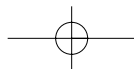
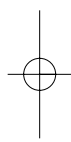



Big ideas come easy to John McAfee. First he pioneered antivirus software, then instant messaging. Now the mercurial magnate thinks he's onto something truly extraordinary: personal Icarus machines.



## Production Final

**SKY CAPTAIN:**  
John Kemmeries, an  
ultralight pioneer, circles  
the Sky Gypsies fleet with  
the greatest of ease.



John  
McAfee's  
**Flying  
Circus**  
Wants You!

BY TOM CLYNES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAWN KISH

“**And now, I’m going to count from one to five,”** John McAfee says, his baritone dharma-salesman voice resonating through the small theater filled with meditating pilots. **“And when I get to five, go ahead and open your eyes. Ready?”**

#### One...

I’ve always considered myself an überskeptic, immune to the whole range of hypnotic experience. But I’ll be damned if John McAfee doesn’t have me believing one morning in early January that I can fly like a bird.

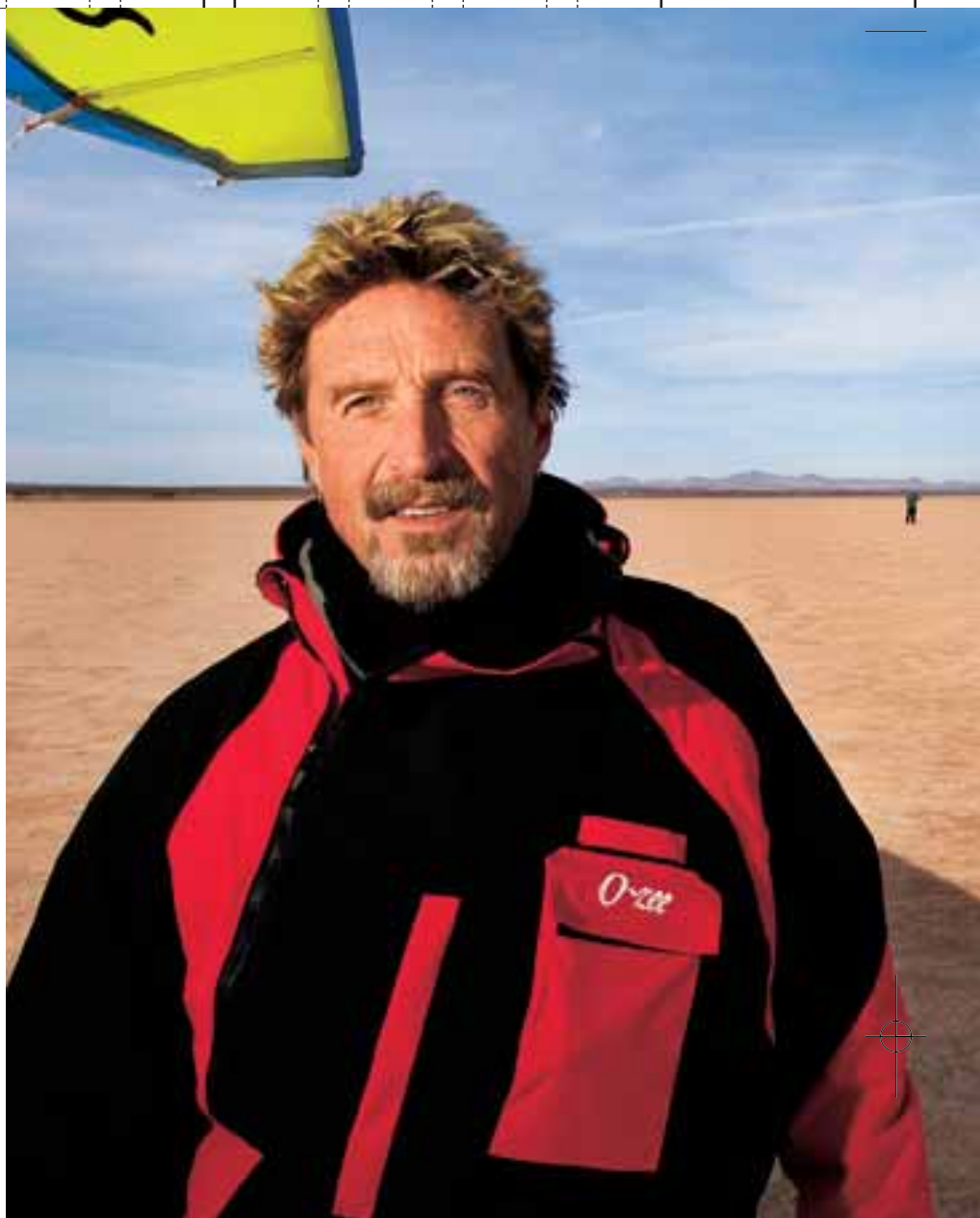
The day after my arrival at McAfee’s Sky Gypsies compound in the sparse and spectacular border country of southwestern New Mexico, I’m on the back of an open-cockpit, winged tricycle, swooping through the air above the Peloncillo Mountains. Up front, in the bird-brain position, McAfee pulls the control bar toward his right hip and sends us diving into Skeleton Canyon.

“This is what Icarus dreamed of,” McAfee yells, as we pirouette around a granite spire, then level off five feet above the floor of the Animas Valley, skimming over ocotillos and longhorn cattle at 65 miles an hour. McAfee stomps the throttle and aims for the crown of a small butte, then flicks the bar forward to spirit us over the top.

As we turn eastward in a broad, climbing arc, I glance over my shoulder and catch a glimpse of nine other airborne craft. They fly behind us in fast-and-loose formation, silhouetted against a backdrop of looming mountains. McAfee leads the squadron across a parched plain toward a sprawling, dry lakebed, and eases us down until the rear tires make tentative contact with the playa. Then, confident that the surface is solid, he cuts the throttle and plants the trike firmly on the ground. One by one, the others drop out of the sky and come to rest in a semicircle.

McAfee takes off his helmet and reaches into his saddlebag for a self-heating can of coffee as three women in red-and-black jumpsuits hop from their machines and run toward each other with hugs and hoots. The hugs become tackles, and the tackles devolve into a giddy wrestling match in the dust.

Opening the coffee, McAfee slices his finger deeply on the pull tab. Someone runs for a bandage as McAfee holds the wound together with his uninjured hand, squinting



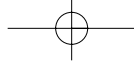
as he takes in a panorama of Mad Max flying machines, dust-kicking wrestlers, and jagged mountains pinned under a cerulean sky. As the dripping blood turns the dust at McAfee’s feet into dark mud, he glances at his watch and a broad smile creeps across his face. It’s high noon in the middle of nowhere, and John McAfee’s flying circus has arrived.

**IT’S HARD TO IMAGINE** another sexagenarian multimillionaire having as much fun as McAfee, the lead evangelist of the new adventure sport he has dubbed aerotrekking. According to McAfee, people can indeed fly like birds, and they don’t need full pilots’ licenses or constrictive, gas-guzzling tin cans to do it.

What they do need are wide-open spaces, a bit of training, and a new class of flying machines with kite wings, motor-driven rear propellers, and handlebars for steering. Variously called weight-shift ultralights, personal air vehicles (PAVs), or simply trikes, the machines have a range of 300 miles or about five hours in the air.

McAfee’s backcountry version of ultralight flying may or may not catch on, but if it does, it wouldn’t be the first time the





**THE GURU** Clockwise from center: McAfee has used his Silicon Valley wealth to create an adrenaline commune; a trike in flight; backcountry camping; cartwheeling pilots.



"We've got to try this," he told Irwin.

"I just said, Uh-oh, here we go," says Irwin, who had known McAfee long enough to understand that his whims often accelerate quickly into all-consuming obsessions. When the couple got back to the U.S., McAfee contacted John Kemmeries, a PAV and hang gliding pioneer who builds ultralights using parts imported from Europe. Kemmeries arranged lessons for McAfee and Irwin, and both were immediately hooked.

"I learned to fly in a Cessna back in the mid-seventies and it didn't turn me on," says McAfee. "It was like flying a tin can. But when I flew a trike, I thought, OK, this is what flying is supposed to be about. I could feel the air, I could smell the vegetation. It's as close as you can come to being a bird."

Out on the playa, we snack and drink coffee and hot cocoa, gushing about our airborne adventures. "Did you see that herd of mule deer?" McAfee asks Kemmeries, who reclines in his flight suit, his partially paralyzed legs stretched out on the cracked mud. In 1994 Kemmeries' paraglider folded in half and tossed him against a mountainside in British Columbia, breaking his back and leaving him unable to walk without a severe limp.

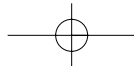
McAfee looks at least a decade younger than his 62 years, with a tousled mane of hair frosted at the tips, a goatee, and an earring. As we swap stories about the morning's flying, he swoops with his bandaged hand to describe the flight of an eagle that passed under us.

McAfee abandoned yoga instruction—"It became a job," he says—to fly around the Southwest with Kemmeries and a former guided-missile engineer named Neil Bungard, also with us on the playa. In the wisdom of traditional aviation, height equals safety, but the three men were intrigued by the daredevil possibilities of

world has found itself swept up in one of his improbable schemes. It was McAfee who, in the late 1980s, informed millions (including me) that malicious "viruses" could infect and kill our electronic equipment. McAfee's ingenious protection software netted him \$100 million by the time he sold his antivirus company in 1994. A few years later, he got into another new thing—instant messaging—and made millions more.

But with business success came the unwelcome creep of drudgery and responsibility. In what was to become a pattern of relentless self-renewal (and, some would say, selfishness), the entrepreneur shed his companies, divorced his spouse, and started teaching transcendental meditation and yoga. He wrote four books with titles such as *Beyond the Siddhis: Supernatural Powers and the Sutras of Patanjali* and *The Fabric of Self*—books McAfee now says he "wouldn't suggest that you or anyone else bother reading."

The beginning of the end of McAfee's introspective phase came during a 2002 trip to Nepal with his girlfriend, Jennifer Irwin, now 27. Thumbing through an in-flight magazine, he noticed a story about a new class of go-anywhere aircraft, designed by French aviators, that are essentially hang gliders with motors, props, and wheels attached. Depending on the model, the planes can hit 110 miles an hour or, just as important for this low-altitude sport, a minimum speed of 40 miles an hour.





ultralow-level flight. Flying a few feet over the mountainous terrain, they learned how to run through tight canyons, sneak up on hunting coyotes, and sluice down mountainsides like airborne skiers.

They founded a club called the Sky Gypsies and, with a growing band of followers, began flying around the desert, landing wherever they pleased and discovering hidden caves and ancient ruins. There are rumors—unconfirmed—of under-the-radar dashes into Mexico and landings on interstate highways.

McAfee sold his ranch in Colorado, and he and Irwin moved to Tucson to be closer to the sport's U.S. epicenter, the dry, wide-open Southwest. McAfee wanted to push ever farther into the backcountry, but the expeditions were restricted by the small planes' limited range. To solve that problem, he decided to develop an 1,100-mile wilderness circuit. He and Irwin scouted for six months by air and off-road vehicle, then he bought land and built a network of eight air bases stretching in a half-circle from Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, to Oro Valley, Arizona.

The Sky Gypsies' home base is in Rodeo, New Mexico. Seventy miles from a supermarket and in the middle of the most sparsely populated county in the lower 48, the complex includes a coffee shop, a yoga center, an Internet lounge, an organic food market, a 35-seat

movie theater, and four air-conditioned hangars. For visitors, McAfee has rolled in 12 restored vintage trailers—including a Spartan that was owned by Howard Hughes—and a dozen classic cars.

Pilots-in-training can enjoy the facilities at a subsidized price of \$45 a night, not including lessons. "I'm not trying to turn a profit," he says. "I want to provide an environment where anyone who has the spirit of adventure can come out and participate." So far, he has spent about \$12 million on the hobby he believes is the greatest thing on Earth.

### ...Two...

Approaching the door of the Sky Gypsy Café, I hear laughter and music, the din of what sounds like a party inside—although a sign beside the door warns "This is an alcohol- and drug-free zone." ADVENTURE

photographer Dawn Kish intercepts me at the door, wide-eyed.

"This place," she whispers, "is really f—ing wild."

As I step inside, a cone-headed man offers his hand and introduces himself as the lead flight instructor. John "Ole" Olson has stuffed his yellow flight balaclava with a soda can and is organizing a "book

**FLIGHT PLAN:** The author's route (below) was but a small sampling of the Sky Gypsies' terrain (above).



MAP BY JASON LEE

## AEROTREKKING

signing,” in which he is calling on all present to sign his self-published memoir, *Into the Wild Blue Yonder*. He immediately offers to give me flying lessons. “I can get you certified to fly on the planet Beldar,” he says.

“Ole,” yells McAfee, who is holding forth at the espresso machine across the café, “I’m not flying with you if you’re wearing that!”

McAfee introduces me to Robert Combs, who was the stunt pilot in those Wrigley’s hang gliding commercials from the early 1980s. Combs, the first person to fly off New Zealand’s Mount Cook and Japan’s Mount Fuji, is now in the process of moving his flight training operation from Hawaii to Rodeo.

“This here is the best thing that’s happened for the sport in the whole country, maybe the whole world,” Combs says. “We’ve got 7,000 feet of runway, tons of hangar space, and year-round flying.

“But sometimes,” he says, glancing over at Olson, “I feel like I’m part of a wild Indian gang.”

Combs introduces me to a lovely blue-haired woman named Goldi Ivashkov, who recently left her job as a hypnotherapist in Los Angeles to learn how to fly. Within three weeks of arriving at Rodeo, she had flown solo, gotten a job at the café, and dyed her long golden hair.

“When I was growing up, it was always my sister who was the artistic one, the one dyeing her hair and doing interesting things,” says Ivashkov. “When I’m out here in the desert with John, I feel like I can do anything, I can be anyone I want to be. I suppose it’s like a cult—only probably healthier.”

For a multimillionaire, McAfee lives in a remarkably open way, having welcomed into his life a random group of folks whose only real common denominator is a passion for flying tiny aircraft. “I’m trying to foster a culture of adventure as expressed through aerotrekking,” McAfee tells me. “I want to create the premier training facility in the world.”

But McAfee doesn’t harbor any illusions about putting 3-D transportation into the hands of the masses. “I’m not sure this is for the mainstream American—you know, the people who spend Sundays sitting on the couch and watching football. This is for the

kind of person who, if they lived in the 18th century, would be wandering around the South Pacific in rickety boats or trying to find the source of the Nile—your Richard Burtons and Charles Darwins and Robert Louis Stevensons.”

Usually, the Sky Gypsies fly between their eight bases. But this week, the first of the new year, McAfee has put together a 200-mile overland fly-and-camp trek. It’s the worst time of year for flying in the Southwest, but we’ve got what looks like a 36-hour window of relatively calm winds.

The plan is to be wheels-up at 9:30 a.m., but by the time we’re ready to get off the ground, one plane has a dead battery and a gusty crosswind has picked up. After one close call—Irwin drags a wingtip on takeoff—everyone gets airborne, and we fly south from Rodeo, paralleling the Peloncillo Mountains until we’re over the spot where Geronimo and his Apaches made their last stand in 1886.

We turn east into Skeleton Canyon, the setting of one of the most persistent buried-treasure legends in the Southwest. “There are some places you can go on these trikes that you can’t get to any other way,” McAfee had told me earlier. That sounded like an unlikely brag, but Skeleton Canyon just might be one of those spots. It’s owned by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, but the entrances are on the property of two intransigent ranchers who have gated them off and steadfastly refused access to anyone—even the federal government.

“But no one owns the air,” says McAfee, “so we fly in there whenever we want. One of these days I’m going to go in and hunt for that treasure.”

Out on the playa, I hop on the back of Kemmeries’ machine, which peels away from the earth with neck-straining torque. Kemmeries’ trike is the most powerful of the fleet, and, with more than 12,000 hours in his logbook, he is by far the senior Sky Gypsies pilot.

I had been impressed with McAfee’s flying, but Kemmeries flies with a confidence and a smoothness that are positively transcendent; it’s as though he’s scoffed at fate by replacing his damaged legs with wings. We separate from the others and skim over the desert, so low that if I were to extend a foot, I’d likely get a toe full of cactus needles.

The landscape unreels below us, a vast unmoving scene animated

Sky Gypsies headquarters



## AEROTREKKING

by our forward motion and the occasional longhorn or coyote. We keep our eyes open for javelinas and wild bison, which are known to graze in the isolated Animas Valley.

Kemmeries says he often sees immigrants and smugglers making their way across the desert. We don't see any today, but we do catch sight of two Border Patrol SUVs parked along a lonely stretch of road. Spotting us heading north from the border, they start their vehicles and follow us. Kemmeries engages them in a game of cat and mouse, diving down to the deserted road for a touch-and-go landing, then quickly zooming skyward.

"I love to screw around with these guys," he says.

**ALTHOUGH KITE-WINGED** trikes are still somewhat of a renegade realm of aviation, they got a boost in 2005 when the Federal Aviation Administration created a Sport Pilot license that reduced the training required for recreational flying. But in 2007 the FAA brought the sport under stricter control, certifying aircraft and licensing pilots and examiners. So far government inspectors have made only one visit to remote Rodeo, to check the registration stickers on the planes in the hangars. The FAA found everything hunky-dory at the Sky Gypsies compound, but McAfee's neighbors were a harder sell. According to Kip Calahan, a realtor who sold McAfee his land, most of the locals—who include bird-watchers, amateur astronomers, artists, and hardscrabble old-timers—weren't too happy when they heard that a rich outsider was on his way in to build an airstrip. "Some folks had a big ol' fit," Calahan says. "There were petitions and rumors that they wanted to fly drugs in. But then people got to know them, and now they're coming

**GYPSY GIRLS:**  
Jen Irwin (below) and  
Goldi Ivashkov in the  
Arizona desert



around. Even the woman across the street had to admit that it's hard to complain about those little lawn mowers in the sky. And now she can't wait to learn how to fly."

McAfee, for his part, put his charm to work, visiting local ranchers, making donations to the youth center and rescue squad, and offering free rides—which he estimates two-thirds of nearby residents have taken him up on. He also posts flyers inviting locals to free movies, although his tastes—foreign films and early Hollywood—haven't exactly been filling the theater.

"The only locals who came to our first film"—a subtitled, three-and-a-half-hour epic by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa—"were teenagers," says McAfee, "and they seemed pretty much dumbfounded by it."

To unload furniture and other belongings consolidated from his previous moves, he advertised a giveaway at the yoga center, inviting his neighbors to come and take what they wanted. People who had been hoping to find a nice card table or a boom box ended up walking away with Oriental rugs, Stickley furniture, and high-end stereo gear.

"I'm guessing I must have given away a million dollars' worth of stuff that day," McAfee says. "But it's not as gracious as it sounds. I didn't have room for it, and I didn't feel like dealing with the hassle of selling it."

### ... Three ...

It's late afternoon when we come in for bumpy landings on a high plateau known as Maternity Meadow. As we set up tents and get a fire going, McAfee flies back to Rodeo for a weather report. He returns grim-faced and informs the pilots that the forecast has changed; the weatherman now predicts high winds and rain for late tonight.

"If the planes blow away during the night, we've got a 35-mile walk through rough terrain," he says. "We can't take the chance."

Some of us elect to stay behind and *(Continued on page 111)*

## ADVENTURE GUIDE

# THE SKY GYPSIES

Membership in the Sky Gypsies has its privileges: namely, the freedom to explore wilderness, discover ruins, run with coyotes, and soar with eagles—in your own fantastic flying machine.

**>THE MACHINES:** Aerotrekking machines are a distinct sub-species of "light sport aircraft," kite-winged planes that are also known as weight-shift ultralights, trikes, or personal air vehicles (PAVs). Powered by rear propellers and steered with a bar at the pilot's fingertips, the trikes have a range of 300 miles or about five hours of airtime. Expensive models can hit 110 miles an hour or,

when low-level flying is necessary, a minimum speed of 40 miles an hour. Trikes go for anywhere from \$20,000 (for a minimalist machine) to \$120,000 (fully loaded).

**>TRAINING:** A Sport Pilot license requires at least 20 hours of flight instruction, at about \$200 an hour. More than 500 pilots nationwide have been certified after a series of tests.

**>SAFETY:** Aerotrekking routes are rated like whitewater rivers for danger and difficulty. Low-altitude flight requires maximum attention, and the planes are unsafe for high winds or night flying. There's no crash data for ultralights, since the FAA doesn't track accidents and the National Transportation Safety Board rarely investigates them. But crashes, including fatal ones, are not unknown.

**>THE SKY GYPSIES:** The aerotrekking club is based in Rodeo, New Mexico, about 120 miles

east of Tucson. Arizona airstrips are located near Rimrock, Pleasant Rock, Kansas Settlement, and La Cholla. New Mexico strips are near Deming, Truth or Consequences, Rodeo, and the Plains of St. Augustine. About 200 members pay an annual fee ranging from \$1,000 all the way up to \$270,000. The club is invitation-only with a strict no-alcohol policy. Contact the Sky Gypsies at [skygypsies.com](http://skygypsies.com) or [aircreation.net](http://aircreation.net). For more about the Sky Gypsy Café, one of the most remote coffeehouses in the U.S., see [skygypsycoffee.com](http://skygypsycoffee.com). —T.C.

## AEROTREKKING

(Continued from page 102)

camp without the trikes. Meanwhile, McAfee will lead the squadron home and come back by four-wheel drive later in the night.

"I want everyone in the air within 30 minutes," McAfee directs. He's already airborne and heading home by the time Briggs Wood, one of the Sky Gypsies' least experienced pilots, begins his takeoff roll. No one is sure how it happens—maybe his foot brushes the brake pedal—but as Wood accelerates the trike skids out of control. He manages to veer away from the other pilots and machines, then overcorrects, rolling the trike and plowing the leading edge of his right wing into the dirt. When he comes to a rest, the plane is on its side, broken into several pieces. Wood is shaken up but unhurt.

Over the radio, McAfee hears about the crash, but the "no injuries" at first gets lost in static. The episode reignites one of his worst fears.

A year ago, McAfee's 22-year-old nephew, flight instructor Joel Bitow, was flying from Rodeo to Bisbee, Arizona, with a student. No one knows why, but somehow they flew into the side of a canyon and both were killed. A teardrop added to the Sky Gypsies tattoo on McAfee's arm commemorates the tragedy.

There's no crash data for ultralights, since the FAA doesn't track accidents and the National Transportation Safety Board doesn't investigate them. But the incident prompted McAfee to reevaluate the flight center's training requirements, though it didn't dim his enthusiasm for flying. "Every adventure sport has risks," he says. "The issue is whether you can manage them. When we're aerotrekking, we're always riding the line between safety and danger."

Wood's trike is unflyable; it will have to be taken apart and trucked out, a process that will take half the night. While part of the team works on dismantling the machine, the rest of us get hot dogs and biscuits roasting over the campfire, under an extraordinarily clear and starry sky.

Just before midnight, McAfee returns. I tell him I'm having a blast flying around in the desert, though it is not without an environmentalist's guilty conscience. I ask him if the world really needs another form of motorized recreation.

McAfee counters that the lightweight trikes get about 30 miles a gallon—better than most SUVs—but since they literally travel as the crow flies, they have a major efficiency

advantage over terrestrial vehicles. Also, their impact is minimized by the fact that they're not usually in contact with the ground, so they don't mar the backcountry with tire tracks. And, although they're not required to do so, the Sky Gypsies scrupulously avoid flying over designated wilderness.

Still, says McAfee, there's room for improvement. In McAfee's private hangar, former Raytheon engineer Bungard is building a "green" trike with a specially tweaked electric motor and a superquiet five-blade prop. Test flights are scheduled for this summer.

With the ringleader's return, the desert party shifts into high gear. Around the fire are millionaires, rocket scientists, fighter pilots, and a pistol-packing gal from Georgia. More wrestling breaks out, and the conversation ranges from Heisenberg's uncertainty principle to sadomasochism to Milton Erickson's rapid-induction hypnosis techniques. The campfire talk flows fast and uninhibited, and the laughter is nearly nonstop—though no one has imbibed anything stronger than coffee.

I ask McAfee about his aversion to alcohol, even at times like this, when nobody's

## AEROTREKING

flying or driving. “I don’t actually mind people drinking,” he tells me. “I just don’t want them doing it around me. With every drink, you lose 8 percent of your IQ. Once you quit, you start to notice that people get really stupid when they drink.”

And yet, when I step back from the fire and look up, I feel giddy, almost stoned. Atop the high meadow, in the darkest corner of the contiguous U.S., it seems that I can feel the Earth spinning through the universe. I jokingly ask Ivashkov, the former hypnotherapist, if McAfee slipped some mojo into the meditation—then I add that I’ve always been one of those people who can’t be hypnotized.

Ivashkov just smiles, and I notice in her green eyes the flickering dance of firelight. “Everyone,” she says, “can be hypnotized.”

### ...Four...

The next afternoon, back at Sky Gypsies HQ, I strap myself into the pilot’s seat of a trike set up for training, with instructor Robert Combs tucked in tightly behind me. I taxi past a steamroller festooned with a flapping pirate flag, then turn onto the runway. After taking

a deep breath, I accelerate. At about 40 miles an hour, Combs tells me to push forward on the control bar, which pivots the wing’s leading edge upward. The trike springs into the air with a force that catches me unawares. Suddenly, I’m flying.

This is a whole lot different from any other piloting I’ve ever done. In the open air, dangling from the wing, I can feel every living breath of wind. I climb out over the broad valley, and as I reach the height of the lower mountain peaks, gusts buffet the wing. My first impulse is to overcorrect, but when I yank the bar it only throws the trike further off balance.

“Try loosening up on the bar,” Combs tells me. “Let the trike correct itself and it’ll settle back into equilibrium.”

On my first day at the Sky Gypsies compound, during the meditation, McAfee had given similar instructions. “Let go of everything you know,” he told the assembled pilots. “Forget all your knowledge and just . . . simply . . . experience.”

I loosen up and let the wing find its own way through the air. In an instant, flying becomes much easier. I cascade up and down, practicing landings and takeoffs, then climb up toward the high peaks of the

Chiricahuas. Combs forewarns me, then reaches down and cuts the engine, leaving nothing in my ears but the rushing wind. I glide between the mountains, experiencing the trike’s wingtips as extensions of my own outstretched arms. It’s not a bird I’ve become, I think, but rather the flying human of my childhood dreams.

So surreal is the experience that it occurs to me, as I turn my last lazy circles above the desert, that the past few days—the flying, the laughs, the desert world of cone-headed aces and blue-haired beauties and shape-shifting possibilities—might have been just one long, hypnotic dream sequence, a runaway unspooling of imagination.

Drifting down toward the airstrip, I think back again to that first day, to the moment when McAfee voiced the final note of his count-up to the meditation’s end.

“Five,” McAfee said, and in the dimly lit theater a dozen pilots opened their eyes. At the foot of the stage, the Sky Gypsies’ leader came into focus, sitting serenely and watching his flock blinking and stretching and rubbing bleary eyes.

“OK,” McAfee said. “Did anyone go anywhere interesting?” ▲