

# Take Yourself on a Vacation — via Zeppelin!

A new San Francisco-based company has just the airship for you.

Recently, I rented an airplane and flew myself to my high-school reunion. How cool, I thought, coming over in an airplane. That'll show 'em just how cool a guy I really am, a guy everyone last saw wearing bell bottoms and covered in hair. Truth be told, I wasn't that excited to see most of my classmates, fat and balding or otherwise showing the wear of the 30-plus years since I'd seen them last. But there was one person who I looked forward to crossing trails with, a girl named Mindy from Mr. Blattstein's 12th grade history class. Ah, Mindy.

At the dance, I eventually swaggered over to reintroduce myself to Mindy. I was elated to see there was no ring on her finger! I told her what a cool guy I'd become and even showed her a photo on my phone of the airplane I'd flown over. She squinted at the picture, gulped and gave me a look like she thought I should have my medication checked before I crawled back into one of those little aluminum death traps. She was not impressed, and I fretted over the experience all the way back home.

What kind of an airplane *would* impress her? Something bigger, more unusual? What if I came back flying a zeppelin?

"Well, you can actually do that," Rachel Loya from Airship Ventures tells me, answering my question about flying all the way over to Mindy's house halfway across the country. The company operates the 246-foot *Eureka* (14 feet longer than a Boeing 747), a brand-new, lighter-than-air zeppelin that's just begun service in the United States. "You're

probably flirting with a six-digit number," she adds, referring to the cost of chartering the airship and crew to fly 1,000 miles away at a cruise speed of 35 to 40 mph. That information not only impressed me, but naturally took me to the next great question: Is it worth spending that kind of money on a girl who had the chance to recognize my greatness more than 30 years ago in history class?

Airship Ventures schedules regular flights from Moffett Field in San Francisco, the only company in North America offering zeppelin rides to the general public. Their website lists almost daily departures for once-in-a-lifetime flightseeing over the Bay Area and as far south as Monterey, California. They also do regular runs all the way down to Long Beach, following the California coastline at little more than 1,000 feet in altitude. If that didn't impress Mindy, I didn't know what would. Should I fly her out for a test run?

"We have partnerships with a number of hotels," Rachel goes on to tell me, filling me in on how I could board the zeppelin in San Fran and sip fine California wine all the way



to Southern California, then transfer to a five-star hotel. What romance — fine wine, a fine hotel and traveling by airship. Mindy wouldn't have a chance. A hundred years ago, fliers crisscrossed the Atlantic in airships, sleeping and dining their way from Europe to the United States and back. It wasn't until the Hindenburg tragedy that the big airships fell out of favor.

Oh, yeah, the *Hindenburg*. What if Mindy actually remembers that day in history class when we learned about the *Hindenburg*? Again, Rachel, comes to my rescue, telling me that the *Hindenburg* was filled with hydrogen (highly combustible); the new zeppelin operated by Airship Ventures is filled with nonflammable helium.

The *Eureka* is actually quite a platform for



travel. It comes with a pilot and a flight attendant, and there's room for 12 folks to ride along in the quiet cabin. You can stand up inside without even bumping your head or settle down on the big couch-like bench seat at the rear of the ship. There's even a bathroom aboard for those kinds of in-flight emergencies.

Airship Ventures even offers flight lessons. Several times a year, they hold single-day training courses where pilots go through

ground school, then actually get some stick time to put in their logbooks. I wondered if Mindy would feel more comfortable on our trip if she knew I was also an experienced zeppelin driver. Probably so. I told Rachel I would definitely sign up for one of their popular classes.

With all the information in hand, I e-mailed Mindy and asked if she'd like to take a trip with me on my zeppelin. We could visit Hawaii, Fiji, the North Pole — it didn't

matter. I waited a week for her to answer. She finally told me that she was afraid of flying, but that her husband and kids would like to take a ride if my blimp was ever in their neck of the woods. You bet, I answered, next time I was flying to my castle in the south of Spain.

For more information, log on to [AirshipVentures.com](http://AirshipVentures.com), or call 650.969.8100. Airport: San Jose Intl. (SJC).

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