



RICHARD MICHAEL FRUITT/Staff Photographer

Starlight Flight owner David Snell offers a different vantage point for yule viewing.

Looking for even more dazzle? The sky's the limit

By MIKE DANIEL
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Crawling through North Texas' glitziest holiday neighborhoods in the family car is a holiday tradition for many. But there *are* other options.

Dainty horse-drawn carriages shuttle through Highland Park and a few other spots. The occasional limousine invades some streets like a sleek metal shark. Areas such as Deerfield in Plano are even good for walking tours (c'mon, it's not *that* cold).

Some people simply rise above it all and avoid the traffic entirely. Really. After years of canvassing the area to compile our annual list of the most worthy light displays, we sure did.

See, we took to the air.

Starlight Flight offers nighttime holiday excursions at 1,000 to 1,500 feet in a Cessna 172, a four-seat turboprop commonly used by flight instructors. Operating out of Addison Airport since 1991, the holiday-light flights are a neat seasonal addition to the company's usual aerial-tour lineup.

Sure, helicopters are another choice, and a few companies here offer flights. They can hover, legally fly lower and have more interior room, but they

typically cost about three times as much and are significantly louder.

We took the Starlight Flight tour last weekend with owner David Snell. Also on board was Gregg Karr of Saginaw, who received the outing as a 50th birthday present from his sister, Carla. Mr. Karr's good-natured daughter, Tosha Stidham, also rode along nervously; she'd never been in a small plane before.

And it *is* small. Think of the Cessna as a Volkswagen Beetle that can go up and down as well as back and forth. The wings are mounted on top of the fuselage, though, which allows passengers nearly unobstructed viewing.

Those vistas are predictably spectacular, even though most notable neighborhoods weren't fully lit up yet (but should be by this weekend). While airborne, we found a couple of new spots to investigate more when ground-bound again: the residential area southwest of Royal Lane and Abrams Road in Lake Highlands, and a house near Hillcrest and Lebanon roads in Frisco that has its entire yard girded by lights that dance to music broadcast on a local radio station.

Best of all, we covered roughly 200 miles — including down-

town Dallas twice, North Arlington, East Dallas, Plano and Frisco — in about 65 minutes.

Mr. Snell is a gentle pilot, banking the craft softly to circle over select neighborhoods and other points of interest. He steers at steeper angles as the flight progresses, but will hold back if any occupant becomes antsy. He even uses the wing tips to point to landmarks.

Takeoff and landing were both buttery for such a small craft, and the vibration is similar to that on a V-twin motorcycle at speed. It's quick, too; it took about four minutes to descend, land, deplane and rush to the restroom (whew!).

Two tips: Bring a video camera instead of a still one, since sharp pictures are difficult to snap after sundown from a plane moving at 140 to 150 mph (now you know why TV news organizations use helicopters). And yes, use the "facilities" just before takeoff; a pit stop at a fast-food restaurant isn't an option.

Starlight Flight's Christmas light tours are available through Jan. 1, daily from 5 p.m. to midnight at the Addison Jetport Terminal, 4505 Claire Chennault St., Addison Airport. Reservations are required. Metro 817-588-1817.

www.starlightflight.com.
► \$130 per couple for 30 minutes, \$180 for one hour; \$15 to \$20 for an extra passenger.