

From World Airnews

Reflections on a recent package tour to Oshkosh...

By: KEVIN BARKER

THEY CALL it the “Pilot’s Hadj”. The pilgrimage.

Before you fill your mind with images of the terminally chaotic, regularly stampeding hordes of tired sweaty faces associated with the Hadj to Mecca, rather picture comfortable, efficient, aviation nirvana, thanks to Calvin Fabig’s Designer Tours, and its thirteenth year of proving that there is a comfortable side to doing Oshkosh.

Once free of the flag carrier’s clutches, and the moment our group was picked up at Washington’s Dulles Airport, things became smooth. The luxurious, air conditioned coach that whisked us to what the charmingly eccentric Harrington Hotel, smack in the middle of all Washington, has to offer, was a sign of things to come.

The Harrington’s attached Harry’s Bar, was the scene of our meet-and-greet, where all the hadjees could get together over a few pints of the local Yeungling draught (oldest brewery in the USA).

One might wonder why Washington, but as any other aeronautical hadjee will tell you, the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, and its larger sibling, the Steven Udvar-Hazy Centre, are locations that cannot be missed. Words cannot quite describe the collection of aviation memorabilia and machines on display.

Think Wright Flyer, and think Joint Strike Fighter, and then fill in just about every other piece of aviation history in between, and you will start to have an idea. What makes it even more special is the fact that the aircraft on display are not similar to the historic and the record breaking ones, but are the actual aircraft involved. After the hustle and bustle of Washington, a glimpse back into the golden age of flying was granted by a visit to the world famous Flying Circus in Bealeton.

Picture an aerodrome set among a patchwork of farmlands, buzzing, and being buzzed by swarms of Stearmans, Wacos and other “barnstormers” owned and flown mainly by commercial pilots, who spend each Sunday during the summer months re-creating the old barnstormin’ air shows of the 1920s and 1930s.

A flip for each tour member sealed off the day, followed by pizza and beers with the pilots, which really offered an insight into the passion these chaps (many dressed in period attire) had for keeping the flame of grassroots flying alive.

And then there was Oshkosh.

Close on 13 000 aircraft, of which 2 900 were display aircraft, 404 warbirds, Raptors, Ospreys and rocket planes from the future – all of this, plus a comfortable, dry hotel room every night.

That's right; Oshkosh doesn't have to be done in "kumbaya" camping style. For me, unless I am camping under the wing of an aircraft I built or flew to Oshkosh myself, I have no need for the nightly 30 degree heat, torrential downpours and swarms of mosquitoes so large that they bear the designation "heavy" behind their call signs.

I like comfort, I like my own en suite bathroom, and I like free wireless internet. I also enjoy being part of a group where the amount of interaction is at your own discretion, but camaraderie is available on tap when needed.

Some may say that you're missing the action by staying off the field. For me, the daily 20-minute luxury bus ride to the site of the action at Whitman Regional field gave one a chance to catch up on the Oshkosh newspaper that is delivered to the hotel's breakfast room every morning, and, in the evening, it gave one a chance to rest weary legs and "debrief" on the day's events.

I found that there was more than enough action (of the sort I am at Oshkosh for) during the day, and that at night, the options were plentiful – depending on your energy levels.

As Calvin has so succinctly managed to weave great beer into the tour, the bus stops a mere two minute walk from the hotel, but more importantly, right in front of The Machine Shed, an eatery that caters not only for the hungry, but also for the very thirsty, and the locally-brewed Spotted Cow draught was well enjoyed by the group over dinner each night.

As someone who enjoys the creature comforts of home, getting my fix of aviation during the daytime (which lasts until 21h30), with the added bargain of being able to come back to a cool, hotel room, with internet to keep in touch with the office, just makes sense.

So when comparing pilgrimages, there is only really one conclusion, and that would be that, unlike most Hadjees, you can't afford to do it only once.