



NEWSLETTER

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An Adventure at Air Venture

By Mike Jerger



OSHKOSH Most people say this word when they think of that big convention of airplanes and vendors and masses of people who come from all over the United States and some foreign countries to see the world's greatest assembly of commercially produced and homebuilt aircraft of all kinds and shapes.

This year, 2013, I decided to make my trek to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, to see this event. Officially, the name of this event is EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2013. If you are familiar with this in any way, you know that the event lasts only one week. But in reality, planning for, and dealing with the issues of this event, goes on all year round.

I made the decision to attend AirVenture 2013 about eight weeks in advance of opening day. I had wanted to attend for the past eight years, after joining EAA chapter 72 and hearing of this event from members of the chapter. In the past, there were always good reasons why I could not attend. . . Work was always a factor, finding a place to stay, rationally justifying the long drive and the expenses. This year, the desire to attend won out over all the objections I recited in the past.

Cost? I could afford it. Expenses were under control and I had a little extra money to play with. My traveling companion could split traveling cost and we would eat cheap. Well, anyway, my idea of cheap eats is too cheap for her. She expected a couple of nicer meals at places like Red Lobster or Longhorn Steak house. But to cut expenses, we took along some

grocery food and placed those items into a cooler. Eating from that cooler kept us from spending too much on food and helped keep us moving when we wanted to cover around 600 miles or so in one day. We took along cold cuts, egg salad, cheese, crackers, bread, soda, milk; you get the picture. We purchased ice every other day or so.

Esther made lodging and ticket purchase from on-line sites a couple of weeks before we left. Purchasing Air Venture tickets in advance saved us some money. Booking rooms early guaranteed us a place to get some sleep and get ready for the next day. None of the hotels during the trip were 5-star rated, and a couple of them were not even worth recommending to friends, but they had hot water and clean bedding and did not cost too much. Well, okay, one of them was overpriced, had no hot water, had an orange extension cord thrown on the floor, and lacked a television. One had a mattress that felt more like box springs. Maybe next time we will go more upscale.

We drove her Toyota van. We had the engine and drive train serviced before we departed and they gave us no problems. It seems that little annoying things occur on every long trip. The only really annoying hiccup was that the rear door opening hatch broke a plastic part only four hours into the trip. We could not get easy access to our suitcases. Oh well. (We found out later that this hatch mechanism is a weakness of Toyota vans. It is a little pricey to fix.)

We drove to Des Moines on the first day. Seven hundred miles in one day makes for a long day when you drive at 65 mph like I do. I let the foolish people drive at 85 mph on the interstate highways and pass me all day long. And I laugh at them when a state trooper pulls them over for speeding. From Des Moines, we made it to our hosting family in a little town called Random Lake, about an hour north of Milwaukee and an hour south of Oshkosh. They were very accommodating and put us up free for four nights. They really helped cut trip expenses.

How did we score that arrangement? We sponsor cadets from the Air Force Academy. They had a son who spent four years in that crazy place. We gave him a place to stay when he could get away for a weekend day or two. For helping their cadet make it through the Academy and hosting his seven family members during his graduation week, they invited us to stay with them whenever we were in the area. Since Random Lake is only an hour from Oshkosh, their offer was too good to pass up. As you can imagine, hotel prices during the week of AirVenture jumped seriously during that week.

On Monday morning around 0830, we departed for Oshkosh. As this was a workday, traffic was quite negotiable. Two-cycle ultralights and powered parachutes were already buzzing in the air as we approached the off ramp to the airport. There were no traffic jams and we kept moving to a grassy field parking lot conveniently close to the west entrance. (I noticed the grass had been mowed just a couple days before. I saw a lot of grounds grooming in preparation for this event.)

With pre-paid tickets in hand, we approached the admissions building. About ten people were manning the admissions operation. They and crowd control directors kept visitor traffic moving right nicely. There were no TSA personnel to scan and harass us, but there was one table at which an AirVenture casual form of security asked that large bags and backpacks be opened for quick scanning. It was a very minor inconvenience. "Here I am, at Oshkosh, a trekkie of the aviation kind" I thought to myself. Of course, to the first-time trekkie, the maps of the grounds are confusing. That's just the way it is. But after a few hours of walking around and looking at fairly simple maps, one gets a feel for where vendors and workshops are.

There were supposed to be free "official" AirVenture visitor hats available to ticketholders at Jeppesen, but they were gone by 0930. I just did not feel the need to get up early enough to get there for my free hat.

The weather was really nice. Temps were in the upper 70s, the sky was mostly clear with some high clouds, and just a hint of breeze from the north. Everybody wore headgear of some kind, from a floppy canvas hat to clean baseball hats. Almost all guys wore something. Nobody wore goofy outfits or noxious T-shirts that were out of line. This was obviously a higher-standards crowd than what you see at a state fair.

EAA volunteers run procedures to help the visiting crowd get all around the grounds. And this was a big area. You have to keep in mind that Wittman Airport is a working, open-to-public airport, about half the size of the Colorado Springs airport. A few days before, during, and after the event, it is the busiest airport in the world, bar none. Hundreds of small airplanes land there in a very short time. The air traffic controllers do a good job to keep everyone separated on a single runway divided into three landing zones. There are joy-ride helicopters in the air all day long. A pair of Ford Tri-Motors were doing the joy-ride routine all morning long when the main airstrip was not reserved for air performance events. There were always half a dozen ultralights in the air just to the west of the main runway throughout the day, yet keeping their distance.

There were fields of small airplanes out the wahzoo. The north field held literally hundreds. Another area set aside for camping recreational vehicles, vans, and tents was almost full. The ground was dry and the field grass was mowed, ideal for parking a vehicle.



Large airplanes were parked in the Philips 66 Plaza area, a concreted area adjacent to the main north-south runway. There was a B-17, a B-24, a C-47 (I think) of a bright yellow color named “Duggy” (not sure what its role in life is), some WW II fighters and some other larger planes. Of obvious absence were any active-duty military aircraft. There was no C-5, no other cargo planes, no fighter planes of any kind, no military helicopters, no military ground vehicles of any kind. No presence by any

branch of the US Armed Forces, nor Reserves nor National Guard. (You can thank your Congress for that, but I digress. . .).

Volunteers made transportation easy. There are defined routes where trams run and stop at frequently-spaced locations, much like a city bus system. Little John Deer utility tractors pull canopied trailers that carry up to 40 people at a time. Their paths are primarily north-to-south and back again, all day long. We took advantage of them. We’d look around in an area of displays, get on a tram and ride it for a few hundred yards, and get off at a little eatery kind of place.

Eateries were in plentiful supply. If you went hungry, it was because you refused to spend money. Foods were fundamental items: hamburgers, fries, hot dogs, sodas and more. Some stands could serve a breakfast and a couple of stands had soft-serve ice cream. (I did not hear any generators; maybe the airport provided the electricity.) Food was a little pricey: \$6 for a hamburger, \$2 for a 20-ounce bottle of soda. I got hold of a half-cooked burger (an exception), but it didn’t give any nasty after-effects. The rest of the food was fine. The first place we ate (where the half-cooked burger was) costs us nearly \$17.00. Very pricey. We learned quickly where the cheaper places were and shared some items as well, such a fries and a soda. This helped a great deal.

Indoor and outdoor facilities were readily available. Large indoor facilities were very clean and tended frequently during the day. The grounds were kept clean by staff and visitors alike. If there was a piece of loose paper on the ground, it was only shortly thereafter someone picked it up and stowed it properly. It seemed like the paying visitors tended to keep the grounds clean just as much as the many unpaid volunteers.



The Ultralight parking area was almost full of all makes and models. A few contraptions we saw had to be questioned if they could really fly. Helicopters were there and were evidently pre-arranged to put on some kind of impromptu take-off, flyover, and land airshow. But they always stayed well clear of the main runway. A few larger seaplanes on wheels were close by in a static display area.

There were many permanent buildings, four of each the size of a gymnasium with multiple aisles of vendors selling something or presenting their goods if not directly for sale. The buildings were crowded with vendors and shoppers alike, so if you wanted to see something, you needed to move out of the mainstream of traffic.

Honda Jet had a big, big presence there. They are pushing their jets that are half the size of the executive jets you see in up-scale aviation magazines. Bendix/King and Garmin both had a big presence there with solid state navigation displays, and had a lot of foot traffic in each area. Rockwell Collins, Dynon and Aircraft Spruce were there. Of course, there were the Big Two engine companies, Lycoming and Continental, with factory-new examples of their products and salesmen giving sales pitches, writing up price quotes, and taking orders.

There were smaller engine suppliers there as well. One notable one was from Brazil, trying to get a foothold in the North American market. (Their English was really good.) Jabiru had one static display; I was a disappointed in their lack of presentation. Rotax was displaying a few of their 912-series engines. A couple of auto-conversion engine suppliers gave out colorful paper handouts only. And there were dozens and dozens of vendors there that I don't mention.

And on the low-end of marketing was the Fly Market. This was a true aviation flea market. Specialty tools that are one-off were there, old flying clothes, some sort of rusted parts and pieces were there. And there was also an aluminum bent prop for sale. The owner might as well try to recover something from an expensive accident.

Seaplane Base

We took a school bus from a designated pickup point near the Ultralight field to the Seaplane area. The trip took about 15 minutes in a noisy, very rough-riding school bus that had just the stiffest suspension; it was just short of a farm tractor that has no suspension. That cramped ride got old real fast. After arriving, we walked along a groomed trail in the woods, maybe 200 yards long, to the float planes. It was nice and quiet, no engines were running. I was told I might see some long-haired flower-power hippies in robes there, but

there were none to be found. Again, the grounds were clean, the grass groomed well and picnic tables were available at points that allowed looking over the water of a very large lake. Another hot food vendor was there with 15 people in line constantly moving. We stayed for an hour and walked back to the bus pickup.



The ride out was free. But the ride back on the same bus required a mandatory voluntary donation of \$3 per person. Whoa! We were not expecting that! What gives? I did not read anything about that expense. It turns out that the AirVenture staff had to offset an additional cost of \$500,000 imposed by the crooks (my opinion) of the FAA. (Again, that is another political issue, so I will express only neutral opinions I have of that scoundrel operation.) When we looked this fee up in the brochure it was stated that donations were freely accepted. The ironic thing we noticed about the donation box on the bus was that it was blocked from accepting cash. This should have caught our attention.

A B-17 and B-29 flew overhead several times during the days we were there, probably taking paying passengers up. They did not land at Wittman Airport. Maybe the main runway was not long enough. But they were obvious when flying overhead. For paying passengers, that was one costly ride.

Airshow

Every day featured an airshow beginning about 2:30 pm. Smart people brought folding chairs. I sat in the grass; that was not comfortable at all.



The Aeroshell demonstration team put on an impressive display, as did the wing walker, professional stunt plane flyers and the Honda demonstration jets. We even got to see the airplane-to-car conversion fly. (It worked, but costs only \$275,000 for not being real fast either in the air or on the ground.) Jet Man was there and jumped out of a very-high altitude helicopter. (From my position away from the flightline, he was only a dot in the sky.) His flight outfit made for some powered gliding, but he landed only after pulling his parachute. His jet wing was technically interesting, but not real practical.

One plane, an AgTractor, was painted like Dusty of the newly- released “Planes” film by Disney. It flew only back and forth above the main runway and blew out smoke.



I think there was enough smoke spewed out during the demonstrations that every mosquito in the state could have been eradicated. Come to think of it, there were no mosquitos or troublesome flying critters of any kind there during our three days attending.

Overall, the show was fun, but I went for what I could pick up educationally. I went to see auto-engine conversion airplanes but did not see a single one. Mind you, there were hundreds of airplanes that were all cowled up and did not blatantly advertise their auto-engine conversions. And I did not walk the miles it would have taken to seek them out.



On the last day, we spent three hours or so at the EAA Museum where we saw this original EAA Chapter 72 logo.

Make it a point to tour that building if you go to a future AirVenture. We heard a presentation by Dick Rutan of around-the-world Voyager fame and listened to him speak of his experiences. Of course, there are static displays and for-sale items, of which we paid our fair share of support.

We did not stay late for any evening events. Six hours per day on my feet were all that I needed to see what I wanted to see.

We departed Random Lake in late morning the Thursday of that week, knowing that there would be many displays and events we did not see, maybe next time. We have polo shirts, T-shirts, floppy hat, coffee mugs, and photos to prove we were there. We had a long drive ahead of us and I don't drive all night anymore like I used to do. We took a return path that took in some sites in South Dakota like Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills area and the pending Sturgis rally Harley motorcyclists, but that is all another story.

Overall, I thought this trip was worthwhile. Maybe I will return in a few years in an airplane. I just keep thinking how much assistance is available if someone really wants to fly. There are schools and help galore. Chapters have expertise available if you just ask if somebody knows something about whatever you are interested in. With careful selection of mentors and suppliers, anyone who exercises careful money flow can learn how to fly and can fly at least once in a while, even if in a factory made rental airplane (a good place to build skills until an aircraft of your own efforts is ready to fly). I, for one, will probably continue this route. Then it will be off to AirVenture again!