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Lake Martin instructor teaches students to fly seaplanes

By Louise Emeagi
 Montgomery Advertiser

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Flying an airplane and flying a seaplane is as different as traveling economy class vs. first class. One is more uninhibited than the other.

Stringent rules and regulations fly out the window onboard seaplane flights, an experience that Charles Welden, owner of the Water Wings Seaplane School on Lake Martin, describes as "real flying."

Seaplane flying is a liberated form of flying. It involves a lot more than following instructions, punching buttons and landing in designated areas, said Welden. "You are in total control. It's freedom," he said.

Seaplanes, or as Welden calls them, "flying floats" fly at 50 to 1,000 feet, which is considerably less than modern jet planes that fly at altitudes up around 40,000 feet. But that's the beauty of it, contends Buzz Veal, who recently ventured into the skies on a seaplane while undertaking flying lessons from Welden.

"As you fly over the water it's fun to see the people fishing and water skiing below," he said. "They wave at me and I wave back."

Observing life on Lake Martin from the skies is not uncommon for Welden. He is a member of the Seaplane Pilots Association, has been flying seaplanes for 25 years and started the Water Wings Seaplane School five years ago.

Earning a seaplane license is not an arduous task.

After a two-day course, at a cost of approximately \$1,000, students generally graduate with their "wings." This typically consists of six hours of flight in structions from Welden at \$130.00 per hour and a two-hour examination overseen by a flight examiner at a cost of \$280.00.

Students find flying to be the easy part, according to Welden. It's the landing, he suggests, that gives students the most difficulty. The type of landing depends on the surface of the water. For instance, landing on rough water tends to cause a few more bumps than landing on a glassy surface.

"A nice and controlled landing is easy on glassy water," said Welden before stating that hearing the impact is the only way to know you've actually hit the surface. However, landing on glassy



Charles Welden teaches how to fly sea planes at his school called Water Wings Sea Plane School. Welden is shown here with his sea plane on Saturday, June 10, 2006 at his home on Lake Martin.

-- (Montgomery Advertiser, Karen S. Doerr)

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water is not always smooth sailing. The image of the seaplane that is reflected off the water appears further than it is, making it difficult to judge the landing, similar to a rearview mirror.

The difficulty of landing a flying float shouldn't deter people from pursuing the experience.

"You're in good hands (with Welden)," said Veal, who proceeded to explain that his comment was based solely on his experience at Water Wings and not his friendship with Welden.

"Honest, he won't take you up unless conditions are just right. He's an excellent instructor."

Welden's flying experience helped Veal overcome his apprehension.

"I was a little nervous at first," laughed Veal, who soon learned that he had plenty of room for error. "The landing strip is so much wider for a sea plane. It's 1,000 feet wide, as opposed to 100 feet wide," he said.

Each year Welden trains at least 25 students, most of whom are between 40 and 50 years of age and come from the Birmingham and Atlanta areas.

The lure is simple, exclaims Veal, who compares seaplane flying to a weekend hobby like golf.

"It's fun. You land, go swimming, and hop right in (the sea plane) again," Veal said.

Welden has also had his share of people who've crossed the seas for the flying float experience.

"I've trained people from Austria and the Netherlands," Weldon said.

On water, seaplanes travel at 35 to 45 miles an hour, the same as speedboats, but in the air travel 100 mph.

Thus, when Welden fancies dinner at Sinclair's lakefront restaurant, he jumps in a flying float and arrives within a fraction of the time it would take to drive.

"It takes an hour and 15 minutes to drive, (but in the plane) it takes 10 minutes," Welden said.

However, if you're thinking about taking the family to dinner on a seaplane, think again.

Seaplanes are not spacious.

"They seat two to three people," Welden said. "The third place is more of a child seat in the back."

Regardless, flying floats on Lake Martin is a first class experience.

"It's a wonderful thing to do," said Veal.

For more information go to <http://www.waterwings.com/>

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