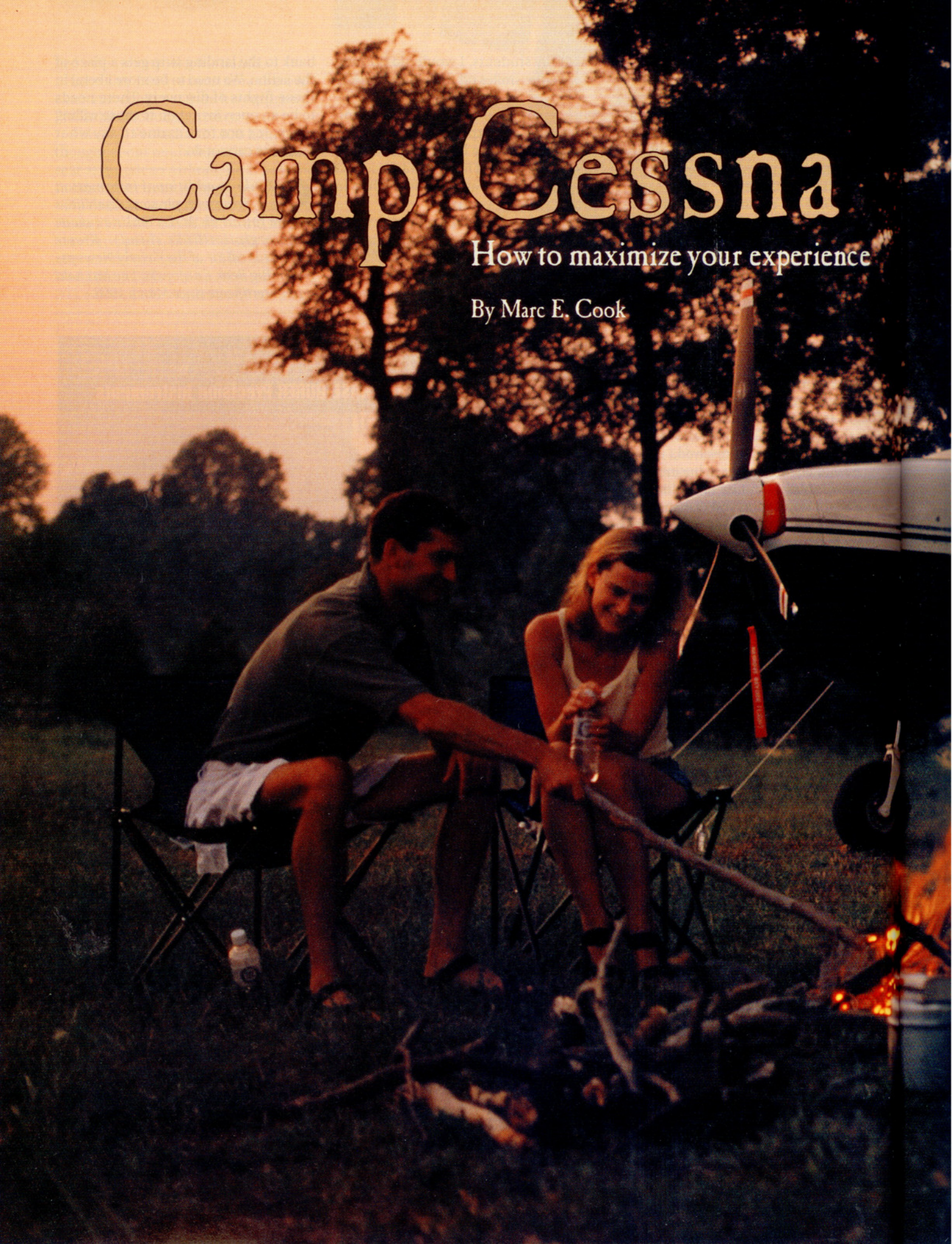


# Camp Cessna

How to maximize your experience

By Marc E. Cook







**L**eaves rustle quietly in the trees above your head. As you settle into your comfortable chair, it's impossible not to take in the scene with a smile. Two items at the top of your pride-and-joy list—your family, your airplane—are together in a postcard setting. The grass carpet upon which your airplane and campsite resides is not full of insects—yet. Low, golden sunlight glints on wing tip and prop spinner. Over your shoulder you sense another airplane, wind whistling past wing struts and the engine clicking over at idle. The Piper Cub sets down on the grass strip with grace.



This is airplane camping at its best.

As in most flying endeavors, the success of your camping sojourn depends a lot on preparation. While it's possible to fill up the back



## Remain alert for shifting winds below the tree line and resist the temptation to carry excess speed into narrow, short strips.

of the airplane with little care or organization and still have a good time, such a tactic depends extensively on dumb, blind luck. It's also unlikely to engender much cooperation from your family for the next outing.

Among the first tasks in preparing for aerial camping is to choose a destination. Sounds simple, right? Not necessarily. First, you have to think about the destination—do you want to fish, swim, hike, bike? Or are you perfectly happy to set up camp at the airport and watch the world cruise by? The difference may be subtle—do you make the camp itself the center of the event, or just your home away from home?—but the consequences are significant.

Second, you need to determine what kind of facilities are available to you. Start by running a search of airports within the AOPA's *Airport Directory* online database; there you'll find a search engine that can pluck those airports reporting camping facilities on the field. You will also find this information in the paper version of the directory. This is a good starting place, particularly if you're going far afield, into unfamiliar territory.

But be forewarned that some of the airports that advertise on-field camping are only signaling that the airport management won't kick you off the property if you pitch a tent next to your airplane. Often, these locations have no amenities—meaning, 24-hour-accessible bathrooms, showers, picnic tables, and



AOPA's Aero SUV sweepstakes Cessna 206 makes an optimum camping airplane. Not only can it carry four people and this gear, it can handle a short, grass strip.

fire pits, to name a few. It's vitally important, then, to call ahead to determine exactly what's on the field. You may find that some strips adjoin conventional campgrounds, giving you access to all of the typical amenities. Another source is your state's board of aeronautics or airports—many of these agencies keep track of airports that have bona fide camping facilities inside the gate.

Because many of the most spectacular and desirable destinations are airports a long way from major cities, you'll likely face short, unimproved

takeoff and the other for landing unless extreme winds demand otherwise.

In a similar vein, be sure to have alternate destinations in mind before you venture out into the wilderness. Summertime storms, capricious winds, or suspect airport conditions can make your primary site unsuitable. And there's no fun in telling the kids that they've just flown three hours only to have to trek home again. Even if you have to "rough it" at your second choice, it's a better outcome than abandoning the endeavor.

Now that you know where you're

grass or gravel strips. With your family in tow and the airplane filled to the headliner with gear, this is not the time to exercise your short-field skills for the first time. Be sure of your skills and carefully research the performance of your airplane before you attempt to plunk down into a 2,000-foot grass strip in the foothills. And even if you're quite the backwoods stick, be sure to add significant safety margins to the book numbers. (The AOPA Aero SUV sweepstakes airplane has big tires, more horsepower, and a STOL kit for just these reasons.) Remain alert for shifting winds below the tree line and resist the temptation to carry excess speed into narrow, short strips. Also pay attention to the airport topography; because of terrain, many runways are used in one direction for



going and you're confident in your skills—and the airplane's capabilities—it's time to pack. Preparing for a multi-day camping trip takes military planning, and requires you to walk the fine line between bringing everything you need (and will use) without dragging along items that'll just gather dust. So let's start here: Leave the television, VCR, microwave, and boom box at home. You're supposed to be getting close to nature, not trammeling the woods into a outdoor version of your home. Bring the cell phone, but don't expect that it'll work in the back country. In the event of an emergency, however, it might literally be a lifesaver.

If you forget everything else, be sure to bring a comprehensive first-aid kit.

## An airplane gives you access to sites and scenery that can be difficult to reach by automobile.

Commercially produced packs are fine but you can build your own, too. Pack water, lots of it—at least a half gallon per person per day. You will likely find potable water at your campsite—that's why you called ahead, after all—but bottled water is necessary if you intend to hike or bicycle away from camp. Plus, it's just good form, particularly if you're flying over desolate landscape getting to your dream camp. Collapsible water jugs are ideally suited to fly-camping and can often be stored under seats or in other oddly shaped parts of the airplane, but also have canteens or smaller vessels in case you decide to hike or bike from camp.

Veteran campers are often divided on the subject of food. How much and what kind do you bring? Depends on your destination, of course, but it's always a good idea to at least bring a minimal supply in case the local store is closed or you get stuck somewhere. Freeze-dried prefabbed food for hikers can be packed easily and, although hardly gourmet, will at least nourish you and your family in a pinch. Take along plenty of snacks for the kids.

Just how do you cook this food, then? Experienced airplane campers use small, propane-powered stoves for the



Air Mod designed this tent (above) to work with high-wing Cessna singles like the Aero SUV. Be sure to bring activities to keep the kids entertained (below).



bulk of the cooking. The sealed canisters are safe enough to fly with, although the better, hiking-grade white fuel cells should be fine as well. Be sure to pack the canisters carefully so they don't float around the cabin in turbu-

lence or run the risk of being punctured in the event of an off-field landing. Don't even think about using avgas, unless you want your outdoor oatmeal tasting a bit like 100LL. And, although it should be obvious, keep your galley



far enough from the airplane to minimize the fire hazard.

Sleeping arrangements seem straightforward, what with the potentially romantic notion of snoozing under the stars. Forget it. You'll need shelter because you might encounter rain or killer mosquitoes. Check that—no *might* about it. Camp often enough and you *will* get rained on and you *will* turn up during the peak insect season.

Buy a good tent. The Aero SUV has a custom-made tent that fits over the wing inboard of the strut. It's also got a bed where the back seats normally fit. Think of this arrangement as providing options. Say you've decided to park in the flood plain and the skies have opened—the airplane bed will at least



allow you to keep your sleeping bag dry. But airplanes are notoriously stuffy, so you'll need to come up with some way to open the windows or doors yet still keep the critters out in the wilderness, where they belong. Buy some mosquito netting and experiment.

Better yet, buy a really good tent.

uninterrupted, waterproofed section that wraps well up into the sidewalls—and generous rain flaps. A well-designed tent will keep you comfortable and dry even in driving rain.

When it comes to packing everything else—clothes, toiletries, kids' books and toys—consider using soft-

Longtime campers prefer rectangular tents because they're more space efficient. Also, if you intend to store your goods in the tent, buy one that's rated for at least one more soul than you're planning to have sleep in there. A four-man tent sleeps four men, and little else. In a tent, you're looking for sealed seams, a bathtub-style bottom—an

One camper takes a snooze in the Aero SUV's modular bed (above). You can fly to idyllic camp sites in a Cessna 206 (below).







## Fold 'em up: take the bikes

Transportation is a key element of enjoying an outdoor adventure—if you're stuck at camp the whole time, you might just miss some of the stunning local scenery. One of the best ways to get around is via bicycle, but carrying full-size bikes in an airplane is often a dicey affair, even if you fly an aerial crate like the Cessna 206. Dahon manufactures a line of folding bikes that helps make normally figured two-wheelers much more compatible with aircraft.

Dahon donated two of its 26-inch-wheel Rockhard mountain bikes to the Aero SUV sweepstakes—so the lucky winner gets not just an airplane and camping gear but a pair of nifty trail-bashers as well. Dahon's Rockhard (retail price \$349.95) is not its top-of-the-line bike—the suspended, high-tech Zero-G is—but it is a good match for the 206's cargo area. With a clever single fold in the middle of the frame, the Dahon breaks down into a package measuring 13 inches by 27 inches by 36 inches. It comes with a nylon carrying bag.

Central to the Rockhard's portability is the central frame cut but also some other clever touches—the handlebar stem folds over on a permanent hinge, and one pedal is supplied with a quick-detach grip. The seat has a quick-release lock as well. Moreover, when folded, the bike can be rolled along on one or both wheels. It takes all of a couple of minutes to fold the bike and about the same amount of time to wrestle it into the carrying bag.




On the trail, the Rockhard acquits itself well. It's not a top-line mountain bike—today's high-end items have suspension systems and weigh virtually nothing—weighing in at 32 pounds and wearing middle-grade Shimano components. Nonetheless, the 21-speed bike runs smoothly through the gears via handlebar-grip shifters and will happily take you down a campsite dirt road or out onto the two-lane leading to town. What's more, the Rockhard's riding position is comfortable for casual touring and has enough adjustability to fit a variety of physiques. It's the perfect addition to the ultimate camping kit.

**Dahon California Inc.**  
833 Meridian Street  
Duarte, California 91010  
626/305-5264  
fax: 626/305-9153  
E-mail: dahoncalif@aol.com

sided bags and simple duffels. Yes, you run the risk of squishing some of your belongings, but by making, say, your packed clothes somewhat malleable, you'll greatly increase the effective carrying capacity of the airplane. Also consider packing your clothes in a day-trip-size backpack—the pack itself will come in handy when hiking side trips. Hard-sided luggage is a real no-no here. Plan for no more than four or five days' clean clothes; on longer trips it makes more sense to do laundry than to pack the entire closet. Do, however, consider the destination's climate when packing, and remember that layering is one of the most efficient ways of dealing with both hot and cold climes. A light windbreaker and a sweatshirt are more adaptable than one heavier coat.

Done right, there are few more satisfying pastimes than airplane camping. An airplane gives you access to sites and scenery that can be impossible or difficult to reach by automobile. What's more, an airplane provides a measure of flexibility that allows you to outrun undesirable weather or enjoy a weekend at a faraway destination while still getting home in time for work on Monday morning. Aero-camping can be one of the best, most rewarding reasons to fly. □

 *Links to additional information about airplane camping and the Aero SUV may be found on AOPA Online ([www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml](http://www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml)). E-mail the author at [marc.cook@aopa.org](mailto:marc.cook@aopa.org)*