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PHOTOGRAPHS BY VARDA GIL

Israel Section Member Experiences Piloting in the United States

In mid-September of 2009, I went on a journey “Following the Fall” in North-eastern USA and from there to Cuba. An important part of the trip was to experience piloting in the U.S., which according to my pilot buddies is significantly different in the U.S. than in our tiny country of Israel. The adventure which left the deepest imprint on me was the flight over Cape Cod.

Cape Cod is a peninsula in Massachusetts, scattered with tiny vacation towns and long beautiful beaches, which turned it into a desired and prestigious tourist site. It was one of the earliest settlements of North America. The town of Provincetown, at the northern tip of the peninsula, was the first to be settled. From its small airport, I took off for a 100-minute flight around the peninsula. Cape Cod is surrounded by many islands, many of which have developed over the years from fishing and trading posts to prestigious tourist sites. One of

them, Martha’s Vineyard, was a popular vacation site for the Kennedy family, where John Fitzgerald Jr., his in-law and his wife Carolyn died in an airplane crash. I rented the plane, a Cessna 172, from a friendly gigantic and goateed American named Bob. He has a small office at the field and one plane, the Cessna, which he uses to fly visitors for romantic fun flights.

The plane, bright and polished inside and out, is parked next to the office. The following day was Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement), and Bob complained that his Jewish wife forced him to fast for the day and made him eat the breakfast meal of gefilte fish and soup with lotkes (precise quotation!). I consoled him by stating that his menu was identical to ours and headed out to the plane and commenced with exterior examinations of the plane. He did not understand what I was doing. “I checked everything!” he said.

I explained that in Israel the pilot is the commander of the plane and is personally responsible. I asked to check the fuel situation, and he informed me that all the tanks were full. Upon my insistence he ran and brought a ladder and measurement tool. “Now I understand why you won all your wars,” he said. “You are so stubborn and thorough.”

All that was left were the checks to be made in the cockpit, which I performed according to the instruction manual for the plane. Bob reported to the regional authorities about a “crazy lady” who was about to take off. Provincetown is a landing strip. The routine is that before alignment, one performs an on-ground 360 degree circle and verifies that there are no planes circling the field or about to land. After I verified “all clear” while performing a “blind broadcast,” we straightened up and took off.

It was a pleasant and warm fall day with a light breeze. The sky was relatively clear, very blue and the visibility was perfect. It was a wonderful day for flying! My friend Varda, who was our photographer, sat in the back of the plane and did a wonderful job. The views were stunning...the ocean in shades of blue, turquoise and light blue, and the water crystal clear. There were hundreds of peaceful islands cuddling in the fall sun. Small towns were peeking out through the green. Many lakes were strewn among them, dotting the green with deep blue shades. Golden beaches stretch the length of the peninsula in the circumference of the surrounding islands. Birds, seals, lighthouses...an endless beauty.

During the entire flight, except for take-off and landing, there was no sound made over the radio. The pilot is responsible to ascertain the location of other planes in the area. There are neither altitude limitations nor planned routes. I'm, of course, relating merely to the Cape Cod area.

However, all good things must come to an end, and our flight was over. We

were already at an angle to base when Bob screamed, "Full throttle, turn to 040 and climb to 700 feet." As a disciplined pilot, I followed his orders. Only after I leveled off did he explain that there were whales in the proximity, and we were flying there. After about seven minutes, we saw them. Bob took command of the stick and down he went to zero altitude. Well, I do exaggerate, more like 150-200 feet. There were a number of whales accompanied by their young offspring. They played in the water, jumped slightly and extended their head and tail out of the water. We circled a number of times and were excited to experience this lovely spectacle.

Then, back we went. I returned for a landing from 500 feet to a lengthy finale. Bob seemed to me a bit worried before the landing - who knew what this crazy woman would do to his plane. But, everything went just right, and he looked satisfied. I descended the plane, intoxicated from the views and the beauty and swore to myself that this might have been my first visit to Cape Cod, but certainly not the last one.

