

A group of people are gathered around a long, rectangular grill outdoors. The grill is filled with numerous burgers and steaks, and a large plume of white smoke is rising from it. A man in a bright yellow shirt and a black baseball cap is in the foreground, wearing white gloves and using a knife to cut a burger. To his right, an older man in a white shirt and shorts is also cutting a burger. Several other people are standing around the grill, some looking at their phones. The background shows a large, light-colored building with vertical siding. The text "Back to Triple Tree, the Anti-Oshkosh" is overlaid in a large, white, italicized font across the bottom half of the image.

***Back to
Triple Tree,
the Anti-Oshkosh***

Back to Triple Tree, the Anti-Oshkosh

By Mike Jones

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I'm a very lucky guy. When the sun is out and the air is mild, I have a choice of three outdoor activities. First, I could work in the garden; I have an old-fashioned garden of roses, camellias, butterfly bushes, lantana and other delights. Alternatively, since we live on a golf course, I could grab my sticks and my almost-sainted wife and squeeze in a leisurely eighteen. Or, I could head to the airport and slip the surly bonds. All three options are just great, but last Saturday the airport won the toss.

That's because this was the week of the famous Triple Tree festival, the annual revival of the lively fly-in, camp-out and party-on fiesta in Woodruff, SC. While the first few days of the week-long event suffered torrential rain, on Wednesday things began to dry and when the weekend arrived the aerodrome was as busy as ever.

Camping on the Enoree

Thirty years ago, Triple Tree (SC00) was a shabby, failing farm in rural South Carolina, halfway between tedium and nowhere. Then the intense and energetic Pat Harkness, southern gentleman, successful entrepreneur and long-term flying enthusiast, recognized the spot along the Enoree River as the perfect location to realize his dream. He snapped up the property and began

the long conversion into what can only be described as the most amazing airport on the planet.

He began by rolling out the world's longest grass runway; 7,000 feet of the smoothest grass this side of a putting green. He found an abandoned World War II control tower and trucked it through the woods to a knoll overlooking the runway. He built a giant hangar on top of another hill, filled it with antique planes and added a commercial kitchen for parties and dinners.



Jonesy and Puffin flew to Triple Tree on a delightfully calm Saturday morning. The visibility was fabulous and the ride so smooth that they flew "hands-off" for minutes at a time. The Bushcat is a rugged light-sport airplane designed by a Russian, built in South Africa, shipped in a crate to the U.S. and reassembled for delivery in Florida. Notice the throttle is on the left while the stick (not shown) is between the two pilots.

Some very clever engineering produced the world's largest lawnmower, a one-of-a-kind 17-blade monster driven by a 2,000-pound compressor. The chain saws came out and camp grounds materialized. A dam was built creating a lake large enough for float planes. Eventually, even a few permanent structures

materialized, including bathhouses with real showers and granite countertops. Take that, Oshkosh!

This year's event proved to be no disappointment. After skipping 2020 for the COVID pandemic, flyers and families were eager to get back to those special places which bring joy to our hearts. 11,000 people materialized at the gates and, according to Harkness, 730 planes and 1,100 pilots. The visitors came from 46 states. The long runway attracts all sorts of planes, from tundra-tired taildraggers to Cessnas and Bonanzas, odd-looking experimentals and vintage

birds. The camp grounds were full of RVs and literally tens of dozens of planes were snuggled under the trees around the property.

Truth in advertising: I botched the landing, in front of the crowds. I hang my head in shame.

Fumbled Flare

The day had started well. I pulled my red-and-white Bushcat taildragger out of my hangar, loaded my gear and was in the air in ten minutes flat. Cruising at 2,500 feet the air was so smooth I flew hands-off for minutes at a time, taking pictures and drinking coffee. “Puffin” cruises at a leisurely 100 mph; the ride to Triple Tree took just under two hours.

Flying to Triple Tree includes a circuitous arrival procedure which begins over a huge Walmart warehouse and ends when you bisect the runway exactly over the control tower. This procedure is published in a very



No grass runway is complete without a bevy of beautifully restored classics arriving in-style. Here a handsome Cessna 195 flares for a wheel landing.

stern non-FAA phraseology. “BE ALERT! START SLOWING DOWN! BE AT YOUR ALTITUDE. HEAD OUTSIDE THE COCKPIT!” it bellows, and that’s just on the first page. “Single engine, ALL TYPES - Maintain 90 KIAS (or 104 MPH) and 1,700 MSL. Landing lights on, lips closed. All arrivals maintain radio silence! Line up spinner to tail. THERE’S NO side-by-side [flying] when you leave Enoree!”

Now comes the part where you know they're serious. "Over Enoree means just that. It's not: I can see it on the horizon, smell it, or it's off my right wing; but over it!" Suitably cowed, I digested these bold-face instructions as if they were delivered by a Marine drill sergeant. Whatever they wanted, they were going to get from little Puffin and me. Yes, sarge! Hoorah!



Cooper and Kevin are enthusiastic flyers from the local area. They just bought a Cessna 182 and Cooper, who is working on his instrument ticket and his CFI card, plans to use it to teach his dad the rules of the aeronautical road.

Leaving Enoree, I was feeling smug. My speed was perfect. My altimeter was Super-Glued to 1,700 feet. I kept my eyes on a swivel, nailed the cross-runway transition and smiled when

tower advised me to turn downwind. As you and I both have been trained, I held the pattern altitude until I reached the end of the runway on downwind. I was perfectly positioned for a graceful tailwheel landing in front of the control tower. Which is when tower told me I was doing it all wrong.

"Red and white taildragger, are you ever going to come down?" he asked sarcastically. "You need to get down quick, traffic behind you! I want you to land short! Make the first turn-off into parking!"

Flying fast and landing short are not a good combination. I pulled the power back to idle and jammed Puffin into a hard slip. With the Rotax windmilling, my altitude peeled off faster than boxer shorts on a wedding

night, at one point descending at 900 fpm. I cranked her on to base and then turned final. All was good except for one tiny, itsy-bitsy insignificant detail: I was far, far too fast. That's not usually a problem with a 7,000 foot runway but this guy wanted me to roll to parking in maybe 1,000 feet. I pulled the nose high to kill my airspeed. It worked, almost good enough.

But aerodynamics being what they are, I flared too high and of course I bounced. And bounced again, and then one more time just for good luck. I hoped my buddies hadn't seen that debacle. Of course they had.

Walking Around

At visitor registration I met Rob Templeton, of Simpsonville, SC. Templeton is a slender, handsome, dark-haired chap of middle years who has been volunteering at Triple Tree for four seasons. He now manages the dozens of volunteers who

handle guest registration. "This is my pay-back to aviation," he said. "I organize the volunteers, keep the computers going, and get people their name badges and credentials. Attendance has been fantastic. We were rained out on Monday and Tuesday, but on Thursday the floodgates opened. It's been full-throttle ever since."



Part of the joy of Triple Tree is the unexpected. Here, Rosie cruises among the airplanes in her Mini-Cooper. Rosie lives with Crystal and Mike Mitchell, of Chensey SC; they don't fly but love coming to Triple Tree every year. Rosie is a five-year old English bulldog and she's been driving since she was one. She learned to ride as a Halloween contest where she was costumed as a race car driver, "and she just loved it," Crystal said. Rosie now she has the Mini, a police car, and a custom golf cart.

Templeton flies both an RV-6A and Cessna 120, because “airplanes are like potato chips and one’s just not enough.” He flies kids in all of the Triple Tree historic aircraft, just to expose them to the opportunity of aviation. “We’ve flown hundreds and hundreds of kids,” he adds with a smile.

Templeton isn’t the only flyer in his family. “I started bringing my son Ben out here to volunteer, as a fourteen-year old,” Templeton explained. “They felt sorry for him and started paying him to cut grass. They took him under their wings and he started flying.” You may have met Ben Templeton at Oshkosh: this year, at age eighteen, he took his bright yellow Piper Cub on a 48-state tour of the entire country.



Ethan Moss, from Bougainville, GA paddles his kayak around the lake at Triple Tree. “I’ve caught three very large bass so far,” he reported proudly. Notice the P-51 parked on the grass behind him. Warbirds and other antiques often make appearances at Triple Tree.

Templeton said Triple Tree grows every year. The event isn’t designed to be a big commercial event like Oshkosh; they limit sponsorships and prefer subdued commercial activity. “We want people to come,

hike the trails, swim in the river, fish in the lake, fly with their buddies and talk about aviation, not be inundated with the commercial side of things,” he said. “This is the anti-Oshkosh.”

In line for lunch (the food is great, by the way) I chatted with Scott and Cooper Bodem, of Greenville SC. They had just purchased their plane, N213BG, a rugged 1972 Cessna 182P. Scott Bodem is a mechanical engineer and aspiring

pilot who began flight training twenty years ago before putting that dream on hold with the birth of triplets. Cooper Bodem, age 18, is one of those triplets.¹ Cooper got his private certificate in April 2021 and has scheduled his instrument checkride for November. He is an aspiring career pilot and plans to build his hours by working as a flight instructor as soon as he completes his CFI certification. Scott plans to be his first student.

Asking to see their new bird, to my dismay I found they had driven to Triple Tree because they had not pre-registered their arrival on the web site. Pre-register? At Triple Tree, “We don’t need no stinking pre-register.”² At Triple Tree planes just magically appear. Now the Bodems know the code; look for them and their handsome plane in 2022.



Every year a swarm of Cardinals appear at Triple Tree and they always camp on the hill behind the control tower. Cardinal drivers are a lively bunch, strongly opinionated, devoted to their planes and with a delightful sense of humor. Matching coffee cups is a nice touch, too.

A Cluster of Cardinals

A flock of a dozen Cardinals were camped together in the same nest they use every year, snuggled in the shade of control tower hill. I chatted with Cardinal fanatics Barry Gamblin from Leesburg, Virginia and Karl Thomas from Mesquite, Texas (every Cardinal pilot is an evangelist; they’re proud of their

¹ Cooper’s triplet brother, Asher, is Worship Leader at Radius Church in Irmo, SC. His triplet sister, Lily, just opened the Lil Bake Shop in Wagener, SC. They have no interest in flying. Go figure.

² Did I just date myself? Does anybody remember *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*? Released in 1948, it starred Humphrey Bogart and Walter Huston. The famous line about not needing badges was voiced by Alfonso Bedoya playing the murderous role of Gold Hat. It was reprised in Mel Brook’s *Blazing Saddles* and again by Christopher Lloyd as Doc in *Back to the Future*.

psychosis). These sleek, handsome airplanes inspire a religious-like infatuation with good reason. They're lighter on the controls than any other Cessna. The cabin is Ferrari-ish, wider than a C182 so pilots sit low and relaxed. There's abundant shoulder room and the baggage door is huge, which makes it easy to squeeze skis or golf clubs into the back. The plane has good legs and is reasonably inexpensive to operate. Most importantly, they're easy to fly and gentle to land. "I think of these as the Porsches of the skies," Thomas concluded proudly.



Just because Triple Tree doesn't feature the Blue Angels or Patty Wagstaff doesn't mean the flying isn't intense. Here the giant, 60,000 lb. C-46 Tinker Belle thrills the crowd as she arrives at Triple Tree in September 2014. To be so close to such a behemoth while it is still in flight is absolutely thrilling. Tinker Belle did not make it to Triple Tree in 2021 due to a maintenance issue but everybody hopes she'll be back in 2022.

A shiny
Cessna
Centurion
caught my eye
as I walked
through the
campground.
This plane was
the newest
acquisition of
Kevin and
Robyn Bachand,
down from
Virginia. Kevin
drives jets for a

living and the Bachand's were featured in this magazine in the 2019 write-up of Triple Tree. That year they arrived in a short-wing Piper. They still own the Tripacer — it's part of the family, after all — but they needed a bird with more capabilities: more speed, more load, longer legs. Dan Howard had just the ticket they needed. It's a 1972 Centurion, with struts and the older style landing gear, but the paint is spectacular, the panel complete and the engine strong. Since they bought it, "we've flown the wings off it" with trips to Oklahoma, Florida

and New England. Centurions, almost uniquely among the high-performance singles, are well-adapted to grass runways and are common at Triple Tree.



The white-haired gent cooking dinner for four hundred people is Pat Harkness, founder and inspiration behind the Triple Tree facility. Pat is old enough and rich enough he doesn't have to work this hard, but he does it willingly. During the week of Triple Tree, Pat is everywhere in his golf cart, ensuring people are having a good time and thanking the volunteers for their help. He is the personification of "servant leadership" and it's inspiring to see.

Of course, the best fun at Triple Tree is sitting by the runway watching comings and goings. I met other Cessna friends and we plunked our folding chairs in the shade of the wings of an enormous, glorious Stinson V77 owned by an American Airlines captain. We admired the paint jobs and abused the pilots of semi-botched landings (I kept respectfully quiet at those moments) and whiled away a couple of happy hours.

The trip home was bumpy but uneventful in the hotter, more turbulent afternoon air. My buddies were sitting by the runway to photograph my take-off, but the plane departing before me used an airshow-style smoke dispenser rigged to his exhaust. It made for a dramatic departure for him but the smoke lingered like a London fog. I nearly had to file IFR just to get on to the runway.

I am pleased to report my little taildragger kept its promise of economical flying. After 3.75 hours in the air it had consumed just 18.75 gallons of 100LL. That's good fun, and just another reason Triple Tree will be on my dance-card until they plant me six feet under. Grass runway, good food, happy people, and lots of airplanes with fat wings and fatter tires. Disney World cannot compare: Triple Tree is the happiest place on Earth.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

